A Belle Époque

by Monkess

Summary

Belle is a suffragette and university student. She is also on her way to the countryside for the holidays, not knowing she ought to have packed for more than a month’s stay.

A late 1800s / early 1900s fantasy and fairytale mashup.

Rated M due to potentially discomfiting acts of violence and later sinister events in the story.

Notes

Allusions to fantasy and fairy tale literature written in or set in early 20th century (mostly), in the Once-esque crossover manner, with the premise that time does not stand quite so still in the Fairy Tale Land across the passing of centuries.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Summer had come to the beautiful - though fairly small and therefore insignificant - Republic of Marchland. With the best crop season, summer holidays, and the extraordinarily magical time of the midsummer night festivities taking place in the countryside, the port capital of Marchland was swiftly emptying itself as the townspeople migrated to the countryside – the workers merely changing occupation from factories to assist their family back home on summer fields, and the better-off people with wealth headed for their countryside estates and summer villas.

The main train line ran through the country like a metal spinal cord. All the trains were packed full of course during the weeks at the beginning of the summer season. While the third class was packed as close and tight as a can of salted anchovies, the passengers of the first class were enjoying far better accommodations in the gently rocking train.

The very formidable aunt Sylvia had secured all of eight seats in first class on the train for herself and her company (and of course the necessary second-class tickets to the staff.) The seats were divided between two compartments. Sitting in the "dull old people" box, as she had so called it herself with fake cheer earlier, were her brother-in-law, Maurice, who dabbled in owning a textile mill. It often seemed to Sylvia he preferred tinkering with the machines rather than making money.

There was Sylvia’s friend, madame Roux, who had just returned from abroad that spring after a long absence. Even though as a long-time practitioner of snobbery, Sylvia was well aware of the fact that it was a bit alarming when she herself thought someone else was a snob, and madame Roux certainly was that, Sylvia had invited her along for two good reasons. Primarily, she hoped that the madame would provide her with sophisticated company while they were in the countryside and interesting tales from her year spent abroad in better, grander societies.

Sitting next to madame Roux was her son, Gaston, or Good Reason Number Two. He seemed quite distracted. The poor boy’s father had been an officer in the army, and had died in accident during a routine drilling exercise when Gaston had been only a baby boy. However, Sylvia thought, that had been enough many years ago so it was no excuse to appear so aloof as he did. Sylvia had been staring at Gaston for a good while during the train ride in hope that the young man would learn how to sit still if silently scorned enough. But he seemed completely oblivious to the women in the compartment for the most time and instead talked with Maurice about the hunting and fishing possibilities at their destination.

Sylvia directed her attention through the glass door of the compartment across the aisle running through the train, at the other four seats she had secured when planning this trip. There sat her dead sister Violet’s only child, Maurice’s heir, in a white summer dress and the abominable white cap on her head that marked the girl as a university student. It was all the rage in the summer amongst the students of the universities to wear these white caps, so they could recognize each other anywhere and everywhere. The caps were completely unfashionable in Sylvia’s opinion, especially so when being worn by a young lady. Sylvia would have rather let Belle wear a gypsy scarf or an eye-patch, and tell anyone who asked that she was headed for a masquerade party.

The universities had allowed girls in only the past five years, and of course Maurice’s bookworm of a girl had done her utmost to be accepted there as soon as possible. Now, after her third year in, she was still woefully unmarried. With any further bad luck, she would be completely unmanageable soon. Sylvia blamed her brother-in-law, of course, who after Violet’s death had simply spoiled his daughter Belle to her current and lamentable state of being out of polite society at twenty and one.

Belle didn’t seem otherwise a completely hopeless case, Sylvia observed. At least Belle had poise, a
winning smile, and she always had that knack of appearing like was paying attention and being interested about whatever was being said to her, so that would definitely factor in her benefit when hunting for husbands. In contrast, Sylvia felt she was old enough not to have to give a toss about smiling to or pleasing anyone herself, of course, but then again her own future was tightly secured already, since she had inheritance of money which was gaining interest in the bank, a largely indifferent husband who couldn’t care less about spending summer holidays in the countryside, and a recently married-off son who was busy at work even though it was summer. Her son was properly providing for his own family.

Still considering what she might do for her niece’s sake, Sylvia observed Belle’s three friends in the other compartment. It was a good thing that they were all separated by two doors and an aisle, for the laughter and chatter in their box seemed constant and potentially loud. There were two girls and a young man. The man (a medical student!) wore a student cap as well, he was Belle’s cousin from his father side, and engaged to one of the girls (the pale fair-haired thing looked quite mousy). The other girl (another normal girl without a cap!) was apparently Belle’s friend – Sylvia hadn’t bothered to learn the details of their relationship, and wouldn’t deign to do so before this Alice introduced her niece to eligible bachelors.

The last time Sylvia had seen Belle had been over Yuletide. At the time, Sylvia had asked her niece what sort of career was she educating herself for, and Belle had replied that she didn’t have any idea at all. When Sylvia had asked why was she at the university then, Belle had given her aunt quite a puzzled look and replied ”to learn things, of course.”

A woman could certainly read outside of a university! And not waste her father’s money in all the enrollment fees and books! Sylvia thought, and shook her head. She turned her gaze towards the window next to her. They were passing farmlands now. The unchanging landscapes didn’t amuse her and she couldn’t wait for the train to get to Bluedale.

“So, this witch. Does she really do magic?” Young Gaston asked suddenly.

His mother also gave Sylvia a pointed glance. One of the things that had enticed madame Roux to join Sylvia in the countryside for the summer was the very fact that the hostess of their manor was none other than Lady Hortensia. Until recently, Hortensia had been the most well-known practitioner of magic in all of Marchland, particularly famous for her horticultural expertise. She was known as Lady Hortensia throughout the country, which irked Sylvia incredibly much. Sylvia herself was married to an ex-baronet, but ever since the tiresome declaration of independence and the formation of the parliament, all noble titles had been withdrawn, and so ladies had become ma’ams, and lords had become sirs.

But Sylvia’s aunt, Lady Hortensia, had never even been noble to start with. She wasn’t even particularly good or amazing at doing magic (in Sylvia’s mind, great magic would have been something that involved a vast fortune, an endless supply of clothes, and an army of servants, all of which were things Aunt Hortensia was lacking.) What good was a woman who could cross-pollinate different species of flowers, anyhow? She had always been a faraway, distant person in Sylvia’s life, and the fact that they were related was sometimes completely baffling to her.

”Aunt Hortensia is a witch, yes,” Sylvia said, trying to choose her words carefully. Whenever she spoke about Hortensia, Sylvia had the uncomfortable feeling as if her aunt was watching her over her shoulder. ”Most of her magic has to do flowers, I believe.” And such gardens as waited for them at Aunt Hortensia’s house. Sylvia at least was looking forward to seeing madam Roux’s expression of delight and astonishment when they would ride through the flower gardens, because they were quite the finest flowers in all the land.
"And does she fly on a broom?" Gaston asked, his lips turning into a wicked smile then.

To Sylvia, the very idea of her respectable 82-year-old aunt sitting on a broom handle was too scandalous. She wanted to wrinkle her nose at Gaston and speak her mind more plainly, but recalled she might not want to offend the boy in case it would somehow affect Belle, so Sylvia pursed her lips first to keep herself civil, and replied "Of course not," her voice as mellow as possible.

Desiring to change the topic swiftly, Sylvia continued speaking: "I’m so glad you two could join us, the menfolk of my household are so busy with work these days. They can’t seem to spend enough time in the office!" She glanced at Maurice, as if trying to make a point that he should have been in an office as well perhaps, and noted that her brother-in-law seemed more nervous than usual. He had always been nervous in Sylvia’s presence, to be honest, ever since he’d been a shy, stammering youth, peddling his inventions from town to town. Then Violet had gone and invested all her inheritance in one of his schemes, which had actually born fruit to Sylvia’s astonishment.

Sylvia had never quite trusted Maurice. The man was good at building things, certainly, but in other prospects he was slightly lacking, in Sylvia’s opinion. He wasn’t handsome, and he didn’t have a strong presence. His conversation was dull, and although he may have had a good heart and best intentions, Maurice was always far too concerned with his toys and apparatuses, and didn’t seem to have the ability to concentrate on his and Belle’s future. In a sense, Violet had been an excellent match to him, Sylvia reminisced, Violet had always picked up the slack where ever Maurice had his shortcomings.

Sylvia glanced again through the sets of ornate glass doors, at Belle sitting in the other compartment, and Sylvia had to wonder if the girl would end up forever alone as her father’s caretaker. That would have been a shame, since Belle was far too pretty to end up as a spinster.

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The journey north by train to Aunt Hortensia’s wonderful manor was to take hours. Even knowing very well that she would have merry company to make the long hours short, Belle had purchased two newspapers at the train station before their departure early that morning. In addition to them, she of course carried a book, but she’d assumed she would find it difficult to read something that required too much attention while she was on the train and in company of three other people. After they had all had a light lunch in the dining car of the train and returned to their seats, Belle dug out her newspapers from her hand luggage, offering the spare to her friend Alice, and spread out hers to browse through the important topics of the day.

As Belle was reading about a brass workers’ labor union strike, her friend Alice sitting next to her suddenly started reading out loud an article from the other newspaper hastily.

"Oh. Listen to this! The extremely dangerous sorcerer and criminal, Rumpelstiltskin, lately wanted for ruining the entire continent’s economy by turning ten tonnes of straw into gold, recently acquired Whitewhit Lake and surrounding lands in southern Marchland. This week he and a local architect, mister so-and-so, who’d recently been released from an insane asylum, created a house at the Whitewhit property in the course of three days. Local architect declares his own work brilliant and visionary, was paid entirely in gold." Alice looked up at her traveling companions. "How about that!"

"If he’s such a wanted criminal, why isn’t anyone arresting him?" Belle’s cousin Archibald asked from no one in particular. His fiancée, Penelope, grinned, but didn’t reply. She was concentrating very hard on her crochet work.

"I think the police probably have to queue up to see him, amongst all the queens, princes, presidents,
bankers and business chairmen who all want a slice of his time,” Alice replied. “And what would the police do about him anyway? Ask him politely to be imprisoned?”

Belle had kept reading about the labor strikes throughout Alice and Archibald’s conversation, which continued a little longer, until she lowered her newspaper in order to better express her opinion on the subject matter of Rumpelstiltskin.

“I actually wish the papers would stop writing about him. It’s all they’ve done ever since he sailed to Marchland, and it’s all made-up rumour and gossip anyway. Would an immortal sorcerer would deign to talk to a news reporter? Probably not. They should concentrate on printing real news instead.” In a bit of a huff, Belle returned her attention to the paper and started reading a piece on the parliament’s last session before the summer leave.

There was a moment of silence in the compartment until Alice felt the need to read the paper out loud again. “Here’s that missing princess princess again. The fugitive princess Snow, sole surviving natural heiress to the throne of Whiteland… bla bla bla… possibly seen in Western Heartlands. Chair of Whiteland parliament, Regina wishes the Heartlands cooperation in seeking out princess Snow and returning her home to answer for her crimes. However, cooperation seems unlikely since the Heartlands are currently in socio-economic turbulence caused by the recent banking crisis created by—” Alice laughed. “Rumpelstiltskin.”

"Maybe he’s not mentioned in the travel section,” Belle replied, as she skimmed through her own paper. The arts and culture pages were full of a delirious architect’s rambles about mazes and pine cones and gold. Finally, she got to her very favourite part of the newspaper: the once-a-week travel reports written by faraway correspondents from all over the world. This week’s article was about a set of pictures taken at a lone island at The Edge of the World.

Belle was utterly delighted to see grainy black and white pictures. The first ever photographs taken there! The Edge of the World was described in plenty of books and articles, of course, but it was quite different to see an actual copy of a photograph someone had painstakingly taken at the very site of the great rift between two worlds. It must have required blind luck to capture such images of vast landscapes, since the glass films needed up to twenty minutes of exposure. Belle knew this because she was considering getting herself a camera when she’d go off on her own adventures.

As she scrutinized the photographs, Belle couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed. Perhaps the descriptions she had read earlier had been very exaggerated, or the pictures weren’t very good. She’d always imagined the fiery berth of lava between othe two lands would have been a bit more dramatic.

Perhaps it had been a dull day for the Edge of the World at the time of the photographs, for the pictures seemed sedatively calm. On the other side of the great rift was the Land Without Magic. The tiny strip of it visible beyond the rift made it seem like it had a similar seashore, as unexciting as the Land With Magic seemed to be.

In the very old days, people could have sailed freely between here and there, and often they would do so. Then, roughly three hundred years ago, this wide rift had appeared between Here and There. It had always been a mystery why this had happened, and there had been a great many theories on what had happened, but none of them too convincing or ever proven right. Belle rather liked mysteries. She hoped some day to have the time, money and opportunity to go see this great rift with her very own eyes. In her most secret waking dreams, she also solved the mystery of the great rift, and then moved on to another exciting place, like Lyonesse or Shambhala, to write memoirs of her adventures while she’d be starting new ones.

As Belle imagined her future adventures across the seas, she listened to Alice, Archibald and
Penelope’s conversation, the topic of which was dominated by useless speculation on Rumpelstiltskin’s presence in Marchland, and what he was supposedly doing in the country since his arrival shortly after Yule. At least his presence in town was good for tourism, since Marchland had been under close scrutiny of the international press ever since. Belle hoped that it would draw the foreign press attention to the fact that a quarter of the Marchland parliament representatives were women and that the university allowed women, so perhaps something good might come out of this.

Belle shook her head to herself and smiled as she found her thoughts dwelling on the strange, green-skinned sorcerer along with her companions who she’d just almost admonished for speaking on the matter of. It was only because she’d gotten fairly tired of Rumpelstiltskin in the five months with his entirely fictional presence in every newspaper, in everyday conversation and then he’d even started turning up as a topic during university lectures. He hadn’t even been in Marchland half the time! According to the very same newspapers printed by the wild tabloid journalists, he’d been abroad most of spring, visiting Councillor Regina (a lady frequently featured in Foreign Affairs section of the Times.)

All that anyone had actually seen of Rumpelstiltskin in Marchlands had been when he’d first arrived in the beginning of the year, then again when he’d left. Until this overnight mansion had popped up at Whitewhit Lake, no one had even known if he even had an address.

It seemed quite silly to her that a single and rather obscure person, sorcerer or not, could pull down an entire sensible country’s standards of journalism to the gutter. It seemed to Belle that any journalist was about as likely to catch an interview with the infamous Rumpelstiltskin as she was.

Abandoning this trail of thought, Belle decided to try and focus her attention back to the articles she could find in the Marchland Times that had some substance in them.

The train journey through the countryside continued steadily and without incident. Belle had just finished reading the newspaper’s better half quite thoroughly when she realized she should pack her things in her hand luggage and get ready to leave the train – the landscape outside their window reminded her they would soon arrive at their station. She glanced through the glass doors of the compartment and across the aisle at her father and the ever high-strung aunt Sylvia. Belle already had a fairly good idea of what Sylvia’s friend and her friend’s son were doing on this outing away from town. Belle’s aunt had questioned every detail of her life quite thoroughly over Yuletide dinner, the last time they had been together, and apparently she had been dropping unsubtle hints about her marriage prospects to Maurice ever since.

Belle didn’t worry about Gaston. She was fairly certain that the man would realize in about less than a day how completely unsuitable he was for her, just as much she would have been for him, and they could have an amicable week all the way up to the midsummer festivities. She would be a graceful enough hostess and try to make sure his stay in Bluedale was not a complete waste of his time. Then he and his mother would leave to return back to town together.

"Bluedale!" A train conductor walked through the train aisles, announcing their arrival. Belle looked through the window at the familiar sights of all her childhood summers, excited to return. As wonderful and exciting as it was to spend ten months of the year in town and at the university, there truly was no summer without the slow, calm magic of Bluedale.

Aunt Hortensia had sent for two carriages to pick their party from the train station. It took a while to make sure all their belongings were taken off the train and to see everything packed safely, and then the large party continued at a leisurely speed through the quaint and quiet village, on the road that would lead them to Aunt Hortensia.

Belle had known the driver of the first carriage practically all her life, and chose to sit with him
instead of climbing inside – partially because Aunt Sylvia had arranged everything so that the only remaining seat had been beside Gaston. It was far better to stay outside in the sunlight after the long stuffy journey aboard the train, exchanging news with old Joseph who was in charge of everything and everyone in Aunt Hortensia’s stables. She wanted to hear how her favourite horse was, while Joseph was pleased to be the first resident of the manor to get a report on their fine young Belle’s year in the university.

Belle had a good view from the driver’s seat, which she enjoyed by taking the opportunity to scan the woodlands surrounding the dirt road once they had left the village. The woods surrounding Hortensia’s estate were always interesting. Many rare species of flora and fauna were attracted to the area. The woodland floor was covered by late-blooming purple anemone mingling with early blooming bluebells. The woods tended to have so many blue and purpley flowers most of the year around, it was where the village had its name from, Bluedale.

Belle was especially delighted to see a family musktrolls with their swishing tails, sitting under a canopy of large leaves by the roadside as they were waiting for the succession of carriages to roll past them.

Musktrolls weren’t exactly people but they weren’t animals either. A tall musktroll might have reached Belle to her knee. They had short dark-brown fur coats, they lived in rather large and apparently comfortable holes which they themselves dug underground. They could see in the dark and they spoke an primal language of their own. Most of them learned to speak a few words of some human languages (“sod off” was an extremely popular phrase), and in general, musktrolls preferred to keep to themselves.

Belle waved at the little trolls as the carriage went past them, and one of them gave her a solemn nod of recognition, which was practically a grand compliment. Belle had always been considerate and polite with the musktrolls, sometimes perhaps even more than with humans. She’d even wanted to write a short study on them for her basic course on anthropology, but the professor at the university had laughed in her face about it before telling her he wouldn’t accept such a paper.

Eventually the carriages rode up a gently rising hillside. At the top they saw where the manor’s sheep grazing pastures began, and just beyond the sheep herd and the soft grass was the ungated, wall-less garden of Aunt Hortensia. Further behind them stood the white wooden manor by the still, clear lake. The garden looked rather like an extension of the wild woodlands, except with more flowers – quite a few of which were the like that would never be seen outside this estate. The garden gave everyone a curious feeling of unapparent orderliness that was experienced as more of a hunch rather than anything seen by the naked eye. It was like the natural chaos in the garden was deliberate, unlike the natural chaos of the forest, which was not.

Belle paid attention to the quick, almost invisible flashes of light that flickered all around the garden’s flowers. She turned her head to one side and tried to look at everything from the corner of her eye to catch a glimpse of the flower fairies that lived in the garden. They were very small, fast, and almost impossible to catch by eye (a twenty minute photograph exposure would have been out of the question), but Belle had seen a few during their unguarded moments. Most of them when she’d been six years old and had devoted an entire summer to fairy-watching. After that summer, they had perhaps lost their glamour, because who wanted to look at fairies after you’d caught a glimpse of too many?

Flower fairies were, to be honest, rather ridiculous and short-lived creatures, who did nothing stupendously clever or intelligent at all. They spent all their waking hours trying to get bees and butterflies to visit their flowers. They supplied Aunt Hortensia with Fairy Dust, when or if she ever needed some, but that was the extent of their usefulness. When the fairies got too bored, they would
do horrible things such as mess up Aunt Sylvia’s carefully pleated hair, or hide tea cups in the
garden, but these incidents were more prone to happen only if the fairies were provoked. Belle
grinned, wondering what would happen if the summer guests were to be discourteous in the garden
this year.

Joseph led the carriages past the gardens and up the driveway to the front of the house. Aunt
Hortensia was already outside waiting for them, sitting in her wheel chair on the terrace. Belle
thought she’d looked a lot healthier a year ago, the summer before, it was if she was slightly shrunk,
or as if she was slowly devoured by her wheel chair. Despite spending most of her time in the chair,
Hortensia had impeccably noble posture. Her snow-white hair was collected and arranged on top of
her head, except for one intentionally left-out curl. She was wearing her favourite green-and-white
dress, with a golden-yellow shawl wrapped around her neck and shoulders.

Belle jumped down from the driver’s seat and ran to greet her first, and the smile that spread on
Hortensia’s face made her face wrinkle and her eyes shine like she’d suddenly turned fifty years
younger inside her mind.

”Oh auntie, it’s so good to see you!” Belle bowed down to give her great-aunt a hug, which she
returned in kind.

Hortensia held her for a moment before releasing her and replied. ”Welcome, my sweet girl. Happy
twenty-first birthday.”

Belle pulled herself up and turned around to see the rest of their party climb out of the coaches with
much more decorum than what she had displayed. As they waited for the rest of the party to catch
up, Belle turned back to Hortensia.

”Has anyone else arrived?” Belle asked. Usually there was an assortment of people visiting the
manor during the midsummer season.

”Ah, you’re the first.” Hortensia folded her hands in her lap and peered at Aunt Sylvia’s friend with
an unreadable expression on her face. ”There’s a museum curator coming the day after tomorrow,
I’m donating away some old things.”

”What things?” Belle asked.

”Completely worthless old knickknacks from the attic, mostly my father’s.” Hortensia lifted an
eyebrow and grinned up at Belle. ”They are interested in old Hortensia’s family heirlooms. Perhaps
after I die, I’ll have myself embalmed. Then the museum visitors can admire the dead old witch as
well as her doodads.” She winked. ”I thought we’d have time tomorrow to see if there’s anything
you and Sylvia want to keep,” Then Hortensia lifted a hand to wave at Maurice and Sylvia, who
were now walking up the path, approaching the terrace.

Belle nodded, smiling as she imagined the ragestorm Sylvia would start over the very notion of
anyone handing away anything for free. It was very good that the curator wouldn’t arrive in two
more days, to give the aunt time to come to terms with Hortensia’s arrangements.

Maurice kissed the back of Hortensia’s hand and thanked her profoundly that his sister’s son
Archibald and his fiancée had been allowed to join them. Sylvia kissed her aunt on the cheek and
introduced her to the Rouxes. Madame Roux made a formal royal curtsey to Hortensia, and
addressed her as a ”lady”, Gaston presented himself with a stiff bow and an expression that for a
moment seemed, to Belle, as sign of complete disinterest in who he viewed as a doddering old
granny in a wheel chair.
Then she admonished herself for her prejudices: perhaps she was being too hard on Gaston? She hardly knew him, after all. Perhaps he was being cautious. In her time, Hortensia had been a highly respected enchantress in Marchland. Perhaps Gaston simply didn’t want to do or say anything to offend her, Belle surmised.

With the greetings and introductions done, the party began to disperse around the house to search for their rooms. Belle and Alice took their luggage up to the room they would share for the visit (Belle had stayed in it so many times, it was practically Belle’s Room). After a brief spell of unpacking and enjoying the cool water someone had thoughtfully left in the room, Belle decided to take the two newspapers from her handbag down to Hortensia’s study, in case her aunt might want to read them later in the evening.

Hortensia was an avid reader who had always encouraged Belle to read as much as possible, as diversely as possible. Hortensia’s study with its modest amount of books was Belle’s second favourite library in the world (only the grand university library could surpass it), and she was already looking forward to spending many lazy rainy summer evenings curled up on the chaise longue in the light of the gas lamp, head forgotten in books.

Assuming she would find the study empty, Belle was already pushing the door open when she heard soft voices inside. Mainly her father’s voice, and a little of Hortensia’s. She knew she should have left them well alone, but found herself a tad curious about what did her father have to talk about with Hortensia that was so secretive? Was it about a birthday party? Or perhaps, she thought with more concern, it was related to Gaston Roux?

"I just don’t know what I can do anymore,“ Maurice’s voice said. He sounded extremely anxious about something. "I mean, these men employ ogres! And…” he lowered his voice, ”they said they would hurt Belle!” he said, but she could still make out the words. Belle clamped her free hand over across her mouth, because she was afraid she might make a sound. Ogres? Who would hurt her?

"So all the money is gone?“ Hortensia asked, also keeping her voice down and quiet.

"Yes, I’m afraid so. We’ve been living on credit since Yule,“ Maurice replied. Belle could practically hear her father wiping the sweat of anxiety from his forehead. "It wouldn’t have happened, if I hadn’t taken that loan from those bastards. But the bank turned me down, you see? And the mills had to invest into repairs. Then a shipment of raw silk vanished at sea.” Maurice sighed. "It was a very expensive accident.”

Belle heard Hortensia’s fingers rapping on the top of her desk as she pondered. In a moment, she spoke.

"I think it might be very likely that the banks refused you because of the Laytons. They’ve wanted you out of business for quite a while now, haven’t they? If I were to imagine the worst, I’d also say they asked these loan-sharks to give you the money at a truly criminal interest.”

"That is… probably very likely.” Maurice agreed. "I think they also made the silk vanish,” he added, sounding so very tired. Belle wanted to burst into the room and go embrace her father and console him, but there was a reason why he hadn’t told her about this yet. Even though she was now eavesdropping on this conversation, Belle didn’t want to distress her father further by letting him know she now knew about their situation. "So, can you possibly lend me the money?“ He asked, his voice pleading and quivering with emotion.

Hortensia sighed. "I would, but I don’t have any.”

Maurice gasped. "But the manor?"
"The house is the house. The flowers are flowers, and the sheep are sheep. None of them are money," Hortensia pointed out.

"But, how do you make by?" Maurice asked. "I always thought you’d be rolling in it."

"Oh, no," Hortensia assured.

"But how do you pay Joseph, and Eleanor, and William?"

Belle heard Hortensia smacking her lips. "We… exchange things."

"You could create money," Maurice said then, desperation lacing his voice.

"I don’t think that’s a good idea, Maurice. It’s quite a sum, and the economy in the country is shaky."

Hortensia sounded oddly distant.

"But what about Belle!" Now Maurice raised his voice.

"Please calm down, Maurice."

Belle heard Hortensia waited a little, then continued. "Here’s what I think would be best. I think you should sell the mill to Laytons, and use the money to appease the people you owe, and then build up from there."

"But the mills were supposed to finance her future…" Maurice whispered.

"Yes, but imagine what happens if I give you the money. You pay the debtors. Then the Laytons come after you again. Set your mills on fire. Or send ogres after Belle. Someone might die. You’d come to me asking for magic to solve all your problems again."

"Magic always comes with a price. And I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I don’t think Belle wants to inherit and manage textile mills. You don’t want to manage textile mills either, it’s not in your nature. You like building things, and fixing things."

Maurice’s voice was small and incredulous. "You’d let these bastards get away with it?"

"I don’t like this situation any better than you do, and the Laytons seem like absolutely detestable people, but I’m just not sure this fight is worth all the effort."

"But she’d have to give up all her dreams of travel and university," Maurice countered. "You know how much that means to her."

Hortensia sighed. "You can’t buy her all her dreams." Belle heard the wheelchair squeak and approach the door. She scampered off as quickly as possible towards the staircase where she’d come from, and hid there, crouching on the mid-level, while Maurice and Hortensia left the study.

"There are scholarship grants," Hortensia was saying. Maurice briskly walked out of sight in quite a huff, turning towards the direction of the drawing room, leaving Aunt Hortensia alone in the foyer. Her royal poise gave up as she leaned deep into her wheelchair and breathed heavily, collapsing like she was a deflating balloon. Belle peered over the edge of the banister. Was she crying? Belle wasn’t sure. She listened to her own heart beating heavily as dreadful thoughts and feelings started nesting in her mind.
Gifts, Cake and Smelling Salts

Chapter Summary

Belle tries to make the best out of a rainy birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belle decided to pretend as if she oblivious about what had taken place between her father and Aunt Hortensia in the library, and the evening continued as normal. At dinner, she’d been seated next to Gaston, and she tried to play the attentive dinner companion even as her thoughts fluttered elsewhere. Her eyes would wander over her father who hadn’t said a word about their financial troubles – they’d lived on credit for half a year, for heavens’ sake – and even while she tried to think of some graceful way to let him know she was not in the dark about his money problems anymore, she also resented that he’d never spoken a word to her. She didn’t want to be treated like a little girl who had to be pampered and shielded from harsh realities. She had spent the entire hour before dinner cataloguing all the money she had spent needlessly during springtime, and wondered if there was something she could return to the shops once they’d return to town.

Then there was the other criminal, sitting at the end of the table. Aunt Hortensia, who Belle had loved like a grandmother all her life, seemed for all intents and purposes almost completely indifferent to the tragedy of the most gravest of injustices that the dark forces of the Layton textile family had conspired against Belle’s father. Perhaps it was true that all witches were heartless after all, Belle thought, as she forced a smile on her face, turning her attention back to Gaston who was talking about fishing.

"Perhaps you would show me the lake tomorrow?" He asked, in connection to his great tale of how he’d caught a 33 pound pike, which he now had stuffed and on display in their townhouse.

"The lake?" Belle asked absently, then made the obvious connection between fish and water. "Of course. I can show you the boathouse and the gazebo as well."

"There’s a boathouse?" Gaston asked, his curiosity piqued.

"There’s a copse of willows between the house and there, so you probably can’t see it from your window," Belle explained. "Do you like rowing?"

"Very much!" Gaston replied with a grin.

"Then we have to go out on the lake tomorrow." Belle liked boats. She’d rowed back and forth across the lake quite a few times, but she especially liked taking the boat out and then floating aimlessly while reading a book. It was ever so peaceful out there.

Near the end of the dinner, when Maurice subtly mentioned to Aunt Sylvia that he wanted a word with her in private after dinner, Belle had no trouble guessing what that conversation would be about. She also heard Aunt Hortensia sigh at her pudding.

Belle was the first to excuse herself from the dinner table. She couldn’t imagine herself sitting
upstairs and sharing conversation with Alice that night, because all her sociable energy had already been spent with Gaston. So Belle visited the room upstairs only briefly enough to retrieve a rather heavy novel from her trunk. The book was titled A Song for Three Towns, and it was a historical novel set in Heartlands, Avalon and Arbonne. It was about thirty years old, written by a mister Richard Blake from Avalon. All of his novels were about corrupt societies and oppressed labour workforce. He was especially known for his sharp analysis of the social injustices in the Dwarf Mines of Avalon, with which the Dwarves had not been at all happy about at the time when the novel came out.

Should a person be bound to a social class by the circumstances of their birth? Blake had written. And a loud Yes, had been the answer of the dwarven society’s highest echelons. However, twenty years after Blake’s death, dwarf miners had started organizing themselves into unions, diversifying their trades, and there was even a Dwarf Poet now. He wasn’t perhaps a terribly refined wordsmith, Belle thought critically, but it was an important social development in any case, so she had bought the poetry book on principle during spring. She didn’t care for the verses in it at all, to be honest, and she hoped she could get at least half of its worth back at the used book shop.

Belle knocked on the door of Aunt Hortensia’s study before entering, and found it entirely unoccupied. She closed the door behind her and lit the lamp above the reclining chair for the evening was already getting slightly dim and she didn’t want to ruin her eyes by reading in half-light. The polished metal sconce behind the lantern reflected the steady light of the flame, illuminating the study with a soft glow.

Besides aunt Hortensia’s desk, there were several book cases in the room, beautifully carved items in their own right holding all the volumes in Hortensia’s collection. The lowest shelves were behind ornately paneled doors, a few of which were locked. A ceramic heater covered with beautifully hand-painted tiles took a modest space in one corner of the room, next to which sat Hortensia’s spinning wheel, which seemed to have gathered a bit of dust, and a wicker basket lined with a cheerfully coloured floral cotton print, containing beige wool roving ready to be spun into yarn. There was also a rocking chair near the beautiful windowed doors that led out to the iron-framed glass garden, which was most notably home to an exotic camellia tree that bore creamy white flowers in late winter.

Belle took a moment to look at the portrait of Aunt Hortensia that was occupying the single stretch of wall in the room that was not a door, a window, behind a bookcase, or above the chair she was reclining on. It was a beautiful oil painting done when Hortensia had been roughly Belle’s age. It showed what beautiful masses of blonde hair she’d once had. The artists had even managed to glance the secret glint of good-natured mischief that sometimes glimmered in Hortensia’s eyes. Wearing a gown with her favourite colours, green, white and gold, Aunt Hortensia was also standing up straight the portrait. There had been an accident soon after the portrait had been finished. Aunt never wanted to speak about it, and Belle had only dared to ask about it once, when she’d been seven. For such a person who appeared to be kind and open, Aunt Hortensia kept a lot of secrets, Belle reflected, and opened her well-worn copy of A Song for Three Towns, and let the late evening roll on towards the night.

Time passed. Eventually her eyes became too weary for reading. Belle decided not to even finish the chapter she was on before heading to bed. "The possession of power is the only lasting philosophy,” Belle muttered, reading a passage out loud, quoting a particularly wicked character in the book. "When power is wielded through magic or violence, it is fear will keep people meek and obedient, like a cloud that shuts away the sun.” She placed a lace ribbon she used a bookmark between the pages before extinguishing the light and leaving the study.
As she climbed up the stairs, she wondered about the analogy she’d just read out loud. If power was a dark cloud, what was the sun hid behind it? She’d read A Song for Three Towns twice through now and was now in the middle of her third journey, and she hadn’t caught this sun on her first two reads. She still enjoyed finding all the new questions mister Blake brought to her. In her opinion, the best pieces of fiction were always layered in a way that returning to them always revealed new things when reintroduced to the faithful reader. She’d noticed that when she’d been re-reading some favourite novels from her childhood, that life experience added weight and substance to the best written stories. Such depth was an attribute she held in high regard.

Belle turned into the corridor of the guest wing. It was dark except for pale and distant moonlight shining through the window at the other end, and a narrow stream of light thrown across the floor and the opposite wall from one of the rooms. It seemed that Belle’s father was still awake. His door was slightly cracked open, and for the second time that day, Belle decided to eavesdrop on her own father. She lamented the fact that the decision to do so had become very easy, but she took a peek anyway, telling herself she was merely making sure her father was fine.

Maurice was alone in his room, wearing his waistcoat unbuttoned and hanging loose over his shirt. His tie and shoes were discarded on the floor near the door, and the man himself was crouching over a tiny desk, scrawling something on little white pieces of cards that looked like his own business calling cards. Belle could recognize them from a distance, because she very often had to look for them when they were in town.

Maurice put the pen back in the inkwell and then filled a glass on the desk Belle hadn’t paid attention to until now. It looked like brandywine. She saw her father empty the glass in a second, before setting it down and getting out of the chair he’d been occupying. He moved across the room to the ceramic heater (Belle jumped a little further back into the darkness of the corridor she was standing in, hoping not to be noticed). Her father knelt at the tiled heater, opening the black iron cover that revealed the dying remains of a fire that had been built there much earlier in the day. Then he threw all the three business cards onto the red embers and watched the fire reawaken as it flickered on the cards, devouring them.

Belle stifled a sigh as she continued into her and Alice’s bedroom on her tiptoes. Her father was drinking and sacrificing calling cards now. She had a hunch that Aunt Sylvia hadn’t taken the news very well.

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Belle’s proper birthday was the day after their arrival to Bluedale, even though Aunt Hortensia had already congratulated her in advance the day before. After Belle woke up, her first birthday gift was already waiting for her downstairs at the breakfast table. Aunt Sylvia presented Belle an object wrapped in gift paper, which by the shape and size of it could be nothing but a book, and a very heavy book it was. Delighted that her aunt would be so considerate, Belle thanked her additionally with a kiss on the cheek before seating herself next to Gaston again.

"Too bad it’s raining today, we’ll have to wait with the boat excursion," Belle told him the first thing after she’d settled herself down and reached for the tea pot. It was an awfully big tea pot too, it had to be lifted with two hands, for it was made to serve ten. An almost garishly colourful tea cozy crocheted from ten different shades of red, orange and yellow was keeping the pot warm.

"So I noticed," Gaston replied, sounding somewhat distant. He was reading the newspaper of the local county, Belle noticed, as she peered over his shoulder. It was the sports section. Summer football games occupied the largest headers. (There was an article about how a football match in the next Dale over had been possibly rigged by gamblers and they were investigating if and how magic
Belle smiled, thinking how amusing it was that something involving reading could pull this Gaston into such deep concentration. Perhaps she had been a bit too prejudiced with the first look she’d given him. In all fairness, it had been caused by the fact that it was Aunt Sylvia that was playing the match-maker here, and even though Belle knew her aunt cared for her, in her own extremely special way, Belle wasn’t so sure if she shared her aunt’s taste in men, career choices or – Belle pulled out the gift from the wrapping, revealing a tome entitled *A Guide to Womanhood*.

Belle was speechless for a moment.

"That looks useful," Gaston remarked, his mouth half-full of egg on toast.

"Thank you, aunt," Belle said. She looked at the cover art. There were a lot of pages, and a lot of illustrations. The pictures were all high quality, which she could appreciate. "It's a very beautiful book," she said, trying the first positive thing that came to her mind.

Aunt Sylvia seemed very well delighted. "I’m glad you like it. You know, the introduction to the chapter on Tactfulness and Etiquette was written by a friend of mine, baroness Eloise de Bleume."

"She isn’t a baroness anymore, aunt," Belle replied quietly.

"I know, darling, but it’s hard to shake off old habits at this age," Sylvia said rather dismissively, and concentrated her attention on madame Roux, withdrawing her notice of Belle as if it were a punishment for what she’d said. Sylvia and madame Roux continued talking about playing cards after breakfast, and taking a turn in the glass garden to admire the camellia tree there.

Willing to not judge the book by its dubious covers, Belle opened the first chapter of her birthday gift as she buttered her toast. Foreword: Personality and Style.

*When she quits the domestic sphere and enters the society as an individual, she is commonly known as a Modern Woman. Can we then presume that this woman has a sense of style?*

Not liking the tone of the opening words, Belle skipped ahead to the next section: Health. It contained drawn illustrations on how to walk gracefully. I think I can already handle that, Belle thought, and jumped ahead to a section containing a very lengthy analysis on women’s physique, which at least seemed quite sensible and useful. Then there was the topic of women’s troubles. Monthly bleeding. Your reproductive organs. Belle sniggered to herself as she leafed through the dry-as-dust analysis on the mechanics of intercourse. Really, when she’d woken up that morning she would never have guessed that she would soon be reading a book containing a diagram of the uterus while eating breakfast.

"What’s that?" Gaston asked, and Belle muttered a discreet answer as she skimmed some more pages ahead very swiftly. She didn’t need guidance from Baroness Eloise de Bleume to know that anatomy drawings were not a subject brought to the breakfast table small talk by Polite Etiquette Society. Speaking of which, it was the next chapter, and she found herself reading Tactfulness and Etiquette. The pages contained direction on how to address aristocrats, diplomats, military personnel, politicians, and other people of various social ranks and means of income, and how to seat them all properly at the dinner parties a wife would be organizing for her husband.

She had given a cursory glance to about one third of the book by the time she’d finished eating her first piece of toast. With her tea getting cold, Belle emptied her cup swiftly and leaned across the table for the giant pot to get some more warmer tea. With the rainy morning having set in, it was a bit chilly in the house, even with the wool shawl she’d wrapped over her blouse. Belle added some
honey in her tea and sipped it slowly as she found the index page of A Guide to Womanhood, to find out what other good advice the book offered. It seemed that the middle section was entirely about the materials, cut, purchase and cleaning of clothes.

The last third of the book was all about the domestic sphere. How to clean, organize and maintain a house, either with staff or without. The last two chapters were about how to manage all of the above while rearing children. There was no information about how to adventure through an exotic country on a riverboat while raising well-mannered offspring, which Belle found rather disappointing, but not at all surprising.

"Thank you aunt, it is a very thoughtful gift," she concluded as she closed the book next to her breakfast plate and piled herself two fried eggs and more toast. Aunt Sylvia acknowledged her with a nod and continued talking about the common weather patterns of Mid-Marchlands with madame Roux.

"May I look take a look at it?" Alice asked. Belle passed the book over the table with a mischievous smile, wondering if she’d find the reproductive organ diagrams as swiftly as Belle had. This didn’t happen. Instead, Alice and Penelope soon leaned their heads together over the book as they came to the treasure-trove section on fashionable clothes. They found the black-and-white photograph copies of fashions from Avalon and Arbonne particularly enticing. A dark velvet gown with metallic embroidery detail owned by a Marchland diplomat’s wife elicited quite the oohs and aahs from the two young ladies on the other side of the table.

Cousin Archibald and Maurice were the last to come down to dinner. Archibald lamented how late he’d slept in, reflecting how quiet it was at the manor compared to the early morning fish market stalls opening near his accommodations in town, and how he was used to waking up to the screeching of sea gulls. Maurice had no explanations, he merely sat down and reached for some bacon first thing. Belle wondered how late her father had stayed up drinking during the night, but now was certainly not the time or the place to discuss that.

Hoping that she might have time to speak to her father about the events of yesterday evening, Belle stayed seated at the breakfast table late after she had finished eating, watching Maurice tend his headache with lemon water and coffee.

Then Aunt Hortensia rolled into the breakfast room and asked for Sylvia and Belle’s attention. "Joseph and William are bringing some things down from the attic to the parlor, Sylvia if you could please take a look at them and see if anything suits your fancy. Belle, you as well."

"Why, Aunt Hortensia, why are you clearing the attic?" Sylvia asked shrewdly.

"I’m donating away some things to make some space up there, so that future generations may continue to fill the attic with more things we don’t need," Hortensia replied. She was already energetically rolling out of the dining room towards the parlor, Belle following her first, Sylvia proceeding last only after she promised madame Roux she wouldn’t take all morning, and they could meet in the glass garden as soon as she was done.

Joseph the Stable Master and William the Shepherd had already brought down a number of things during the course of breakfast, and the parlor looked like an antique shop. Hortensia had mentioned that most of the things had presumably belonged to great-grandfather Magnus. As Sylvia started interrogating Hortensia about the nature of this donation she was making, Belle shut out her aunt’s voice and concentrated on the treasures of history. She was hoping to claim anything that looked valuable, in hopes of selling it, even if she’d have to tear it out of Sylvia’s greedy paws.

There was Magnus’s collection of old pipes. Two incomplete tea sets. A miniature ship built inside a
bottle that had a crack on it. There old porcelain dolls with clothes that had been torn by mice and birds, and with the paint on their faces so worn they had hardly any features left. There were quite a lot of rather mediocre oil landscapes and portraits – Belle peered at the names in the corners of the paintings, coming to the conclusion that they must have been made by her own grandmother Lilian, Hortensia’s sister and Sylvia’s mother.

Next Belle found still life water colour paintings, which were far better in technique. She was not surprised to find Hortensia’s name scribbled softly with graphite in the corner of each picture. Flowers. Lots of flowers. They would probably sit well with the curator, Belle thought, looking next at a large wall clock with broken hands so it couldn’t tell the time. Old pairs of skis were brought down next by Joseph, who started muttering about the broken leather straps and how he could fix them by winter. As if he or Aunt Hortensia in her wheelchair would ski for pleasure once snow fell!

No gold (which wouldn’t have been valuable anyway), no silver. No invaluable spell books, or locks of hair belonging to long-gone queens of the great kingdoms.

Belle had dismissed the trunk full of clothing, because it had had a bit of an attic smell, and she imagined any fabrics inside it would have had the same fate as the doll clothes that had probably end up as padding in the nests of small animals, but Hortensia was leaning over the trunk quite eagerly, which caught Belle’s attention.

“What is it?” She asked, and leaned down to assist the great aunt, whose eyes were shining.

“I had to pack away my clothes after I had my accident. I couldn’t wear my old things anymore, couldn’t put most of them on, you see?” She shook a greyish item of clothing, making so much dust fly that all three women had to cough and wait for the cloud to calm down.

“Joseph, please carry the trunk to the terrace? Belle, could you shake the dust off of these? I think they should all be about your size.” Sylvia glanced at the clothes, but found them instantly distasteful. They wouldn’t have fitted her anyway, and they were long since out of fashion. Belle hesitated, but noticed that there seemed to be no wear or tear in the piles of clothes at all. She thought of the beautiful portrait of young Hortensia which hung in the study, and wondered if she would find the gown in the trunk. Joseph and Belle shared the heavy load of the trunk between themselves, carrying it out to the terrace that shielded them from most of the summer rain.

After a thorough dusting, Belle found that all the clothes in the trunk were quite amazing. At the very bottom of the large trunk she’d found a golden-yellow ball gown inside a silk bag. The gown alone had filled half of the trunk. On top of it she’d found other carefully-folded and securely packed items, mostly lighter gowns and petticoats, and muslin chemises so fine they might have been made of spider silk.

The item that had most caught Hortensia’s interest had been a green-gold brocade coat lined with silk. It was in flawless condition, and reached Belle down well past her knees almost to her ankles. She was quite petite and short, so she’d been rather afraid that all the contents of the trunk would simply drown her, but somehow she’d never really realized before that Hortensia was no tall woman either. It was because she seemed deceptively tall in her wheelchair.

After quite a lengthy moment spent cleaning and dusting the trunk and its contents, Belle folded and repacked everything to their places neatly. She was thinking of trying to find someone to buy the golden gown, but she loved the thought of keeping the other items. One could never have enough undergowns. She hurried to get Joseph to help her again with the trunk, before returning to Hortensia and thanking her for the clothes. Belle reflected that it was quite possible that Hortensia had maneuvered the most valuable things from the attic into her possession after all, right under Sylvia’s nose, without a fight.
Aunt Hortensia reminded Sylvia that her friend was waiting for her in the glass garden, and off she hurried, after she’d claimed an old pipe, one of the old tea sets and the wall clock as her inheritance. Hortensia and Belle continued sorting the old things in mostly companionable silence, with Belle sometimes suggesting items that the curator might find interesting. Belle also helped sort out the irredeemably useless things, which they agreed to have either destroyed or recycled. Alice joined them halfway through the project, and declared rain was boring and that Gaston had cheated at cards they’d been playing in the drawing room with Archibald and Penelope.

The parlor was still a bit of a mess by lunchtime, which was a fairly dull affair with little conversation. The rain seemed to bring everyone’s mood down. Belle didn’t feel much like talking, because she didn’t want to say anything about the clothes she’d been given, in case Sylvia got too interested in them, and she didn’t want to talk to her father, in case she’d say something out of place. She had been waiting all morning for Maurice to approach her, but instead she’d seen no sight of him since breakfast.

"Poor sheep," Alice reflected, looking out through the window at the grazing sheep in the clearing beyond the garden. Most of the sheep had gathered around a wide oak tree for shelter. "They must be ever so wet," she said with heart-breaking sympathy.

"Don’t worry," Hortensia said soothingly, "They’re used to rain. The water just trickles down off their backs. So you’ve lived in town all your life?"

"Oh yes, lady Hortensia," Alice said, with an empathic nod. She was a short, blonde sixteen-year-old, but the way she spoke, and the way her eyes were frequently dreamily out of focus as if looking into some other far-away world, she sometimes appeared to have the mind of a six-year-old. Alice and Belle knew each other from Avonlea mostly by chance: They lived in the same part of town, and had similar tempers and fairly much the same interests. Their friendship wasn’t intense, as if they were sisters, but the relationship was easy and companionable. When the possibility for Alice to return to the country as Belle’s particular friend had risen again, Belle had not hesitated to ask Alice to join her.

"And you, master Roux, are you of the town or the country?" Hortensia asked next, directing her attention to Gaston, left of Belle.

"I was born and raised in the country, and I moved to town when I was ten," he replied.

"We are continuing on to our summer estate by train next week," madame Roux continued. "Sylvia, you’ll have to visit us by the end of the summer," she continued, tossing the ball of conversation to the aunt.

After lunch was done, Belle and Alice helped Eleanor, the mistress of the kitchen, clean up. Then Belle excused herself from Alice’s presence, declaring that she needed to speak to her father. But finding Maurice was easier said than done. He was not in his guest room, not in the study. He was not in the drawing room or the parlor. Belle had done a full circuit of the entire manor and decided to go look downwards next. She found Alice and Eleanor scrubbing plates and conversing in the kitchen, while Aunt Sylvia and madame Roux’s maids were looking bored and snobbish sitting by the table and eating cold cuts. They didn’t bother to stand up at Belle’s entering, as etiquette would have demanded, but Belle couldn’t have cared less about that as she breezed through the room.

There was no sight of her father down below in the wine cellar, but she was surprised to find Gaston there, studying the labels on the ale and wine bottles. After briefly admonishing him – and he swore he’d been merely looking – Belle returned upstairs and finally found Maurice beyond the window of the parlor. He was walking outside in the rain with an umbrella.
In a moment, Belle was wearing her new brocade coat, and wielding Joseph’s old black umbrella, as she hurried outside to join Maurice, who first complimented her new coat, and then told her to get back inside.

“Yes, I will in a moment. Is there something you’d like to talk about first?” Belle asked, her eyes pleading and hopeful. "For example, explain to me why you’re wandering out here in the rain all alone, looking entirely miserable?” She asked, her voice light, trying to make the question sound less serious than it was.

Maurice seemed a bit helpless, and hesitated to answer at first. "I must seem a bit obvious then,” he said, laughing with dark humour.

They walked slowly through Aunt Hortensia’s garden, where the early summer flowers in all the shades of blue, gold and purple were now in bloom. The fairies were hiding from the rain, so there was no display of light and mystery, but this didn’t diminish the beauty of the flowers. If anything, the rain drops clinging to the tender petals made the flowers shine more.

"Belle, I owe a lot of money, to some bad people. We could be losing the mill,” Maurice told his daughter, with a soft, gentle voice.

Belle thought for a moment, thankful that her father had finally admitted the truth to her, and trying to find a response that was helpful.

"Can I do anything, papa? Perhaps I could find some work?” she said.

"These sums…” Maurice shook his head. "I don’t know if you should be looking for work, it wouldn’t help much.”

"I could earn at least my own keep?” Belle suggested. ”You wouldn’t have to worry about me in all of this.”

Maurice was thoughtful in his turn for a moment.

"I’d like to see you married soon. I’d like that very much. It would keep you safe.” He glanced at the white wooden house, and back at Belle. "Now, I’m not saying that you should marry Gaston, or the next boy your Aunt Sylvia brings you. But I’d like you to try give them a chance. Marriage means steady security, and a home.” She patted Belle’s hand. "I don’t know if I can give either of those to you anymore.” Maurice sighed and turned to look at the bush of purple foxglove next to them.

"I could have a home, and security, if I worked…” Belle said quietly.

"Working as what? A governess? A maid?” Maurice asked a tad too sharply. But perhaps he was right. There was not much of a future in either of those professions for a young women who had spent two semesters in a university, and who had high hopes of traveling abroad. Not unless she became a maid to someone who enjoyed travel. And as a maid, she would have to say good bye to reading.

"Aunt Sylvia wanted you to be friendly with Gaston. She told me she thinks you’re a bit haughty with nice young men and that it wouldn’t hurt to try harder.” Maurice sighed heavily. "Sylvia has some money of her own, and she said she could arrange you a dowry, for Violet’s sake.”

At this point, it felt to Belle like she wasn’t even registering, comprehending all the words that were coming out of her father’s mouth. It was as if a stranger was speaking to him.

So Belle said nothing. She promptly left her father alone in the rain and headed back for the house,
trying to count her blessings, telling herself that there were poor children in Agrabah who begged on the streets for bread and never had a chance to learn how to read. There were young girls all over Marchlands born to cooks and maids and fishmongers who never got to spend all summer in a beautiful manor house reading Richard Blake novels.

Belle was very lucky, and she told herself she was obliged to feel so. She’d already had such nice things in her life, all thanks to money she hadn’t earned herself. She’d had the privilege of obtaining impressive education. To ask for more would be greedy and selfish, she told herself sternly, choking down a sob and fighting back the tears that wanted to pool in her eyes.

Afternoon was best spent in morose solitude, and concentrating on how to appear lovely at the dinner table. Belle had her afternoon tea alone in the study, trying to forget the conversation she’d had with her father by reading more of A Song for Three Towns. Hortensia visited her at one point, but said nothing, only read through the previous day’s newspapers, and then left the room.

When dinner approached, Belle went upstairs to change clothes. It was going to be a fine affair, since it was her birthday. There was going to be a rather large cake at the end.

Since she’d already decided to sell Hortensia’s golden ball gown, Belle thought it a shame if she didn’t wear it at least once before letting it off her hands. Hence she dug the gown from the trunk of, together with the monstrously large petticoat it came with, and after some trial and effort mostly in the underwear department, managed to get herself mostly inside the gown.

Alice walked in as she was halfway done, and gasped in wonder at Belle.

"Please help me with it,” Belle asked, turning her back to her friend.

"It’s amazing! You look amazing! What a lovely dress!” Alice exclaimed, fingering the fine satin with her fingers.

"Aunt Hortensia gave it to me for my birthday,” Belle replied, "it must be at least sixty years old.”

"It is a bit out of fashion,” Alice said, picking at the laces that needed her attention. Then she grinned. "In a good way.”

Yes, the decolletage was cut rather low. With the current fashion of high collars gathered primly around the throats, the way this golden gown off her shoulders was a bit scandalous. But her father and aunt Sylvia had asked her to be lovely, hadn’t they? Belle thought darkly. But it wasn’t for their pleasure, or anyone else’s, she was doing this little masquerade for. It was her miserable twenty-first birthday, and she’d try and make the best of it.

Alice borrowed her a chain of pearls that completed the outfit, and down they went into the dining room.

The guests of Hortensia’s manor were all delighted by the gown and it was the ruling topic of conversation throughout dinner. Sylvia declared that wearing ball gowns at a dinner table was a breach of etiquette, but she also admitted that Belle looked very well in it. It was nice. She felt a little bit like a princess. She’d cherish the memory of the moment, if and when later in the year she might have to rely on Sylvia or someone else’s charity getting herself fed.

Belle had a seat of honour at the other end of the long dining table, all the way across from Aunt Hortensia, who seemed a bit healthier and better that evening. She had exclaimed her delight in the fact that they were just the same size and that the dress hadn’t gone to waste. Sitting next to Belle was Gaston, who seemed to have trouble keeping his gaze at the level of Belle’s eyes when he
Belle turned to speak to her, a fact which Belle found as amusing as off-putting. But they spoke amicably throughout the dinner, remade their plans to take the boat out the next day, and Belle nodded and smiled to Gaston’s great fishing expedition tales.

Outside, the weather seemed to be only taking a turn for the worse. More rain poured down from the skies, and the wind picked up so that the rain pattered against the windows. Curtains were drawn to keep the howling wind and the chill at bay, more wood added to the flames of the heaters, and bottles of whiskey and sherry were produced to accompany the dessert.

With the main course concluded, Alice and Penelope helped turn low the lights in the room before Eleanor started walking in carrying the birthday cake on a silver platter. It was a remarkable cake in two tiers, painstakingly decorated with cream and sugar shapes of flowers, and with a small circle of candles on the top tier. Everyone clapped their hands to Eleanor’s craftsmanship, then Hortensia started singing the Happy Birthday song, and everyone joined in.

With the laid in the middle of the table, the song halfway through, there was suddenly a noise outside, the distinct sound of a carriage rolling to the front yard, throwing pebbles around. As the song died out, Hortensia asked Joseph to greet the guest at the front door. Belle thought she heard something mentioned about a Doctor Tiller? She wondered if she should for Joseph to return before cutting the cake, but then Eleanor was at her side, a silver cake server in hand, and leading Belle across the dining room closer up towards the cake.

”Make a wish!” Alice exclaimed, and Belle nodded. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and wished that her father’s problems with the debts would be solved by the end of the year. Then she opened her eyes and blew the candles out.

Then as all the lights in the dining room went out, the two lights mounted to the walls, and all the tall white tapers around the table, Belle marveled the condition and health of her lungs, until her brain as the next thing told her it was simply impossible that she could have blown off all the lights in the room. Then she pondered if this was a part of a birthday surprise of some sort.

Joseph returned to the doorway, carrying a candelabra in his hand. He looked very worried indeed, the lines of age on his face deeper than usual, and leaned down to whisper in Aunt Hortensia’s ear. Aunt Hortensia looked almost bewildered for a moment, before schooling her expression back to a neat surface of calm.

”Excuse me everyone, I better go see to the guest at the door,” Hortensia said, and was about to roll her wheelchair backwards, when the lights suddenly returned to the dining room. The candles around the table flickered back alive. Everyone’s attention seemed to be on Belle, who was standing in the middle of them with a silver cake shovel in hand, looking at Aunt Hortensia in mild confusion.

”Oh, there’s no need,” an unfamiliar voice piped out from the other end of the table. It was a terrible, inhuman voice, all hiss, its tone laced with a subtle threat. All the heads turned in unison to see the peculiar new guest. He was sitting in Belle’s chair with his fingers laced together, throwing Aunt Hortensia a toothy grin, and such teeth they were, all of them black!

The stranger was wearing a coat of something that looked like it was made of snake or crocodile perhaps. His eyes were as dark as his teeth and fingernails, and his skin was unmistakably green. There was something horribly inhuman and abstractly threatening about him, which elicited the similar kind of primal run-or-hide reaction from the people in the room like a large snake would, or a predatory wolf perhaps.

”Oh my!” Alice exclaimed as she scampered off, having sat just next to him. She went to hide behind Aunt Sylvia’s seat, a curious knee-jerk reaction when it came to logical choices, Belle
Gaston was the last to notice the new presence at the dinner table. When he turned to see what everyone else was looking at, his immediate reaction was a strange wailing sound, and getting off his seat so fat that the chair fell down. The green stranger barely acknowledged the staggering young man next to him, all his eyes were for Aunt Hortensia, who was doing and saying nothing, much like everyone else in the room.

The stranger played with the half-full sherry glass in front of him as the silence drew longer. ”You sent me an invitation. Something about a deal you wished to make.” His gaze passed briefly on Maurice before returning to Hortensia, who slowly brought a smile on her lips. She sipped her glass of sherry, not leaving her eyes from the additional guest at the table for a moment.

"Welcome to the Mid-Marchland Dales. Would you like to join me in the study, or shall we have some cake first?"

The uninvited guest turned his intense gaze on Belle for the first time now, at her standing by the cake, gripping the cake server like a weapon as she stared back at him. What an odd man, Belle thought. What an odd, odd man.

"I think we should let the cake wait,” the stranger said as he stood up, his movement strangely graceful and fluid for someone who looked and sounded so coarse. "At least give time for the cutter to regain her wits,” he added with a sharp smile in his voice as he walked past around Belle. She craned her neck and then turned around at the perceived insult, gritting her teeth together, wanting to give back some kind of a retort, but "Hey you, wait!” wasn’t going to make any kind of good effect, and was perhaps likely to make him want to turn her into an animal of some sort. So she settled to watching Rumpelstiltskin leave the dining room with Aunt Hortensia.

It felt like everyone had been holding their breath until they heard the faraway sound of Aunt Hortensia’s study door clicking carried into the dining room, and then air returned, and the candles seemed a bit brighter.

Belle laughed. "So, where were we?” She asked, not wanting to stand around like a statue until whatever business happened in the study would be concluded. She cut herself a piece of cake.

Gaston was just about to charge past her, when madame Roux suddenly fainted, sinking forwards on the dinner table, her head almost hitting the creamy birthday cake.

Aunt Sylvia closed her fan, pointing at Gaston with it, and it made a loud snapping sound. ”Go find your mother’s smelling salts.” She got out of her seat and started readjusting poor madame Roux.

Maurice couldn’t sit still any longer then, and excused himself from the dinner table. He was so nervous, his forehead was sweating.

"I think we’ll retire as well,” Archibald agreed, and escorted Penelope out of the dining room, following Gaston, but not Maurice, who Belle had seen definitely heading towards the study as he’d crossed the foyer.

Alice returned to her seat. ”Can I have some cake?” She asked nonchalantly.

Belle handed Alice the piece she’d cut, before hurrying out of the room and following Maurice’s footsteps.
Books:

A Song for Three Towns is an allusion to Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities, and the quote is an edited one from this book.

The Woman's Guidebook is a real book, which I have, and quite enjoy reading. It's a compilation by different writers, edited by Lempi Torppa.
The Tale of Aunt Hortensia

The stable master, Joseph, was standing in the foyer, speaking in confusion with the cook Eleanor, when Belle hurried past them. Joseph halted her.

"Miss Belle, do you think we should send William to Bluedale to fetch the constabulary?" Joseph asked. They both stared at Belle pleadingly, while in Belle's was all wonderment why the two of them would ask her of all people.

"I think only if we want mister Crawley to be turned into a newt," Belle managed to answer, and joined her father at the door to the study. Maurice had his palm on the handle, trying it several times, but the door would not open.

"It's locked," Maurice said woefully. He had the whiskey smell on his breath, Belle noticed. And far too much of it for how much he'd had it at the dinner table.

"But there's no lock on this door..." Belle said, and lifted her brows. Apparently there was one now.

Maurice gave his daughter an apprehensive glare. "You should go up to your room and stay there until he leaves," he instructed Belle, who replied with a huff and a pointed look meant to assure that she was absolutely not going upstairs to hide from Rumpelstiltskin.

Without another word or meaningful glare, Belle decided to proceed to the glassed winter garden instead. There was another entrance outside, in the garden. She hurried to the closet to find her coat, and ran out into the rainstorm.

"Where are you going!" She heard her father call after her.

"To see Aunt Hortensia!" Belle shot the reply across her shoulder. She wasn't even sure why she was going to see Aunt Hortensia anyway, a moment ago she'd been ready to have cake, and she'd run into the foyer just out of concern for her father. Then the lock had appeared on the door of the study, and Belle's first gut instinct had been to run inside to protect her frail old aunt in a wheelchair.

When she'd finished circling around the house and gotten herself quite drenched before stepping into the winter garden, Belle had cooled down internally as well, trying to come to grips to what she was doing. Between herself and her aunt, Hortensia was far more likely to survive an encounter with Rumpelstiltskin. But she was already in the darkened garden, and there was the soft golden light coming through the windowed double doors of the study.

Belle gathered her enormous petticoat up to her waist before crouching down and starting to crawl on all fours on the tiled pathway. She thought she'd find a good a hiding place behind an opportune bush, from where she could see into the study. She had finished doing that and settled down her petticoats, the door leading out opened and closed again. Maurice had followed Belle into the garden, and was making large showy hand gestures at her to come join him at the door at once. Belle shook her head viciously, shaking droplets of rainwater from her hair around.
Maurice was a large man, so when he crouched down and made it across the garden his knees half-bent, it wasn't stealthy. Belle gestured at him to get back or at least level himself down more, with a pleading look in her eyes.

When Maurice reached Belle's hiding place beyond the conveniently placed bushes, he scolded his daughter immediately. "It's rude to eavesdrop!" he hissed.

"I know," Belle replied, her cheeks flushing. It was only the third time she was doing it within the space of twenty-four hours. When her father settled beside her on the ground, she felt considerably less guilty about it.

"What are they doing?" Maurice asked.

Belle hadn't had a chance to pay attention to the window of the study until now. Her father didn't have his spectacles on, and he was squinting. Apparently he didn't see all that well, and the two dozen window panels distorted the light coming through with reflections.

"I think," Belle paused. "They're drinking sherry, papa,"

Rumpelstiltskin was running his fingers across the spinning wheel and saying something. Aunt Hortensia sat in her wheelchair next to the desk and replied, and apparently laughed too. Then he stepped away from the spinning wheel, closer to her, and spoke animatedly, not quite walking but not staying put either, and accentuating his words with his flicks of his finger as he spoke.

Aunt Hortensia replied again with a rather cheeky grin, cocking her head as she did. She seemed quite flirtatious! She was 82, and in a wheelchair! And winking her eye like that at Rumpelstiltskin!

"Can you see anything else?" Maurice whispered, startling Belle.

"Shh!" Belle replied.

Aunt Hortensia's expression had turned suddenly very grim, and she started moving about the room. She rolled over to the double doors, and pulled a satin cord which drew down the heavy velvet curtains to cover the windows.

"She drew the curtains, papa," Belle sighed, feeling rather glad that she had. Concluding that Aunt Hortensia didn't seem to be in any need of rescuing, it was time to leave this rather inept exercise in busybodying and return back in the house. Belle stood up as gracefully as possible while supposedly having hid in a garden wet through, while wearing a golden satin ball gown.

Oh...

She looked down. The dress seemed quite ruined.

Well, it was her own fault. What did she do that for, go run outside in the rain with her coat open, and crawl on all fours in a garden full of dirt? She frowned, pushing the matter with the dress aside for now.

Belle offered her hand to her father, helping him get up. "They want to be alone. Better go back to the house, papa," she said, feeling impossibly defeated. What a birthday it had been. At least there was still cake left in the dining room, if madame Roux hadn't managed to faint on top of it. Or unless they would all die soon by the hand of Aunt Hortensia's terrifying guest, that was still uncertain.

They left the garden quietly, and hurried back around the house through the pouring rain. Belle decided to head upstairs immediately to change her clothes, so she could look at what could be...
salvaged, and to save herself from catching a cold. A furious sense of embarrassment and humiliation stung her. And to think she'd already imagined the day couldn't be worse.

~

Hortensia circled around her desk to open a cabinet where she kept a bottle of sherry and small crystal glasses. "Would you like a drink?" She felt she was in need of one. Despite her putting up the best show at seeming calm and graceful, she wasn't at all immune to the sense of frightened awe that Rumpelstiltskin inspired.

It helped to keep her facade up when she told herself that this was merely another guest, much as any other, and pushed herself into the routines of hostessing. When he declined her offer, she helped herself a glassful and emptied it swiftly.

"I'd thought you'd dismissed my letter," Hortensia said conversationally, and poured more sherry for herself. She left the glass and the bottle on the table and circled back around the desk. She didn't want to hide behind the desk, because it was not how she behaved with guests.

"No, I kept it," he said, adding a thrilled gleeful noise at the end of his reply that might have been a mean, short laugh.

"Would you like to take a seat?" she continued, gesturing at the recliner and the rocking chair at opposite sides of the room. "We're perhaps a bit lacking in normal chairs, as I tend to bring mine along as I go."

He shook his head curtly. "Prefer standing."

"I'm afraid we missed proper introductions. I'm of course Hortensia. I think I might have gone by as Hortensia Blackwood at some point. And the Marchland Enchantress."

"Rumpelstiltskin," he said, and gave her a polite bow. He moved a bit like an energetic marionette, Hortensia looked at him, marveling, while trying to remind herself to stay on guard. She was a little amused when he touched the spinning wheel lightly, leaving a mark on the dust.

"You're not too scared of me," he said, peering down at her, somewhat interested. Hortensia wasn't sure what he was after.

"One should always make their guests feel welcome. Being scared is hardly the way to do it."

Hortensia relaxed a bit, and beamed up a disarming smile of the Hortensia in the oil painting. "Unless you'd feel more welcome if I obliged myself to be more terrified in your presence."

"More?" He asked playfully.

"I'm well aware of your power, sir," Hortensia replied, square-faced honesty in her manner. "So what brings you to see me four months after my invitation?"

The imp took a slow step towards her and bent down ever so slightly, as he smiled, showing his darkened teeth. "There seems to be quite the gathering of desperate souls under your roof." He straightened up and laughed. "I thought I'd swat them all at once."

"I see," Hortensia mused.

"Two of them are hiding in your conservatory," Rumpelstiltskin grinned, not looking at the double doors with their ornate windows, but pointing at them with a window. "Shall we show them what happens to people who eavesdrop on Rumpelstiltskin?" He asked.
"No, I think that won't be necessary," Hortensia replied immediately and rolled her wheelchair closer to the doors so she could close the heavy green velvet curtains. They would muffle all light and sound.

"What sort of a deal does the Marchland Enchantress have in mind?" Rumpelstiltskin asked before she had the time to turn back. "And what do you presume to give in return?"

"Actually," Hortensia replied, trying to choose her words carefully, in hopes of not angering him, "I didn't write to you about a deal. The letter entailed everything. A social nicety." She rolled back close to the desk and took her sherry glass in hand. "The King of Avalon couldn't sail to southern islands and take a house for the weekend without the Queen of Lyonesse asking him for tea."

If Hortensia presumed to be a judge of character or good at catching body language, she would have thought Rumpelstiltskin's slightly faltered expression was due to the fact that he'd been caught by surprise.

"How peculiar," he said eventually, his animated animosity returning as swiftly as it had receded. "Social calls are terrible waste of time."

Hortensia almost burst into laugh, but she caught it at half-a-snigger. She was at death's door, and he was three hundred years old and immortal! Of the two, she thought she should have been the one inconvenienced. "I'm sorry if I've wasted your time, I didn't realize that you'd be so pressed for it." It had also been enjoyable to get a spontaneous response out of him that wasn't a part of something looking like a rehearsed act to startle people.

"I'll go make something better out of it with the rest of your family," he replied, sounding a less amused than a moment before.

"Oh, please do wait?" Hortensia pleaded.

"So, there is something you want of me?" Rumpelstiltskin demanded. "Don't lie, I can see that you're dying. Do you want something to take away the cancer? Or just the pain?"

Hortensia closed her eyes for briefly and shook her head. "No." She looked up at him. "There's nothing I want for me. But I'm not the only one who's contacted you about a deal."

Rumpelstiltskin flicked his fingers, producing a neat white calling card, with Belle's father's name on it. Added to it, with Maurice's handwriting, was "Lady Hortensia's House, Bluedale." Then the card burst into flame and vanished.

Hortensia didn't know what he found more distracting: The fact that Maurice was desperate enough to contact Rumpelstiltskin, or that he'd used Hortensia's name as leverage in catching his attention. This at least solved the mystery of why he'd been so nervous since their arrival. Perhaps it had been planned early on. Hortensia could sympathize with Maurice, but she felt irked. But he was Belle's father, so he was family.

"Maurice is drunk at the moment." And this explains why, Hortensia added to herself. Because he's scared for his life that this meeting goes bad. "It wouldn't very fair of you to go and squeeze his soul right now." And I wonder what there would be left to squeeze out.

"It's never fair," Rumpelstiltskin replied merrily.

"Is there anything I could offer to persuade you to wait until tomorrow afternoon?" Hortensia asked.

"Oh, you mean... a deal?" He seemed to be enjoying himself again immensely. "Your firstborn,
perhaps? That ship set sail a long time ago. Perhaps your gardens? Just for the sheer pleasure of tearing the wings off of every single fairy in there.” His hands kept constantly moving as he spoke.

Hortensia caught her tongue before saying something she might have regretted a second later. She surmised he already had an inkling of some interested, she guessed that Rumpelstiltskin knew what he wanted, and she was being dangled like a worm in a hook.

"If you're going to delay me, keep me here for hours and hours of my precious time,” he said, "then you should amuse me with a tale.”

"Any tale?” Hortensia asked.

"Not just any. A particular tale.” Rumpelstiltskin pointed at the spinning wheel. ”May I?” He asked.

Hortensia nodded. She was just about to ask if he needed a seat fetched, but it seemed that he also could bring his own when needed, as a stool materialized out of nowhere. She watched him pick the dusty wool from the basket.

"You're not an entirely common witch,” he said, tweaking the wool between his hands, ”you have had magic for over fifty years, you have some skill and power, and you rarely use it, except to break curses, and you take nothing in return. Tell me about your magic. What brings about this enormous generosity of yours? What is the feeling that drives you? And do make it an interesting tale, and more to the point, true, or I'll have even less consideration for your family than you'd think possible.” He looked into Hortensia's eyes, dark eyes staring at her so she felt like he'd penetrate her mind and dig her secrets out with a stare.

Well, she supposed there was really not a lot of harm in telling him, Hortensia thought to herself. In fact, the idea that she could tell someone, and that the telling of it might somehow be useful, was quite appealing to her.

"I'd prefer wool, if you don't mind, it's much warmer in winter,” Hortensia said, pointing at the spinning wheel.

He nodded, but it was somewhat mischievous. ”Let's have it then.”

"None of it was pleasant. I had an accident when I was twenty-three, it put me in this wheelchair,” Hortensia began, emptying her glass of wine. She set it aside and decided not to drink any more. "It was upsetting, as you can imagine. We tried to get help. That was costly. The size of this estate shrunk the first time.”

"Poor, poor lord and his grand estates, not so grand anymore,” Rumpelstiltskin said mockingly.

Hortensia tried to recall details of the next part of her life's journey, but it was a bit hazy. Her memory had put together the events of the past into a bit of a mess, and the things that had ensued, they weren't exactly helping her jolt back any clear thoughts.

"So I decided to find magic. That was not easy, bound in a wheelchair. I had quite a few incidents of being stuck in a forest on a tree root. When I was twenty-eight, I was thinking about packing up, selling everything I could ship and train passage to. Well, to see you.” Hortensia smiled a bit, recalling how she'd had to let go of the idea. ”I think I must have written you a letter,” she continued somewhat absently.

He didn’t bother with a reply. The steady sound of the spinning wheel was very smoothing, Hortensia tried to concentrate on that.
"Then I got what I wanted. There was a witch who consorted with some fairly wicked fairies, I found her by chance. She showed me the ropes. I think she died of mushroom poisoning at some point, fairies can be so deceitful."

Hortensia found she had to pause to take a breath and consider how she was going to deliver the gist of the thing, so to speak. The Truth of the Matter. She was afraid she was going to derail herself with insignificant details and then Rumpelstiltskin would be bored and... who knew what.

"Then I learned that magic comes with a price. The great exchange. I thought that I'd get back on my feet with no payment. I was thirty years old. My sister was pregnant at the time, with her third child, it was supposed to be a boy." She heard her voice that had been so clear, falter into a mutter. "There was a bit of a mess, and I tried to take it all back. That was a bit silly of me. I didn't go all the way, and they both died anyway."

Hortensia nodded to herself. "I was standing up, and she took a fall. In the staircase." Lilian had come to the countryside to give birth, Hortensia recalled. She hadn't wanted to be alone while her husband had been away. She'd taken a stumble at the top, and had come rolling down.

Hortensia recalled how she'd... gotten to her sister's side. They'd had words just before other people had joined them, and then the light had faded out of Lilian's eyes. How their father had cried and shouted and demanded why had no one been escorting Lilian down? Then Hortensia recalled how her father had lifted her back to the wheelchair. No one had ever noticed or questioned, how had Hortensia gotten out of her wheelchair in the first place?

"You could walk?" Rumpelstiltskin asked. He hadn't missed that. He probably missed very few things, Hortensia reflected.

"Yes, for a while. No one knew. I pretended." Hortensia nodded. "Until I went and broke my spine again." Hortensia smiled. "Very silly of me. I was young and thinking I was doing something very brave and selfless. I just wanted to get rid of the guilt, and I thought that would have done the trick."

She pursed her lips for a moment. "So I suppose the answer to your questions lies somewhere between grief and guilt?"

He didn't reply, and there was a nervous quiet in the room Hortensia assumed was her duty to fill.

"So I made a career as The Enchantress, mostly really just breaking curses with fairy dust. I tried to be good. Make good things. I charged feebly, or nothing at all. That's how I earned my reputation and nickname Good Fairy Godmother," Hortensia said, laughing bittersweetly.

"And are you good?" Rumpelstiltskin asked, his voice low, eyes on the yarn.

Hortensia shook her head. "I'm not good," she said with a smile. She wasn't good, not just for what had happened to Lilian, but because of all sorts of things she'd gotten up to while she'd been bound in the wheelchair the first time. While they were partially related to her journey up to the point when she'd finally had power, her other dead-end quests had been the real reason behind her shocking moral decline. There had been things far worse than wheelchairs and tree roots. But he hadn't asked her about her opinions of right and wrong, now had he?

"I'm not good." Hortensia repeated. She shrugged, feeling curiously light about her chest all of a sudden. "I don't think it'll matter much soon anyhow, as you noticed. Doctor Tiller says I'll be gone within a year," she added, as if talking of the weather.

It seemed like Rumpelstiltskin was now more interested in the spinning wheel than her, Hortensia thought.
"Will that do? Or did you find it tedious?" Hortensia asked.

Rumpelstiltskin stopped spinning wool and rose from the stool he'd conjured for himself, which also vanished. "Maudlin sentimentalities," he scoffed.

"I agree, feelings tend to be like that," Hortensia replied calmly. "Would you like a room? Tea? Cake?" She asked, assuming their arrangement was established, since he hadn't declared the tale rubbish yet. "The old master bedroom in the west wing is completely unoccupied, and no one else stays on that floor on that side of the house. I think you'll find it large enough and comfortable. I'll ask no one to disturb you for the duration of your stay, I should imagine you find most of us mortals fairly tedious company."

"Not at all, I create most of my amusement out of them," Rumpelstiltskin replied. "But they usually don't enjoy it," he added, and stepped aside and around Hortensia who was rolling towards the door of the study, which she'd enchanted.

"I'll have someone bring some fresh sheets up," Hortensia said, glancing over her shoulder, but Rumpelstiltskin was already gone. She shook her head, but felt relieved in more than one way, and she couldn't help but notice that the lamp and candles in the study seemed a little brighter now that the Dark One had gone.

As Hortensia left the study, it seemed to her that the guests and the staff had taken themselves to bed, or at least left downstairs, with the exception of two. Maurice and Belle were both outside in the foyer, Belle eating cake in a blue dress as she sat on the stairs, Maurice had been pacing on the carpet back and forth, and snapped to attention as soon Hortensia wheeled herself out of the study. Hortensia wanted to give him a piece of her mind, but the hour was very late, and she found herself quite drained.

"I need to speak to him," Maurice began.

"You'll get a chance to do that tomorrow," Hortensia retorted. She beckoned Belle closer. "Darling, you know where the linen closet, be so good as to leave fresh sheets outside your grandfather Magnus's old room," she said. "And please, at breakfast tomorrow, let everyone know they shouldn't go into the west wing at all. Make that as plain and clear as day."

"What? Is he up there?" Maurice asked.

Hortensia directed a rather menacing glare at him. "Maurice, you will go to bed, and drink nothing but water until tomorrow afternoon. And now I'm going to turn in, good night," she snapped, mustering such authoritative finality that Maurice didn't dare come after her with more questions.

"Do you think he'd like cake as well?" Belle asked Hortensia, and Hortensia had to wonder if she was hearing an uncharacteristic echo of impertinence in Belle's voice. Then she dismissed the idea, because Belle was far from a sassy troublemaker.

"And perhaps tea, if you can find any hot water in the kitchen," Hortensia replied, already rolling away.

As she closed her bedroom door behind her, Hortensia had to wonder how Rumpelstiltskin would use Maurice's plight against her tomorrow. Maurice had absolutely nothing of value or interest to the Dark One.

Hortensia lifted herself out of her wheelchair into bed. It was hard work for an old woman, but she'd done this fifty years through now. Lately, there had often been someone there to see if she could
manage, but tonight everyone seemed to be in hiding, apart from Belle and Maurice. She had to admit that hiding was the better option for most of them.

Hide, children, from the monsters in the night, Hortensia whispered as a good night's prayer to her guests.
The Boat and The Pavilion

Chapter Summary

Belle encounters a series of unpleasantries

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Aunt Hortensia bade her grand-niece and Maurice a stern good night, the first thing Belle did was to see if her father obeyed Aunt Hortensia's stern command of leaving all matters, and the odd, odd guest!, well enough alone until tomorrow. Having extinguished the candles, Belle stood at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at her retreating father, heard and saw him headed for the east wing and the guest rooms.

When there was no light or sound coming from upstairs any more, Belle went to find the linen closet in the dim light of a rainy summer's night. She knew the house so well, she wasn't worried of stumbling or getting lost. Finding the proper sheets in the darkness was slightly tricky, but she managed by feeling her way through the shelves and their contents.

With impeccably smoothly ironed linens gone soft with time and wear folded over one arm, Belle made a trip to the kitchen, and left the sheets on the back of a chair, before investigating the situation with tea water. The stoves and ovens had been cooling for a while now, but there was a large iron pot on the remains of the day's last coals, the water inside it still acceptably hot to produce respectable tea. Most of the cake was in the pantry, having been left almost untouched by the dinner party.

In order to handle the tea tins in the darkness, Belle smelled each until she arrived at the soothing dried peppermint leaves from the previous summer's harvest. Next she had to find one of the old small teapots that would travel well upstairs on a tray. Once there had been two dozen of them in the manor's kitchens, but after a bit of fumbling in the darkness, she could only find one. Luckily, one was enough.

A moment later Belle left the kitchen, carrying sheets, and a tray laden with cake and tea. She ghosted through the sleeping, calm house. Deceptively calm, Belle thought. Not that less than an hour ago Joseph and Gaston had had to carry Gaston's mother between the two of them upstairs, after Aunt Sylvia had had to loosen the laces of madame Roux's corset in the dining room. Now in the present state of quiet lull, they all probably thought everything was back to normal, and that the beast that had interrupted their dinner party was gone, having been just another one of Aunt Hortensia's peculiar visitors (once a garden luncheon had been interrupted by a lion, and since then all unexpected turns of events at Hortensia's manor had left the regular visitors fairly unperturbed.)

Belle took a turn at the staircase for the west wing. She had to open a set of double doors to let herself into the corridor, but she managed to just turn the handle with half a hand under everything she carried and slip in.

The bedrooms she passed had been at some point in time designed and built to house one Magnus Blackwood, a railway engineer, his wife, and their children. Belle had played in this part of the house as a child, but she had come rarely, because she'd found the west wing a melancholy place.
All the old furniture were covered under dust sheets, but the doors to the bedrooms were closed, thankfully, sparing Belle from their eerie gloom.

Although Aunt Hortensia had specified to Belle that she wasn't to go into grandfather Magnus's room, Belle thought it would have been rather rude to leave the sheets and the tray on the floor and slinking away. Surely the great sorcerer wouldn't mind if she knocked?

Belle rapped the door with her knuckles softly, not wanting anyone else to hear what she was doing, but the dark and the quiet of the night made every sound loud. She waited a little while, feeling a lump rise in her throat, and the hair in the back of her neck stand up, as she anticipated something awful to happen, with second thoughts sneaking up on her to tell her she was doing a bit mistake.

But nothing happened. All was quiet and calm.

After a glance across her shoulder, as if making sure no one would her trespassing, Belle tried the door handle. The door opened effortlessly. She stepped into the master bedroom.

"I brought you tea," she whispered into the dark room. She could make out pale dust sheets in the little light let in by the window, speckled with rain. There was no one inside by the looks of it.

There was a table and two chairs by the window hidden under a large dust sheet. Belle put the tray and the sheets on the dust sheet covering railway engineer Magnus Blackwood's oak four poster bed, bare from having had its curtains removed for storage. Now, with free hands, she pulled the cover away, revealing the table and two chairs, every moment slow and careful in order to disturb as little dust as possible. After folding the cover into itself a few times, she set the old sheet aside and put the tray on the table.

She was slightly alarmed when she suddenly thought she smelled smoke in the room. Tobacco smoke. Belle spun around from the tea tray and the table, looking everywhere in the room, but everything was as empty, uninhabited and quiet as ever. But she was not in the habit of questioning her own senses, especially when she was in the house of a renown witch.

Because it was an old wooden house and she could smell smoke, it would hardly do if the house burned down during the night. Her first instinct was to open the old ceramic heater in the corner of the room. There were similar heaters in every room of the house, each covered with beautifully painted porcelain tiles, they stored heat wonderfully and were far more advanced in heating large houses than old fashioned fireplaces. They were far less romantic than open fires, but far more practical as well, economic in needing less wood to warm up, and keeping warm for far longer.

The furnace inside this particular golden and green mosaic heater was cold and empty, and Belle closed the hatch. The lingering smell of smoke persisted, but Belle recalled the large set of pipes they had found from the attic earlier in the day, so it was no wonder that her great-grandfather's old bedroom smelled like pipe smoke. Before returning to the bed where the fresh sheets were still sitting in folded piles, she made sure she didn't have soot all over her hands, before starting work on the bed.

She felt slightly irritated that she was up so late in the middle of her birthday, putting fresh sheets in a bed without any light, to a completely mortifying stranger who had as good as vanished without a word. Even with the protection of the dust sheets, all the rooms were in a rather morbid state to be putting guests in, and perhaps the stranger might take horrible offence, if his sensibilities were like those of Aunt Sylvia or Madame Roux's (Belle knew they could only bare to stay in such a plain house because of the prestige of being able to say how they'd spent the summer with Lady Hortensia at her Countryside Manor.) All in all, Belle felt that them all being found dead in the morning due to Aunt Hortensia's lack of preparation for visitors who showed completely unannounced would be as
outrageously unfair as it was patently ridiculous.

“He might have RSVP’d,” Belle huffed, incredulous how she'd said something she'd agree on with Aunt Sylvia, as she unfolded one of the old duvets she'd discovered from under the sheets, and laid it over the crisp, white linen sheet.

There was a noise in the room. Definitely a noise. A smothered giggle. Belle felt her body involuntarily freeze. It was him. He was here. Snakeskin coat and scaly green skin, and the black eyes and claws for nails, Belle recalled. Who knew what a man like that would do to a girl when they were alone in a bedroom in the middle of the night, and he was watching her? Perhaps not doing as Aunt Hortensia had specified her had been a bad idea? Belle gritted her teeth.

Carefully peering while trying not to move her head, she saw nothing and no one, not even from the corner of her eye how a fairy might be caught. She kept still, waiting for a moment in anticipation of some kind of reprieve for her comment on the RSVP. But nothing happened, and quiet reigned again. Belle forced herself to calm with a deep intake of breath, and proceeded to stuff a pillow in a pillowcase, assuring herself in the privacy of her mind, that everything was fine.

Now you lay the pillow on the bed, she told herself, and calmly walk out of the room, don't run, and don't look like you're trying to sneak, because that would be silly, he's probably looking at you, so you can't really hide in plain sight. She forced herself into a rather mechanical-looking slow gait of steps, headed towards the door. It felt like she was crossing the length of a ballroom instead of a fairly spacious bedroom chamber, with her heart pounding in her ears, telling her to run and hide. When she was near the door, she couldn't help but take the last two steps much quicker than the earlier ones.

“Good night,” she whispered, out of some automated sense of courtesy, and closed the door behind herself before she did a tip-toed run through the hall and out of the west wing.

Aunt Hortensia wheeled herself into the dining room in the morning, looking a bit cross, which was a bit unlike her. She seemed to be doing a headcount, and was glad that Aunt Sylvia and madame Roux had decided to stay in bed for the duration of the morning, with their ladies' maids keeping them company and carrying them breakfast trays up and down the staircase. Then she rolled out, curtly announcing she would be found in the study or the conservatory.

The weather was wonderful, compared to the glum and rain from the day before. Belle had been under the impression that all five of them, herself, Alice, Penelope, Archibald and Gaston were to go boating together on the lake after breakfast, but both her father and then a suddenly downstairs-descending Aunt Sylvia had all kinds of urgencies to discuss with the three youngsters they didn't want on the boat trip. Maurice had decided he would be terribly bereft if Alice didn't join him in the drawing room to play the pianoforte, and Aunt Sylvia had a sudden urgency to get a letter delivered to the post office in Bluedale, a task which was suitable only for Penelope and Archibald (in Sylvia's opinion.)

“Then there were two,” Belle remarked to Gaston, as they were the only people present at the breakfast table.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Just let me get my book,” Belle replied, pushing her chair back.

Belle smiled, shrugging. “Just some light reading. Maybe I can read to you while you row.” She tilted her head a little and grinned. “Unless if you want me to row, then you can read to me.”

Gaston didn't seem to find that amusing. He seemed to barely register her at all, in fact, finding Belle's comment neither offending or entertaining.

A moment later, Belle and Gaston walked in a somewhat companionable silence on the greenery, towards the boat house, Gaston wearing a plain white linen shirt under a navy blue waistcoat and matching trousers and carrying a bottle of water with thin lemonade slices pushed in through the neck, Belle in the same pale blue dress she'd worn during the night, with a white shawl wrapped loosely around her shoulders and a book in her hand. Gaston was wearing a straw hats to shield himself from the summer sunlight, and Belle wore her white student cap proudly. Outwardly, they appeared a strikingly coordinated couple.

Belle glanced over her shoulder at the house, hoping they'd find everything nice and normal by the time they'd get back. She noticed that the curtains in the far west bedroom window had been drawn now. “There creates himself an artificial night,” Belle whispered, quoting some poet whose name she couldn't quite remember.

“Excuse me?” Gaston asked.

“Oh, nothing, I was just thinking of a poem I read a long time ago,” Belle replied.

After Gaston took charge of taking the row boat out to the lake, fussing over the oars and the bailer like it was high science, narrating how it was all done properly, Belle sat down primly at the stern, which she'd furnished with a cushion from the boathouse as Gaston manoeuvred the boat out to the open waters under a cloudless morning sky.

Their small talk died soon. Belle sat, watching the serene surface of the lake, and the reflections of the shores on it, and how the droplets of water sprayed from the oars back to the water to create ripples.

“You didn't stay at the house to guard your mother,” Belle said after a while.

“She asked me to watch over you instead,” Gaston replied. “And I'm glad she did. Staying inside all day in her bedroom with the sun on a clear sky is a waste of summer.” He glanced over his shoulder to look at where he was going. “Let's go to that island,” he decided, speaking of a small pile of rocks and dirty in the middle of the lake. A very thin birch tree stood there amongst reeds, and there was just about enough grass for one person to lie on it comfortably.

“So Rumpelstiltskin doesn't frighten you any more?” Belle asked, thinking of how Gaston had looked like he'd been physically hit the night before.

“He seems to be under the thrall of your great-aunt and I don't think I can be scared of someone who is tamed by a little old woman in a wheelchair,” Gaston replied matter-of-factly.

Belle thought for a bit. It was true that her Aunt Hortensia was only a 82-year-old woman in a wheelchair, but she had also been a great benefactor throughout her life, removing wicked curses, blessing newborns, never accepting compensation for any magic she did, and always conducting herself regally and politely, whether she was addressing duchesses or the postman. She had a garden full of fairies – except they seemed to have all vanished at the moment – and who knew what else she could do. Aunt Hortensia had always been extremely strict about magic, and sworn that the less she used it the better, and she'd gradually just stopped doing these things almost entirely. She'd retired from public at sixty, and it was no wonder, Belle thought, that Gaston wouldn't know of her
exploits or her self-sacrificing heroism.

“They can both do magic, perhaps you shouldn't think so lightly of them,” Belle muttered.

“It's all mirrors and smoke, like stage magicians. Party tricks, nothing more,” Gaston said self-assuredly. Magic had never been in very high demand, or regarded with favour in Marchland. The country prided itself on practical and logical principles, and magic was more often regarded with scepticism and distrust. This was quite different from places like Lyonesse or Heartlands, or Arbonne, where royal courts vied for attention from wizards and witches.

“Have you ever seen a lion turn into a man?” Belle asked.

Gaston laughed, rolling his eyes, and kept rowing the boat. He didn't reply.

Belle decided to open her book. She had brought the Guide to Womanhood along, because if the boat capsized, she wouldn't be too upset if the book sank to the bottom of the lake. She found herself back at the first few pages, re-reading the introduction.

The young woman of our modern new era is a creature without elegance, because she is unable to harmonise the different aspects of her life together, to remove the discord between her myriad duties and her self-image which would reflect outwards as true elegance. The society is waging an internal war on whether or not a woman belongs in the sphere of the life at home; or should she be a wholly independent member of the society, with same occupation as a man, and as such assume a role of heavy responsibility.

This moment in time proves that the modern young woman is at a crossfire of having to seek her own lifestyle, but she will inevitably face consequences of this adventure in the form of problems and questions that will pull her into wholly different directions of internal conflicts, and such will these hardships be that she will not be able to find any help or consolation from women who devote their life to the domestic sphere. A woman always desires to perform to perfection in everything she does, but these new lifestyles will usher her mercilessly into a vicious circle of turbulence and pressure – and so her elegance is lost.

Belle wasn’t sure what to make of it. The writer seemed to be very cautiously understanding with the women's political movements, while still trying to make the entire idea of leaving home and hearth sound like the worst possible thing a woman could do for herself. Thinking back to the table of contents she’d read the day before, she thought that most likely the entire introduction would be a devious treaty of reasoning tailored to coax young stubborn women, a gentle guidance to why a woman’s place would be home, beside and supporting her husband, and then the rest of the book would lead her to the intricacies and many challenges of life at home.

Such as – she flipped the book to a random place halfway – how to host a card game meeting, and a number of other casual social affairs to other married women.

“You should always hide your children and your dogs from your guests,” Belle read out loud.

“While you may find your sons, daughters and pets the most adorable creatures in all the world, your guests may not find them so, and nothing is as disconcerting as a young child constantly hanging on to her mother as she prattles, or a dog licking your guests' silk stockings as it begs for treats.”

Gaston laughed again. “I thought around six would be nice.”

“Dogs?” Belle asked.

“Children. I'm the only child and I have few cousins who all live around the country. I don't want my
sons to grow up all alone.”

Belle recalled that his father had died when he'd been young, explaining the lack of siblings. To talk about that would have been indelicate, so she struggled to think of something else to say.

“I don't think I'd like that many children, and not in a long while,” she ended up with.

“Oh really? How do you think you'll be able to get married then?” Gaston asked.

“I'm not sure. Maybe I'll just have to do as the author here suggests, and abandon my natural female elegance in favour of working, like every working class woman has to do, to support myself.” Belle said.

Gaston seemed thoughtful.

They arrived at the island, and Gaston stepped out of the boat to inspect what little there was to be explore of it. Belle stayed in the boat, her book open in her lap, the brim of her white cap pulled down over her face to shield herself better from the sun and Gaston.

_The importance of your invisible clothes. A woman's elegance can be seen best in the quality of her undergarments._

Belle looked at the grainy photographs of beautiful and luxurious silk slips and chemises. The book had helpful tips on how to choose the best laces to go with each undergarment, and the importance of having the cut of them done by proper seamstresses. In contrast, Belle felt quite happy with her plain underclothes. She hardly needed a silk dress to sit in the lecture halls and make notes.

When Gaston's hand suddenly appeared in her peripheral sight, slipping under the hem of her skirt to her bare ankle, Belle not only twitched. She gave a loud exclaim of horror and distaste as she pulled her legs closer to herself and held up the Guide to Womanhood as if it were a shield. When she could bare to look up at him, she saw that he seemed utterly confused.

“So are we not going to...?” he asked at length.

“Do what!!” Belle asked, horrified.

Gaston's face pulled slowly into a frown. He glanced over the lake towards the house, and returned his gaze on Belle.

“You were showing me those images yesterday morning at breakfast, and then you invite me out on an expedition across the lake without chaperone.” He spoke very slowly. “And this doesn't seem to be about your desperation to get engaged soon, either. You said you don't intend to get married. So I assumed...”

“What desperation of marriage are you talking about?” Belle asked pointedly, shoving the other things aside for now.

Gaston shrugged. “You live on credit, so it figures your father can't wait to get rid of you. That's why I was brought here.” He looked up and squinted at the sun.

Belle felt blood leave her cheeks. “Who knows this? How long have you known?” She asked, her voice moderately calmer.

“I don't know. Since spring? A lot of people know, I guess. My mother knows, and she's probably told everyone.”
Belle closed her eyes and felt her body convulse around the book she was hugging. That meant that Aunt Sylvia had also known for a while now. And perhaps there were people in her lectures, perhaps even some of the professors too, had known she was in financial trouble. And she'd had no idea. That was shameful. So was the fact that Aunt Sylvia had arranged a rather vapid man to spend a whole week with her, and he seemed to have no qualms at all about assuming that Belle was the kind of free spirit who would allow herself to be pawed by an almost complete stranger after not two days of acquaintance.

“I'd like to go back now,” Belle said, hearing her own voice shaking. She opened her eyes and sat up a little straighter. “Please row back, or I will.”

Gaston didn't say anything, and Belle didn't care much for what he was feeling anyway. She decided to keep her eyes off the young man for the duration of their journey to the boathouse, which felt like it lasted forever.

As they were nearing the shore, Gaston started talking again.

“You wouldn't make a terrible wife, you know. You seem clever, and not wasteful. Your aunt Sylvia says you can manage a household on your own while attending university, and that is a little impressive.” Gaston spoked slowly, soothingly, like talking to a wild animal, Belle imagined. Or a child.

“You know, you'd be a lot happier at home. It's a man's world, and it only gives women a hard time. You're too beautiful to let yourself be crushed by harsh reality. A marriage might save you,” Gaston continued.

Belle didn't reply anything, she only waited until the boat finally moored, then scrambled out of it with all haste. She felt too stubborn to let Gaston take care of the mooring and the oars and the cushions alone, so she helped. She would not run out hysterically and leave the man to do the men's work, not even when Gaston insisted she not trouble herself.

“You seem upset. You shouldn't have exerted yourself. Why don't you go lie down and let me tell your aunts you're feeling unwell,” Gaston suggested, as they left the boathouse and walked uphill past the beautiful white summer pavilion with a beautiful view over the lake.

Belle halted in her steps then. She turned around, pulling herself up straight. “I am fine, and I don't need you to do me any favours. If I were not fine, it would not be because I'm a weak woman. And it would certainly not because I lifted an oar and a cushion off a row boat. I have rowed back and forth on that lake on my own since I was twelve, thank you very much, and I have never run into any manner of trouble with my happiness, my boat, or my education due to my lack of male reproduction organs. Most of my trouble with my happiness, my boat, or my education, have always been caused by presumptuous people who pretend to know what's best for me.” She felt as if an unstoppable fountain of words had just opened somewhere in the back of her mind, and she mentioned other things on her mind, finding lack not only in Gaston's decorum, but with his sense and intellect as well; then not only his, but of all men in general.

“And often I find myself wondering how it can be that men consider them so lofty and superior, and why should a woman be locked in the house with no prospect or future, when it's quite obvious women are just as good as men at everything they do!” Belle finished, exasperated, feeling that her terrible verbal diarrhea had run its course.

Gaston had listened to the entire thing through with a sort of a distant facade of interest and disdain on his face, and he stood still, looking down at her silently.
“There's one thing women aren't better at,” he said, at length.

“What's that?” Belle asked.

“Men are taller,” Gaston said. He plucked Belle's white cap off her head, then with a flick of his wrist, threw it up. The cap spun around, landing on the roof of the white summer pavilion.

“Enjoy your morning, Belle,” he said, amused, and touched his straw hat with exaggerated gentlemanly courtesy, before he stalked off.

The quiet rage that filled Belle’s body from that moment on was what next propelled her back to the boathouse. There was a ladder there, on the long side of the room. It was very heavy, made of iron, and Belle had to drag it in her wake out of the boathouse and then up the hill to the summer pavilion, but she didn't feel tired. Her righteous rage kept her well invigorated as she started lifting up the ladder to slant on the side of the pavilion. The adrenaline from her regret for having let Gaston humiliate her was what pushed her up the rickety ladder's narrow steps laid too far between for a lady wearing a dress and petticoat and shoes still slippery from a boat.

Belle reached the topmost rung and had to hoist herself up to get herself securely on the pavilion roof. Unfortunately, her foot slipped just then, and she felt a curious moment as if the world was pulling her in two directions. Not just metaphorically as the writer of the Guide to Womanhood had described, but quite literally. The ladder started going the other way, while Belle was supposedly headed for the rooftop. She grabbed the ornate wooden edge with a shrill cry of panic, and managed to throw herself onto the pavilion roof in a sheer state of panic and reflexes.

Belle lay on the rooftop, on top of last year's autumn leaves that had gathered there, her heart once again pounding in her ears, as she heard the iron ladder fall down to the ground with a thud softened by the green grass and the modestly restrained weeds of Aunt Hortensia's unkempt lawn.

“Oh sweet stars,” she told herself, when she felt like she could dare to move again.

On all fours, she circled around the roof and retrieved her cap, which was not at all worse for wear for the adventure it had had.

Then it was the matter of getting back down. Belle peered carefully over the edge of the roof and wondered if she would dare to jump down. Perhaps, she thought, if she shimmied herself over the ornate finishing of the roof, hung down from her fingertips, maybe the fall would not be so bad. She sat back and contemplated on how she might go about managing her return.

Or perhaps, if she waited, someone might come down from the manor to see her, and they could lift up the ladder, Belle realized. That seemed a lot more appealing to her, than a second chance of possibly breaking her leg or head.

She sat back, and contemplated. It would be lunch soon in any case, which meant someone would definitely come looking for her if she didn't make an appearance. Perhaps waiting for help would be the most prudent choice, she reasoned.

So she did nothing but sit and wait. She lay herself on the slanting roof of the summer pavilion, adjusted her cap so that it shielded her eyes from the sun, and tried to think of pleasant things. Such as the fact that at least Gaston wouldn't be with her all summer, just the one week. That Aunt Hortensia had donated her a whole trunk full of beautiful clothes. That the sun was shining.

What a short list, Belle lamented. Then she just tried to think of nothing at all.

There was a sound just nearby, of metal meeting wood.
“Oh, thank you!” Belle exclaimed. She sat back up again, and peered over the edge of the pavilion’s roof. Someone in a black silk top hat and a dark coat had just finished pushing the ladder back up, and was twirling a cane in his hand. Belle wondered, if this was the museum curator from Avonlea that Hortensia had mentioned. He did look like a very fine city gentleman.

“Thank you ever so much, can you please hold them steady?” Belle asked, her voice raised, and saw a gloved hand take a hold of the staircase, even though the man didn’t reply. Gathering her courage, Belle took a deep breath, and started her descent back down to the ground, with the ladder rungs devilishly narrow and slippery from the meadow dew.

She wanted to rush down, but found herself squeezing the ladder so hard in fear of slipping and falling, that her palms had clamped to fists that didn't want to unwind and move again. Talking herself through it one step and one limb at a time, it took Belle quite a while to get down. She was too afraid of looking down, so she wasn't even aware of how close her goal was, until she felt a pair of strong hands at her waist, picking her from the rung she was standing on, lifting her like she weighed nothing, and setting her down on the grass gently.

Belle spun around, ready to meet the dapper charming museum curator with an earnest and honest expression of relief and happiness on her face, and was extremely shocked indeed to find herself uncomfortably close and face to face with Rumpelstiltskin again. He didn't seem half as threatening in summer sunlight, though, Belle thought.

“Thank you, very much, sir,” Belle managed to stutter. “I think I might have stayed there until lunch, if you hadn't come by.”

He smiled, but it was not such an awful toothy grin as he'd worn during the night. He was possibly about to reply, when Belle spoke again.

“You look very smart. I mean, your clothes do.”

They were all black and sleek, but inspired a bit less horror than an animal skin.

“Is it appropriate for the weekend in the countryside?” He asked, removing an imaginary speckle of dust from his arm. He asked? Belle wondered. And he didn't sound like he was throwing a hidden threat between the line.

“I'm not sure, really. I think men might usually wear something plainer. But you do look very smart,” Belle said, feeling a bit heady. This was the last conversation she'd imagined she'd be having shortly after marooning herself on a roof. “This is a very singular household, I don't think anyone much cares what one wears.”

“I've overheard one of your tiresome relatives speak of etiquette frequently,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

Belle smiled brightly, nodding. “That would be my aunt, Sylvia.”

“I'm tempted to turn your aunt Sylvia into a small insect, but I think it might be viewed as a charitable deed.” He twirled his cane and grinned. “And I don't want that kind of reputation.”

Belle sniggered in turn, and knelt down to retrieve the book she'd left amongst the tall blades of grass.

“Did you like the cake and tea?” Belle asked, as she straightened up again, but she found herself quite alone. He'd vanished as swiftly as he'd appeared.

Belle glanced at the iron ladder, and reminded herself to ask William to assist her in returning it to its
As she walked uphill past the willow copse to the house, Belle smiled to herself as she thought she ought to add her encounter with Rumpelstiltskin to her short list of pleasant things.

Chapter End Notes

Obvious Shakespeare quote,

long quotation from my previously mentioned ladyguidebook.
Bargaining

Chapter Summary

Terms are drawn up by one side and the other

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The morning had been a long and miserable one for Maurice, who had spent the large part of it waiting. He'd wanted to speak with Aunt Hortensia and explain to her how very taxing the past few weeks had been for him, but the crippled old woman had crossly shut him out of her study and told him to do nothing. Aunt Hortensia was always appeared a very wise, loving person, even if she kept her distance.

Maurice had ended up spending all morning sitting in the garden in a somewhat fretful state caused by the only certainty in his life at present being nothing but uncertainty. The only gladness he felt was for the fact that Belle and Gaston had gone out to the lake together. Belle hardly ever even spoke to young men, always too wrapped up in her books and writing papers for her classes at the university. And Maurice's sister-in-law Sylvia had been very clever to arrange it all.

Maurice considered his options, glancing up above him towards the silent and shrouded west wing of the manor. Maurice didn't have much to bargain with, really, and he didn't know how far Aunt Hortensia would go to help them, but Belle's life had been threatened. But who knew what sort of thing immortal and ancient sorcerers needed for their mysterious spells? If asked, Maurice was willing to give his own tired and decrepit soul, if that meant saving Belle and her future.

Belle was a wonderful daughter. She wasn't vain, and only needed money when she needed to buy books and paper. They lived in a modest house, and she never complained. When Maurice had concocted a lie about their kitchen help having had to move to the countryside to look after her sick mother for a while – in reality he'd had to let her go – Belle had taken the task of preparing them meals in the evenings, and had laughed with the joy of learning new things.

But even if Belle knew how to boil potatoes and read the alphabets of Agrabah, she had still lived a very sheltered life, and Maurice was worried for how real poverty might affect his daughter. No university, no new books. All her dreams of adventures filled with river boats and trains would be lost if Maurice would just sell the mill to cover his debt.

The injustice of the Laytons more than likely getting their hands on his inventions also irritated him. It was a terrible thing to bear, this feeling like over twenty years of his life's work was vanishing. He wasn't a young man any more either, so the idea of starting over was just not viable.

Sitting in the garden, Maurice rolled these same thoughts around his head over and over again, until the gong in the main foyer rang loud enough so the sound reached even him where he was.

The guests of Blackwood Manor were divided into separate smaller parties for lunch that day, because Aunt Hortensia had wanted a private word with Maurice and Belle. Madame Roux was still staying in her room with her maid, while her son and Belle's friends and cousin were seated with the four of them in the dining room for lunch. The rest of the guests were in the conservatory with Aunt
Hortensia, including Sylvia who had decided to join the emergency family meeting without being invited. That was hardly a surprise. She was far more inclined to involve herself with helping Maurice than to chaperone over young people.

After the cook Eleanor had left, having brought in the sandwiches and potato and leek soup they were having for lunch, Aunt Hortensia lifted a paper she’d rolled up and tied with a bow. Until then, the paper had sat in her lap, hidden under the table.

“I took the liberty of writing down some terms of contract this morning,” Hortensia said and handed the paper over the table at Maurice, but Sylvia caught the roll halfway between, which Belle then caught from her fingers to swiftly pass on to her father.

Maurice accepted the paper with a mutter of thanks from Belle, and read the thing, nodding and muttering to himself.

Rather than money, Aunt Hortensia requested the finding and delivery of all missing shipments of wool and silk to the mill. In addition to that, she had written a long, detailed description of the manner in which she wished the money-lenders and their ogres dealt with: no death or dismemberment, no curses or diseases leading to death or dismemberment; but with a solution that would persuade the lenders not to harass Maurice with threats of mysterious accidents happening to his daughter (Aunt Hortensia had listed some possibilities with the caveat “underline suitable course of action or propose another one underneath in the blank space below.”)

“Of course. It’s all good and sensible.”

“Let me see that,” Sylvia demanded, and Maurice acquiesced. He hoped to keep Sylvia as an ally, and she had already been very helpful with arranging the private boating outing between Belle and Gaston.

“And we will want any counter-offer and its specific terms in writing,” Aunt Hortensia said, sounding a little gentler than earlier.

“Oh my dear Lady, I should deal with him alone. I am responsible for this, after all,” Maurice said apologetically.

“We're family, so we'll deal with it as family. Together.” Aunt Hortensia ladled soup for herself and picked a sandwich.

“Did I understand correctly that the Laytons are trying to get Maurice out of business?” Sylvia asked, after giving the paper only a mere cursory glance and putting it on the table. Belle picked up the contract next.

“Not just that, they'll try and buy the mills along with all the machinery for a tuppence by getting him bankrupt,” Aunt Hortensia said, then sipped her soup elegantly.

“What?” Maurice asked, alarmed.

“They must want your clever, brilliant machines, Maurice. Have they ever approached you about selling them?” Aunt Hortensia asked as an afterthought, now curious.

“Yes, actually-” Maurice looked back in time, sifting through his memories. “It was three years ago. They said I asked for too much money at the time. Why, I never gave it a thought that they would be after the machines.”

“There you have it,” Aunt Hortensia said matter-of-factly and continued eating.
Maurice glanced at his daughter. Belle read the contract as she nibbled on a sandwich.

“Perhaps after these transactions, they may perhaps consider meeting your price,” Aunt Hortensia suggested hopefully. “That might secure Belle's studies and travel expenses when she goes south of Agrabah to find the mythic source of the river Kial.”

Belle laughed, rolling up the contract in her hands. She secured it with the ribbon and placed it on her lap to keep it safe.

“I do wonder what he'd like in return,” Belle said.

“Most likely something out of me,” Aunt Hortensia replied. “I think he's tempted to level the entire estate, only to get rid of the fairies here.”

“Oh, how awful,” Sylvia said, frowning. Maurice nodded, wondering if it was more the house or the fairies Sylvia was concerned for.

“Unfortunately I'm quite unable to meet those terms,” Aunt Hortensia continued, smiling, “because I've already made arrangements that Joseph and Eleanor are soon taking possession of the house.”

In reaction, Sylvia's face went immediately red. Her mouth was forming the word “what” but no sound was coming out.

Aunt Hortensia spoke with such a light lilt to her speech, Maurice might have thought she was telling a joke.

“Unfortunately I haven't been able to pay them wages in the past ten years. I thought this would settle the matter. They already live here, after all, and times like these it is quite possible for a lady to leave a manor to a cook and a stableman.” Aunt Hortensia picked up her glass of elderberry water, the strongest flavoured drink served at lunch that day. “To modern times.”

Belle and Maurice joined in silently to the toast, while Sylvia seemed to be still trapped within the mental process of making a decision on the volume and violence of her forthcoming exhibition of utter disapproval. When the tension in her head mounted too high, Sylvia cooled herself by emptying her glass of water with one swift gulp before proceeding to stare at her sandwich as if it had offended her.

Sylvia's displeasure could not be contained too long. Promptly after lunch was done, she demanded Hortensia stay in the conservatory to discuss the business with the manor and the ten years of unpaid wages.

“Dear Sylvia, now is hardly the time,” Hortensia said.

“Oh yes this is the time! The sooner we can solve this situation the better!” Sylvia said, slapping her palm on the table so that it made all the plates and the spoons on the plates clatter.

Aunt Hortensia gave a most exasperated sigh and rested her forehead against her palm, slightly bending to her left.

“Shall we take the dishes to the kitchen?” Belle asked, breaking the awkward silence between her Aunt One and Aunt Two.

“Thank you my dear, that would be so helpful.” Aunt Hortensia replied, trying to keep her voice calm and level.
Maurice joined in silently, happy to be doing something useful for a change, even if it was just moving used dishes from one room to another. With Belle carrying an empty soup bowl and a silver platter, and Maurice the empty plates and spoons, they gracefully left the oncoming storm brewing in the conservatory. After a brief trip to the kitchen to Eleanor's delight, Belle suggested her father they go to Aunt Hortensia to wait for their audience with Rumpelstiltskin.

“Belle, it's my business, and I'll deal it with myself,” Maurice told her gently but sternly. “Business is discussed amongst men.” There were women indeed in politics and in the university, but the world of finance and business was still predominantly governed by men in the Marchlands.

Belle gave him a look. She seemed ready to say something, but held her tongue and looked away.

Maurice saw one of the parlours was empty, and took a seat there. All the young guests seemed to be outside, and in all likelihood madame Roux was still staying elegantly in her guest room, and with the aunts in the conservatory and the help most likely busy at work, it seemed that Belle and Maurice were quite alone in the house. The room was a comfortably furnished space for entertaining guests. There were two parlours in the house in fact, one on the western side and one on the eastern, but the other one was addressed to as the drawing room to save confusion.

When Belle had been a child, she'd been certain that the drawing room was where one went to draw pictures, and she had always diligently seated herself in there with her colour pencils and her paper whenever she had felt like drawing. Such thoughts crossed Maurice's mind now that he looked around the room and at Belle, standing in front of the windowed glass doors leading to the garden, her thoughts and feelings unreadable.

As the tension of waiting mounted, Maurice realized he hadn't spoken to Belle properly about all of it. Not really. He hadn't wanted to give her any cause for concern. That was late now though.

“I haven't done this quite right,” he said quietly. Maurice felt tired and worried. He had always felt tired and worried since Belle's mother had passed away, but now more so than ever before.

“Papa, I'll be with you through this, whatever happens,” Belle said softly and stepped closer to the chair Maurice occupied. She reached down and took his hand in hers to squeeze it softly. He squeezed her hand back and smiled briefly up at her.

“I know, Belle, I know.” Maurice put both his hands around hers. “I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier. I thought I would have solved it, but it just kept going worse. I didn't want to worry you.”

“Papa, I'm sure Rumpelstiltskin will help us,” Belle said, beaming a bright smile down at him. She sounded so assuring and certain, Maurice was almost tempted to believe her, but he was far too sceptic and pessimistic at this point in time to believe the fancies his daughter had faith in. She was so young and sweet and full of youthful idealism that Maurice prayed would never ever be taken from her. “I'm sure he will,” Belle added, squeezing his hand again lightly.

Maurice shook his head a little, then glanced into the corner of the room. It seemed as if all the shadows in the room were creeping towards there. Elongating, crawling across surfaces. Then the shadows left the surfaces, evaporating into air like smoke, a blackish purplish smoke. The light elsewhere in the room began to dim in the meantime.

The shadowy smoke took form, turning from insubstantial purple magic into the green-skinned sorcerer with the menacing grin in a scaly coat made of some large reptile. A sardonic toothy grin of black teeth, black claws for nails, this was Rumpelstiltskin. His intense eyes met Maurice's, and he got up from his chair defiantly, to meet this aberration of a man eye to eye.
“Such trust,” Rumpelstiltskin said, adding a terribly twisted little laugh at the end. Maurice tried to find some word or phrase of greeting from his mind, but none quite made it to his tongue immediately. His every instinct told him to stay put and regard the creature warily.

“I sent you the invitation,” Maurice said, as if admitting a crime he'd committed. He wanted to try draw all the sorcerer's attention to him, in case something unseemly happened. “I'm fully responsible.”

“Let's see.” Rumpelstiltskin flicked his wrist and Aunt Hortensia's contract appeared in his hand – the contract paper was twice as long now, with plenty of empty space for his terms. Rumpelstiltskin gave Hortensia's clauses a derisive glare.

“Yes, I can do all this,” Rumpelstiltskin said dismissively, and thrust the contract to Maurice. “For a price,” he added, and shot a brief smile like a dagger at him. Words appeared on the contract paper out of thin air to state Rumpelstiltskin's terms. Maurice read them, and felt his heart skip a beat.

Belle's service as caretaker of Rumpelstiltskin's estate was the price. Fifty years. Maurice didn't deign to read any further with the particulars of the contract, for he'd had enough.

“Fifty years? That's as good as forever!” he shouted.

Rumpelstiltskin giggled, the high-pitched and gross sound no normal person would have uttered. “I do like the way you negotiate,” he said in turn, snapped his fingers, and the words on the paper changed again. “Even then, you do realise that in the current economy, you're still winning this deal.” He twirled his hand next and a pen appeared between his fingers. “I should really ask two of them,” he added, his voice softer.

“No. Get out, leave!” Maurice felt his hands shaking. He tried to tear the contract, but the paper wouldn't even crumple in his hands.

“What is it papa, why are you upset?” Belle asked. Maurice felt his daughter's eyes peer over his shoulder and, well, she was a quick reader. It felt insulting and threatening to him that Belle had been even exposed to reading such a vile suggestion as there was on the paper. There was nothing unseemly in the words themselves, but Maurice couldn't help but read between the lines into wicked, evil intents beyond.

“Don't worry, we'll manage some other way,” Maurice muttered, deciding to roll up the scroll instead, since he couldn't tear it to pieces. He thought of how lively and even somewhat happily preoccupied Belle had seemed after she'd gotten back from the boat trip with Gaston. Perhaps there was something there, to fulfil his as well as Sylvia's wishes.

“As you wish,” Rumpelstiltskin said nonchalantly and turned his back to leave.

“No, wait!” Belle exclaimed. Maurice closed his eyes for a second, he felt so sick in his stomach that it made him reel. When he opened his eyes again, he saw Belle walking across the room, approaching Rumpelstiltskin.

“I'll go with you,” Belle said, to Rumpelstiltskin's immediate delight. The sorcerer clapped his hands together and giggled.

“Belle!” Maurice shook his head. Desperate they might be, but the entire purpose of seeking help from Rumpelstiltskin had been to provide for Belle's happiness and independence, not take them away from her!

“Papa, only I can sign that,” Belle said level-headedly to him, before turning her attention back to
Rumpelstiltskin. “I shall go.”

“As you must have heard, dearie, it's forever,” Rumpelstiltskin told her.

“You'll follow this contract to the letter?” Belle asked him in return.

Rumpelstiltskin gave her a mock of a courteous bow. “You have my word.”

“Then you'll have mine,” Belle replied, and Maurice felt his nausea become replaced with anger as he heard his darling girl utter “I'll go with you, forever” to the disgusting old creature that was now laughing with wicked glee. The contract vanished from Maurice's sweaty, shaky hands, and was presented to Belle, who took a pen offered to her by Rumpelstiltskin, and quickly wrote her name on it.

“No, Belle! I won't let you go with this beast!” Maurice protested, mustering the strength to approach his daughter, to snatch her away. She was only prey to Rumpelstiltskin. No textile mill, no invention of technology, no missing silk in the world was worth having Belle enslaved to servitude to such a monster as he must have been by all accounts.

Belle turned around to him.

“Father. I've decided to go,” she said very quietly. “It's too late to argue this now.”

Then the monster stalked closer to them, with long, dancing steps. Maurice felt even sicker than he had before, watching the black-clawed hand hover near Belle's slender waist.

“You know. She's right.” Rumpelstiltskin grinned, pointing at Belle. To Maurice, those darkened teeth were far too close to his fair Belle. “The deal is struck.”

Belle nodded glumly.

Horror and nausea made Maurice avert his eyes for a moment.

Belle turned on her heels to address Rumpelstiltskin again. “And when are you going to keep your end of this bargain?” She asked boldly.

The monster's terrible grin almost froze as she stood up to him, and Maurice felt a pang of fear mixed with pride in his heart.

“I'd prefer this dealt with before I depart from my family,” Belle continued, when Rumpelstiltskin didn't immediately reply. “If that suits you. Sir.” Her gaze may not have faltered, but her voice quivered lightly.

The monster's smile diluted, he stared down Belle as he twirled his hand abstractly in the air, as if to underline the fact he was speaking again. “This will take a moment.”

Rumpelstiltskin vanished with a cloud of smoke.

As soon as Maurice realized what had happened, he approached Belle and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“You need to run. We'll get the carriage, you'll ride all day and night away if you have to, do you understand?” He sought for words and ideas for a moment. “Perhaps Gaston can join you, yes, you can go to their summer estate together.” Maurice felt deeply for his little girl, for how fearful and uncertain she looked just then.
Belle felt sick in her stomach with the entire world. She blinked away tears that threatened to rise up to her eyes, and swallowed down the awful sense of dread that was trying to rise up her throat and choke her.

When she'd read the contract over Maurice's shoulder, Belle had realised that there was no victorious outcome for their family out of this mess. Either they would end up living in the countryside on charity – if Aunt Hortensia's servants would permit them – or if not, they would have to rely on Aunt Sylvia's assistance, and Aunt Sylvia was not known for being charitable.

And the both of them were pushing her towards marriage, Belle knew, and she also realised that the gates of the university were most likely closed to her from now on. She wouldn't find a husband who'd give his wife a stipend to spend all day in lecture halls and libraries, not when she'd be needed home to give birth to children and keep house.

And there was the fact to consider that his father was now indebted and destitute. To not consider a favourable marriage which might help his situation would be selfish, no matter how well she might fare living in a poorhouse with her father. She cursed herself as well for not having sought any practical knowledge in the university. She might have become a governess or a teacher, except she had no experience with small children, and she had the absolute certainty of knowledge that young children were not taught how to read ancient runes, or the histories of werewolf clans in southern Heartlands.

So Belle had been presented with the option of not saving her father's business from utterly heartless villains and most likely ending up in an arranged marriage, opposed to the chance of saving the business by doing housework for an utterly heartless villain. At least she'd keep governance over her own personal space, Belle thought, comparing Gaston's straightforward suggestions with the quiet and withdrawn sorcerer who'd held still some ladders. She had never heard or read of the Great Dark One carrying off young ladies into the night, but that sort of thing would be hushed, wouldn't it? And she was certain that she'd caught him watching her twice now in the past two days, had this been his design in accepting the invitation all along?

Belle had also held a romantic notion that working for Rumpelstiltskin might be interesting and exciting, and take her places. Something that a poor house or a marriage would certainly not allow for her. Belle considered it wishful thinking, but she couldn't deny now that it had been that sudden wild and optimistic hope of possible adventure that had made her speak aloud and write her name on the contract, not her practical weighing of her other options.

Now with her father proposing to her she run off with Gaston, Belle pursed her lips together tightly and shook her head.

“No, papa. I think I better go pack my things before Rumpelstiltskin returns,” she said. She leaned forward and gave her father a kiss on the cheek, but she couldn't leave his hard embrace. He was like a statue, but Belle managed to escape by curtseying underneath and away from those restrictive arms.

Before he managed to utter another word, Belle hurried out of the room. She ran upstairs, her mind and thoughts in a state of disarray. Would she be allowed to bring her own things? What about her winter clothes? She only had summer clothes. The Dark Castle was very far away, how long would it take to travel there? Would they leave together in a cloud of smoke, or would there be trains and ships and trains?

And above all, Belle would need to make a list of all the books she had borrowed from the university library for summer and make sure her father returned them as soon as possible. It would be horrifying
if some poor soul would go without important volumes of knowledge for her sake.

What else might be horrifying though? Perhaps an eternity with Rumpelstiltskin? A darker voice in her mind reminded her.

Belle packed her things in her travel trunk almost aggressively. She couldn't fight the second wave of tears that suddenly welled up. She was scared and she couldn't stop telling herself otherwise now. She also felt unfathomably lonely, like there was no one on her side. Papa hadn't deigned to talk with her. Aunt Hortensia had kept herself distant and emotionally as unattached as ever. Aunt Sylvia seemed only intent on making things worse by playing match-maker and constantly questioning Belle's choices.

And quite soon, Belle realised, she would be far, far more alone.

Not being able to see what she was doing for the tears in her eyes, Belle sat down on the edge of her bed and wiped her eyes on her white sleeve, which was a bit unladylike but she couldn't have cared less.

After suggesting herself to calm down, Belle reminded herself of the good she'd at least allowed to happen. Her father's life work would not be lost at least. He'd be able to repay his debtors, who would never harry him again, if Rumpelstiltskin was as good as his word.

And now she would need to continue making herself ready to go away forever.

While packing, Belle regarded Aunt Sylvia's guide book with sinister reflection. Last night she wouldn't have in her wildest dreams imagined that she would get to introducing herself to the intricacies of the housekeeping section so soon. She made sure to pack the guide so that it was easily found, in case she'd need something to distract her on the road.

Hoping she was as done as possible, and that Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't have yet returned, Belle crept back downstairs to look for Joseph or William to help her with her travel trunk and Aunt Hortensia's chest of vintage clothes. Down at the foot of the staircase in the grand foyer, she found Maurice speaking animatedly with Gaston and his mother about his plan to send Belle away, while Aunt Hortensia was speaking sternly against the very idea of it. Aunt Sylvia seemed to feel out of place with a situation where she wasn't the loudest speaker or objector to a situation, so she merely stood behind Hortensia's wheelchair, holding the back of the chair so fiercely her hands were white. None of them seemed to notice Belle before she called out across the foyer, willing her voice to stay clear and strong, and not break and show how she'd cried.

“I need some help with my luggage,” Belle announced.

Everyone looked up at her, six steps up.

“Yes. Of course. Gaston will take you with him,” Maurice replied.

“No, I'm not going with him,” Belle replied and sighed. She often wished she knew how to make her father listen to her.

“Of course you are. There's a monster after you,” Gaston declared. He seemed much more intense now than before, when he'd seemed bored and aloof. Belle wondered why so. “I'll protect you,” Gaston vowed, taking the steps up to Belle. Soon Archibald and William hurried past them, Maurice directing them to get the luggage down immediately, apparently Joseph was already out getting the carriage horses reined.

Belle's eyes met with Aunt Hortensia's, which had the expression of great displeasure written all over
them. Belle wondered what it was like to be a woman so late in her life, who had met nobility and royalty from all over the world, great witches and wizards, and still to be so grossly ignored by men under her very own roof. But Aunt Hortensia didn't stomp her foot or scream, she had already declared her disapproval of this plan and was now watching what happened.

“Maurice, you know I won't allow the door open if you let that terrible man try and drag Belle away from here against her will,” Aunt Hortensia said calmly to Maurice, who merely spared the old woman in the wheelchair a passing glance. He seemed far more intent on saving Belle than listening to reason. Maurice who had been scammed by the Layton textile industries and loan-sharks was going to try and outwit Rumpelstiltskin?

“Don't worry, you'll be safe with me,” Gaston whispered in Belle's ear. Then Gaston was wrapping his arms around Belle, and Belle tried to bat his questing hands away.

Then the room went darker than it ought to have been on a bright summer's day.

“My my my, what a commotion,” they all heard Rumpelstiltskin's voice before they noticed where he stood. A shadow that shouldn't have been where it was melted away, and revealed the sorcerer. He'd changed again, he wasn't wearing the scaly crocodile coat any longer, but was back in the dark suit Belle had seen him wearing earlier in the morning out in the park by the pavilion, top hat and cane and everything.

“Why is there an enchantment locking all the doors of the house?” He asked conversationally from Aunt Hortensia, while knocking the hardwood floor with the tip of his cane.

Aunt Hortensia pointed at Gaston and Belle with her withered grey old finger. “Please excuse the young men, they are trying to rescue the damsel in distress,” she said. Belle wondered whose side was the peculiar woman on. Did she even have a side?

Gaston hurried down the steps. He pulled a very small gun out from under his coat, which made everyone in the room gasp loudly, except Aunt Hortensia and Rumpelstiltskin. The latter laughed mirthfully as he snapped his fingers – and so, with a black and purple cloud of smoke, Gaston vanished, replaced by a very confused looking black tom cat.

“My darling!” Madame Roux shrieked hysterically. It was quite striking. She was such a quiet, demure and dignified woman, it was hard to get a word out of her about anything, except a softly spoken, derisive condemnation on the state of the weather or the dinner, so when she actually spoke loudly enough for everyone in the room to hear her, it was as if they were hearing her for the first time. Or at least it felt so to Belle. “You monster! You beast! Absolute villain and coward!” The woman spouted hysterically at Rumpelstiltskin as she scooped down to take Gaston-cat into her arms.

“Worry not, you'll be very close to your son…” Rumpelstiltskin snapped his fingers again, and in another flash of smoke and magic, madame Roux was transformed into a grey-brown mouse. The madame mouse stood on its hind legs on the hardwood floor with a scared little expression on its quivering, whiskered face.

Something horrifying almost happened next. The black cat next to her was taken over by his feline impulses. Rumpelstiltskin laughed, and the voice was cruel and horrible, and made Belle's skin crawl.

A terrible animal murder was prevented by Aunt Sylvia and Maurice's intervention, although Maurice moved considerably slower than Sylvia who caught madame mouse between her palms as sharply as a hawk. The excited black cat whose prey had been taken away from him fought back
Maurice trying to restrain him.

“Sylvia, hide madame Roux in the kitchen. Maurice, put Gaston in the study and close all the doors,” Aunt Hortensia directed them. Still standing in the middle of the flight of stairs, Belle watched her father and aunt set into motion per Aunt Hortensia's instructions.

Rumpelstiltskin ignored them and stalked closer to Belle.

“Shall we?” He asked.

Chapter End Notes

This took forever because I rewrote basically all of it changing a point of view. But now it's done! On to new challenges! Such as trying to decide on how to travel in style in a gaslamp adventure.
Rumpelstiltskin and Belle had left Aunt Hortensia's house through the front door, and after the display in the foyer, Belle had quite forgotten to enquire if she was allowed to bring anything with her except for the clothes she was wearing. She'd merely reached for her coat as they'd passed by it, and out they'd stepped into the bright summer afternoon, which Belle was relieved to notice was undiminished in her eyes by the strange aura of darkness that seemed to emanate from Rumpelstiltskin. That must have been why they called him the Dark One, instead of the Green One, Belle surmised.

There was a carriage in the middle of the gravel path, and quite an old one, Belle estimated. The more modern equipage was slimmer and of lighter build, reinforced and made sturdy by the miracles of modern steel technologies. The sizes of the wheels and the style of ostentatious ornamentation there were in the details of the wood carvings around the box gave her reason to believe that the carriage was perhaps as much as two hundred years old. There were no horses and no driver.

A door to the carriage opened on its own, revealing darkness. With a rattle, a helpful step unfolded from underneath the box. Rumpelstiltskin's hand on her waist was guiding her across the yard and towards the carriage, but Belle swiftly took an extra step as she slid away from his reach and climbed up into the dark. Velvet curtains blocked the windows except for a slim sliver of light that came through a crack and Belle was horribly conscious of the green-skinned man just behind her. Wanting to get far away from him, she bolted up into the box and claimed a corner of a seat, where she folded her arms in front of her chest defensively, hugging her coat against her chest.

After Rumpelstiltskin claimed a seat opposite to her, the door closed on its own accord, and it was suddenly very dark. Belle, fearing for her life as much for the sanctity of her personal space, felt her breath catch in her throat. She became very still and tense, expecting something awful to happen to her. She heard the gravel rattle underneath the ancient wheels of the carriage as they rolled out of Aunt Hortensia's manor grounds.

Rumpelstiltskin cleared his throat, and Belle thought he was about to say something, but he stayed silent after that, apart from a stifled sigh-like sound. Belle recalled she had to breathe, and did so warily, trying to be as quiet and still as possible. She still wondered what the cause for the dark and the curtains were, and was very much afraid.

They couldn't have been in the carriage for longer than five minutes before the abruptly stopped moving. The door on the other side opened, and Rumpelstiltskin climbed out of the box. Belle sat still, wondering what had happened. Had the sorcerer perhaps changed his mind?

“Come out,” Rumpelstiltskin told her tersely.

Belle thought she might have fainted with joy! He had changed his mind! A relieved smile claimed her lips and Belle got off her seat and climbed out of the carriage box. Then she got a good look at the view surrounding them, and felt her heart had been struck with both loss and wonder.

They were in the courtyard of a sprawling old castle. Red roses were in bloom in the gardens surrounding them. Belle spun around, and saw the castle was protected by outer walls that stood quite far away. She could make out wrought iron gates in the distance, at the other end of the path that led them up to the front door of what must have been the Dark Castle.
There was something – a large hill perhaps – rising in the distance beyond the other side of the walls. With an exhilarated shudder, Belle realised that she was looking at a mountaintop. That was right, she was in the mountains. They were in the mountains. She had never left the plain and flat lands of her home country. Belle turned around again to look back at the castle, and she found the carriage had vanished. Rumpelstiltskin was still there, giving her a malignant grin.

“Your work awaits,” he said, gesturing towards the great doors that were opening by themselves, revealing a grey, dim hall. Belle could tell even from this distance that the place was dusty. Not exactly untidy, just... forgotten. Rumpelstiltskin marched inside, and Belle followed in his wake. She glanced around in the hall, affirming her suspicions on the dust. She heard the great doors close behind her with a thud, which almost made her stumble in her steps.

From the hall, Rumpelstiltskin led her to a large room which might have been big enough for a ball, but instead the place was filled with a clutter of strange things lying on end tables and pedestals. In the middle of the room was a large table, and only one seat at the end of it. A wide fireplace occupied one of the walls almost entirely. Belle kept glancing around and taking mental notes of her surroundings as she listened to Rumpelstiltskin list her the chores he expected her to do: laundering, dusting, preparing tea, and the rather peculiar task of collecting straw for the spinning wheel – the wheel was in the corner of the grand room, surrounded by piles of straw.

They took a short flight of stairs down to a landing that connected with the kitchen. Rumpelstiltskin pointed at the way briefly, but to Belle's surprise they didn't go there. Belle found that odd, for shouldn't the kitchen have been the first place for her to be introduced to, under the circumstances? Instead, they took a turn down another set of stairs. Belle wondered if perhaps they were headed for a large pantry, or a wine cellar. It was cool down here for all the rooms were half-buried in mountain rock.

“Where are we going?” Belle asked, doing her best to keep up with Rumpelstiltskin's long strides.

“Ah, let's call it... your room,” Rumpelstiltskin replied, glancing over his shoulder, sounding far more gleeful than he ought to have. Just then, he stopped as if rooted, and twirled around as he opened a door to his right, bowing slightly as he gestured Belle to enter.

She approached cautiously, for she'd already noticed what a big heavy lock there was on the door. The rest of the room didn't look much better, for it was more of a dungeon or a prison cell, rather than a place for a person to live in. Narrow windows high up near the ceiling were the only sources of light. There were no modern gaslamps, not even candles, and the mockery of a bed was not a far cry from the pallet she'd slept on once when she'd been imprisoned in Avonlea.

“My room?!” Belle asked, her voice quivering with fear and outrage.

With a deft nudge Rumpelstiltskin pushed her inside and closed the door behind her. She heard him laugh. She tried the door but it was locked, so she knocked the door furiously, begging him to return and let him out, but she could hear his voice fade upstairs, his gleeful cackle echoing in the stony castle corridors.

As Belle realised how pointless it was to try and reason with the sorcerer – he was obviously not operating with the same social etiquette as most of the world she knew of – Belle left the door and inspected the sparse room, feeling her burning rage warm her in the cold room. She sat down on the bed, which was every bit as hard as she'd expected it to be, and reminisced the last time she'd been in a cell.

A women's suffrage protest.
It had been a great deal different then. For one, there had been eight other ladies, and they had been extremely protective of her. Belle had been only sixteen at the time. Even a most cynical jail warden had been protective of her. When Maurice had turned up in embarrassment the next day to pay the fine and to pick up Belle, she had demanded him not to take her away, for they were all about to take part in a hunger strike, and Belle had felt ever so sad to leave, even though all the ladies were sternly telling her to leave, believing her too young and frail for the extremities they were committing themselves to.

There was possibly no point in trying a hunger strike here, Belle reflected. She closed her eyes and tried to summon memories of the brave women she’d spent a night in a jail cell with ten years before. She wondered how it was that they were no longer in touch. After the movement's successes in Marchland there perhaps had been fewer causes for women to chain themselves to the parliament house.

“Well, if he decides to chain me up, then I can look back on that,” she reflected out loud, and let out a sigh of defeat.

Some time passed. It was quite dull, and she wished she had something to read, even the Conduct of a Good Wife and Hostess part of the book that Aunt Sylvia had given her. Then suddenly startled, Belle wondered if Rumpelstiltskin read the newspaper. Any newspaper. What sort of newspapers might one acquire high up in the mountains, anyway? How long did they travel, and would they be terribly out of date by the time they arrived?

As she sat there, the chill of the dungeon begun to creep through her light summer clothes. She put on Aunt Hortensia's old coat and closed her eyes, imagining she was being wrapped under the old enchantress's protection. The coat smelled less of dust and more of Hortensia's house, which was very comforting and consoling. To think she’d been there mere moments ago! Belle had had lunch there, and now it was only mid to late afternoon of the same day, and now she was two and a half countries away from home.

When she reopened her eyes again, she was cautiously amazed to find her travel luggage and Aunt Hortensia's chest of clothes in the dungeon with her. Belle peered around, but there was no Rumpelstiltskin around, no sight or sound of him. She approached her luggage carefully, as if she expected the travel trunk to explode, but it was as plain as it ever was, everything inside in the order she’d packed them in, with the Guide Book on top.

Recalling her earlier wish that she'd have something to read, Belle reached for it and opened the index page thoughtfully, wryly wondering if she looked carefully enough, would she find a section entitled How To Behave When Selling Yourself to Slavery.

“First order of business,” Rumpelstiltskin's strange inhuman sound from behind her startled Belle so much she dropped the book from her hands back into the trunk. She twirled around to face her new master, fear pumping adrenaline into her veins now harder than before. They were all alone on some mountaintop in the middle of nowhere, in a dungeon, which technically sort-of served as a bedroom, and he hadn't knocked. The question of what sort of monster exactly he was yet remained unanswered.

Rumpelstiltskin had changed clothes again, he was back in the scaly coat he'd worn the first time Belle had seen him. Belle had learned to interpret his smiles as threats, and he was smiling now. He lifted his finger and pointed at discarded clothes left on a narrow bench on one side of the room underneath the narrow windows. “My suit suffered some... occupational hazards in Avonlea, you should wash those.”

Belle nodded, bowed and curtsied at the same time, because she wasn't entirely sure what was
expected of her. Awkwardly she realised she wasn't doing much of a job of any of the three, and then put that thought aside to scamperv across the floor to collect a dark silk-wool jacket and a white silk shirt with plenty of blood stains around the cuffs.

He'd worn these clothes to Avonlea when Belle had sent him off to treat with the loan-sharks. Mortified that she hadn't noticed the blood before, Belle wondered if any of the blood belonged the Rumpelstiltskin (instinctively she assumed his blood would be black, or green), and realised that most of it must have belonged to the faceless people she'd never heard of before yesterday.

“Oh,” she said with a heavy breath, suddenly repulsed.

But she didn't have time to deal with her distaste of the causes and reasons behind the stains, because Rumpelstiltskin expected her to follow him through the castle again, to the space she assumed was the laundry room. It was a little dusty as well, and Belle thought she should set to cleaning the room before attempting to do anything else there.

Her new master announced he expected his tea served so-and-so and what time. Belle nodded, repeating “yes, yes” to all he said, while she was still a little too shaken to grasp everything clearly. Then he left, thankfully, and Belle threw the bloodied things into a washbasin. Her own white blouse now also had blood stains too, she noticed, even though she had tried being careful.

Belle hurried back into her “room” and fetched a warmer blouse as well as the guide book. She knew in theory how to wash blood stains, but she wanted to be absolutely sure what she was doing before putting her hands on the finest silk she'd ever touched. In her head she counted her chores, trying to evaluate how much time she could spend tidying the room before washing, and how long she would need in the kitchen to make a tea tray for Rumpelstiltskin.

First though, she needed to sit down and read.

Even though she wasn't in the best of her mental capacity, Belle was incomparably grateful to Aunt Sylvia for the book, because it gave her all the directions she needed about handling silk and blood stains. Once she knew what she was doing, Belle felt a little bit more like herself, determined and confident.

With a plan in her head forming, involving salt and soap, and a dustpan and a broom, Belle set herself into motion. Minutes and then hours passed. She wondered as if she was being tested, and that thought did no good to her sensibilities, but she kept gritting her teeth together and reminding herself that losing her nerves to agitation would help her accomplish nothing. Maybe this sorcerer lopped off the heads of the maids that displeased him? So it was better to set her fears aside for now and work.

The tea wasn't ready until rather late into the evening, and when Belle carried the tray up the stairs to the grand room with the table, the fireplace and the spinning wheel, she was shaking in fear for her life and for the poor porcelain tea things she was carrying: her arms were so tired from pumping water, carrying water, cleaning and dusting, rinsing and scrubbing that she feared her strength would give up before the tray reached the table.

As Belle entered, she saw Rumpelstiltskin was sitting at the other end of the table, in the lone chair, his intense eyes and wicked smile locked onto her. Mustering the last of her strength, Belle carried the tray to the table and laid it there – the wrong end, she thought, how was the man going to reach his tea from all the way across the other side of the room? Withholding a sigh, Belle poured tea into a cup, and then set off to timidly cross the length of the table to Rumpelstiltskin with the saucer in her hand. The cup and the spoon on the saucer rattled uncomfortably as she approached Rumpelstiltskin, and she kept her eyes on him.
“I’m sorry it’s late,” Belle said, hearing how her own was voice raspy and squeaking. She set the saucer near him, within an arm’s distance, but she wasn’t quite comfortable getting too close to him. His face betrayed a brief second of irritation as he had to reach for his tea, but he didn’t admonish her for it.

Rumpelstiltskin sipped his tea. Belle stared at him. He put the cup down and looked up at her. He was almost about to say something.

“I got the stains out of the shirt,” Belle blurted out. “I think I managed the jacket too, but I’m not so sure, until it dries.”

He gave her an incredulous glare. Belle wasn’t sure if it was because she’d stopped him short, or because he’d already forgotten about the shirt.

Then Rumpelstiltskin spoke. “Before you go, dearie... before you flit off back to the kitchen. The woods surrounding the castle have been lately full of uninvited guests. Some, if not most of them, would like to talk to you, if they saw you. You’re not to say a word to anyone who addresses you, even if you know them, or they know your name. Understand?” His voice was entirely out of malicious glee, but the grave serious tone of it made him even frightening than he would have been had he grinned and laughed as if making fun of Belle.

Belle nodded curtly. “I understand, sir.” She was about to go, but concern for her own safety got the better of her. She hesitated, and turned back to face Rumpelstiltskin, who’d picked his tea cup back into his hand.

“Who are those people? Are they... policemen? Soldiers?” Belle asked.

Rumpelstiltskin made a face. “Oh much worse. They’re journalists.”

Belle blinked. She curtsied mechanically, trying to force herself to be distracted. She was afraid she would laugh, and that Rumpelstiltskin would take offence. Then he would surely behead her as a saucy, uppity little thing and that wouldn’t do. Belle hurried out of the room and into the kitchen practically on her tiptoes. There she clamped her palm over her mouth and tried to laugh as silently as she could.

The next day Belle woke up feeling as if she had found no rest in her sleep at all. The bed was as cold and hard as the rest of the cell Rumpelstiltskin had given her, and the fact that Belle had kept herself awake in fear of Rumpelstiltskin's sudden appearance in the night had not been conducive to a good long sleep. Then as the first light of morning crept in through the narrow windows, the dungeon door became unlocked. Feeling thoroughly dreadful, Belle climbed up the stairs into the kitchen to make breakfast with the odds and ends she could find from the pantry.

The kitchen itself was no miracle of modern technology either. In short, the kitchen was like the rest of the castle Belle had seen – old and decrepit and most of it belonging in a museum. The kitchen must have been originally built to accommodate the feeding of hundreds of people in the castle, and so all the equipment were woefully inadequate to handle the simple task of making breakfast for two. Belle started with the fire, and decided to build up from that. Once she was sure the fire had caught onto the wood, Belle left the kitchen in search of further instructions, and she found Rumpelstiltskin spinning at the wheel in his great room. With the absence of the stiff and scaly coat, Belle was rather surprised to see what a small, thin man there was underneath, with a white shirt and grey-green waistcoat. If wasn't for his skin been green, and his eyes so very black, Rumpelstiltskin might have
passed for any normal person. She stopped abruptly in the doorway and folded her hands together in front of her lap. He stopped spinning, and looked at her, his face changing from a moody dark expression to an equally terrifying joyful one.

“You look dreadful,” he said as he abandoned his spinning wheel. He approached Belle, and she marvelled the cat-like elegance of his movements. Strange, so very strange, Belle thought, hypnotised by the sense of alarm and wonder that Rumpelstiltskin's presence weaved. He was almost in front of her when Belle recalled he'd spoken to her.

“Oh. I don't have a mirror. I forgot to brush my hair,” she replied apologetically. “Would you like something besides tea for breakfast, sir?”

Rumpelstiltskin shook his head and trailed off to across the floor towards his chair where he'd left his scaly coat. “Just tea. Then I'll be gone for a while. Clean this room in the meantime.”

Belle gulped. It was a huge room. The rugs alone would take her all morning. The floor needed scrubbing. The curtains needed taking down and dusting as well.

“All of it, sir?” She asked.

With his coat on, Rumpelstiltskin looked a bit more larger than life, vicious and impenetrable again. He glanced around the room and shrugged. “Bring my tea to the tower,” he said and walked out of the room.

“Of course,” Belle replied and hurried back into the kitchen, hoping that the winding staircase she'd seen in the hallway was the way to the tower.

A lengthy moment later, Belle was climbing up winding stairs, carrying a tea tray, inwardly wishing Rumpelstiltskin acquired himself some lighter tea pots if he insisted she carry them all around the castle. It seemed to her such a waste to brew an entire pot of tea and she hadn't noticed him drink more than a single cup yet.

There were so few windows in the castle, and the ones she found were blocked by heavy curtains. Instead of natural light, the entire castle was lit with eerie candles that didn't seem quite right to her, and in some corridors she'd noticed just the inexplicable presence of light coming from nowhere, illuminating just enough so she wouldn't stumble. Then, as she was ascending the staircase of what she hoped to be the way to The Tower, Belle passed by a small window that gave way to actual daylight, and despite her worries of letting the tea go cold, Belle couldn't pass the opportunity to stop and look out.

Even from such a narrow little window, the view was breath-taking. The weather outside seemed wonderful and sunny, all blue sky. She could see evergreen forests down below, surrounding the Dark Castle. The landscape rolled delightfully in the distance, with the hills rising up to become mountains in far distance. She saw open green pastures, and the hint of gently rising stripes of smoke hinted of a village within walking distance.

Her heart warm with delight, she made the last steps and found herself in the right tower, as she could deduce from Rumpelstiltskin's presence. He had just finished packing a small black leather satchel. The lock on it closed with a click as Belle arrived, looking for a level surface to set the tray on, but every possible strip of table was occupied by maps and books and scrolls. She stood still like a statue, letting her eyes wander around the room. There were glass vials, and jars on the shelves. It was a sorcerer's workroom, Belle realised.

“Put it down,” Rumpelstiltskin told her, busying himself with... things on the workbench.
“On the floor?” Belle asked, hearing herself sound a bit more sarcastic than she intended, and winced internally at the expected repercussions of cheek.

To her surprise she saw Rumpelstiltskin glance around the room. With a frown, he deigned to make space between the books and scrolls. Belle laid the tray down on the desk and poured him his tea. He was quite uncomfortably close to her, but his attention was still more focused on other things besides Belle and his tea.

Belle couldn’t help but steal a peek at the things laid out in the open on the desk. She was sad to find that the books were written in some foreign language she couldn’t decipher, even the letters were unfamiliar to her. The scrolls seemed much the same, all of them old and hand-written from times beyond the age of the printing press. Belle assumed that was why it was so dark inside the castle, because light would hurt and destroy all these precious old things.

The map, buried underneath the scattered books and scrolls did not require her reading skills, for Belle could have recognized the shape of the drawing anywhere. It was a large coloured illustration of the Great Rift and the neighbouring land masses. The map was fairly new too, unlike the other things, it was printed. Belle had seen a smaller version in the books regarding the matter, but this was large and detailed.

It was the shape of her dreams.

Belle touched the map gingerly with an extended index finger, which was when Rumpelstiltskin seemed to recall her presence again.

“Get to work,” he reminded her, his voice low, almost growling.

“Yes, sir,” Belle replied and hurried out of the room.

Rumpelstiltskin was gone all day while Belle did the best she could with his favourite room. She rolled up the carpets and dragged them aside. She dusted the tapestries and shook the worst of the dirt out of the curtains. The curtains seemed to be all nailed down, so she couldn’t open them to reveal daylight during the master’s absence.

By noon, Belle had managed a cursory scrubbing of the floors. As she had been looking for a broom, Belle found very old and raggedy linen sheets she’d torn to rags and had used for wiping the floor, and the poor old scraps had turned quite dark indeed by the time she was done with the floor.

After feeding herself with eggs, bread and cheese, for there was nothing else to be found, she returned to the task of sweeping dust off the pedestals and end-tables, and off the curios laid on them. Magical items such a silver cup. A dagger. A carved twig that Belle assumed was a magic wand. Not particularly keen on accidentally changing herself into a toad, Belle decided not to touch any of the items. She put on gloves and tried to do most of the actual touching with a feather-duster.

Then she cleaned the old ashes from the fireplace, and washed the mess she made on the floor around from such an activity. She wiped the mantelpiece and cleaned the outer sides of the windows of the great cabinet that stored more of Rumpelstiltskin’s curios. She would have washed the insides as well, but the cabinet was locked. The spinning wheel and the haphazardly thrown-about straw received a brief glance from her, for she wasn’t sure what she might do about that corner of the room. Perhaps later on she might find some kind of a basket for the straw, so the floor would be less of a mess.
With the room looking somewhat respectable after all these chores, Belle directed her attentions to the carpets. They needed good beatings, outside. She could manage to lift one up just barely, for they were heavy old things. She hadn't noticed a door leading outside through the kitchen, so she wobbled ahead towards the front door with the carpet in her arms. She managed through the hall and to the great double doors that led outside. She had to drop the carpet entirely to push open a heavy door, and then maneuver the big carpet back into her arms. At least the weather outside was perfect for dusting carpet.

She crossed the threshold, and felt as if the whole world turned upside down for a moment, and then found herself walking back into Rumpelstiltskin's grand room of curios and a spinning wheel. Belle felt dizzy and a little sick in the stomach from the experience. She dropped the carpet and hurried back into the hall, tried to leave again, and returned to the room she'd just left once again.

After the third try, she was quite confident that she was very much trapped in the Dark Castle.

She wanted to leave the carpet in the hall with a note pinned to it, perhaps a "dust your own carpets then," but that wouldn't do. In the end, she decided to drag the carpets down into the room where she'd washed two shirts and a jacket earlier, and see what she might do with them there. Perhaps scrub them, let them dry if she could find a large and warm enough room for them (and how ever was she going to manage to move them once they were soaked through! She could barely make do with them as they were.)

Once she was in the laundry room with the two carpets, she also realised that she quite likely shouldn't attempt to wash them wearing her nicest clothes, or much in the way of clothes in any case. The thought of the master's return to his castle pressed on her mind, but Belle decided to try and be quick about it. She knew she'd more likely catch a cold swimming on the floor of the laundry room fully clothed.

For starters, Belle pumped a large cauldron full of water (thanking her lucky stars once more that there was a pump inside the castle and that she didn't have to go entirely medieval and retrieve water from outside, not that she could if she wanted to,) and then made a fire underneath it. She would wash the carpets with warm water, and then use the rest of the water for washing herself, for she was sweaty and achy through and through.

Her stomach was cramping, and Belle thought it was for the lack of food, or because of the spell that prevented her from leaving the castle. Then as she removed her blouse, skirt and stockings, she realised the reason why she had felt absolutely dreadful all days was because of the large stain of blood all over her underwear.

"Brilliant, just brilliant," she sighed, feeling utterly hopeless and defeated.

Her dungeon room was not far away, but the run she made through the cellars to get there felt too long for her taste. Belle was usually quite regular in her time of the month, but she assumed the stress and hassle from the past two days had upset her. She tied up the blood-rags and changed into fresh underwear, which she felt sorry about getting messy soon with the carpet-cleaning.

After returning to the washing room, having ran up the corridor practically naked yet again, Belle looked down at the carpets as she waited for the cauldron to heat up, and tried to figure out if she was doing something right. The Guidebook knew nothing about carpets. She only knew about carpet cleaning in theory, because she'd watched maids of Avonlea every summer taking carpets to the seaside, where they'd wash them in the sea water with pine soap. But she had no sea, and no scent of the pine.

No, what Belle had was a cold cellar on the top of a mountain, and very achy lower back and
Rumpelstiltskin returned home after nightfall. Belle had sat on the floor in front of the fireplace in the room of curios, waiting for his return as she'd studied The Guidebook. By that time, she was mostly dry, except for her long hair. She'd made twin braids and hoped they would dry by the next day.

As the doors opened, Belle closed her book and jumped up. She squeezed the book against her cramping lower abdomen and managed to stutter a greetings.

“Would you like some tea?” She asked as well, watching Rumpelstiltskin stride straight ahead to his spinning wheel, not even looking at the room she'd worked hard on all day.

“Yes, yes,” he said, barely acknowledging her presence once again. Belle felt sad about it, being dismissed so, but then again, having his full attention was somewhat terrifying, so there was no way to win.

Once she returned with the tea tray, Belle had found the courage to address her new employer with questions.

“May I please be allowed outside in the garden to dust things?” Belle asked.

When Rumpelstiltskin frowned up at her, his lips still touching his tea cup, but said nothing, Belle took the opportunity to continue expressing her opinions.

“I also would like a subscription of the nearest newspaper, a kitchen garden, more fresh food in the pantry, some help with the wet and heavy carpets I washed this afternoon, they'll never dry out in the laundry room. I’d also like to write home, to let my father know I’m fine.”

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her as he set the tea cup on the saucer. He cocked his head slightly.

“Did you make that cake?” He asked, which was a bizarre reply. Belle was slightly bewildered at first, and then recalled how she'd brought him a piece of cake and a cup of tea only two nights ago.

“No, Aunt Hortensia's cook made that,” Belle replied.

Belle thought he looked rather disappointed for a second. Then he smiled, which Belle knew was bad.

“There will be no newspapers and no letters. You will not be going outside either, and there will be no garden. But there’s dinner waiting in the kitchen, already made, and you should fetch mine. Eat yours where you like. I'll see about the carpets later.”

Suppressing a frown, Belle curtsied and left.

By some magic, dinner had arrived in the castle on its own accord. Belle couldn't rejoice about that since she felt utterly miserable. She only had three books with her, and there was to be no communication for her with the outside world, not even in the form of her allowed to step outside into the sun.

Deflated and defeated, she did a hasty job of delivering dinner to the great room, escaping as soon as she could back to the kitchen where she ate her share on a chair by the fireplace where she heated the tea water. Once she'd finished eating, she felt so achy and tired that she couldn't imagine attempting anything except lying down during the rest of the night, even if she had to do so in the cold dungeon.
She was so tired she didn't even want to get out of her clothes, so she simply threw herself on the bed. But no rest came to her there, for her cramps kept her awake. In her several layers of misery, Belle started to cry. It started out simply as tears, but eventually developed into full-blown sobs and wails. In the darkness of a cold, forbidding dungeon, she embraced all her misfortunes, her losses, her aches and her loneliness, and wallowed in them.

When Rumpelstiltskin then practically ran into the room, complaining about the noise she was making, Belle was so enraged by her emotional turmoil she forgot to feel scared of him.

“I just left my entire family behind two and a half countries away, I'm cold in your stupid dungeon, and I'm bleeding! That's why!” Belle shouted at him as she sat up on the edge of her bed.

He seemed to express something that might have been understood as being startled or alarmed on another person, but Belle wasn't sure.

“Did you have an accident while I was gone?” He asked, looking at her carefully.

Belle closed her eyes and gave a deep sigh.

“So I look like I'm missing a limb?” She asked. “No. I've been scrubbing your filth all day with... women's troubles.” She pursed her lips and looked aside. In point of fact, she had never in her life discussed this topic with a person of the male persuasion, and she had to assume Rumpelstiltskin was that, at least guessing by the standard of clothing he chose to put on. There was no knowing if he was actually a snake or some kind of a fish underneath it all.

“If you'll excuse me, I'd like to get back to consoling my terrible pains by wailing like a banshee,” Belle continued, feeling curiously more herself in the face of the terrified puzzlement that was taking over Rumpelstiltskin's overconfidence, even though she could still feel how red and puffy the crying had made her face.

“Just a moment,” he retorted and left the dungeon in a hurry.

Belle sat on the edge of the bed, waiting, dangling her feet as she did.

He reappeared after a lengthy moment, carrying a saucer with a cup on it.

“For the pain,” he said as he offered the tea to her solemnly. Belle accepted the golden mixture with some apprehension. If she'd learned anything as a bystander of Aunt Hortensia's affairs, she was absolutely certain that she wouldn't want to drink a magic potion.

“What's in it?”

“Willow bark and sweet violet,” he replied.

Belle sniffed it. The scent was what he'd claimed it to be, so she drank it all in one go. Perhaps it was her wishful thinking overcrowding her senses, but she could feel the pain start to recede.

“Thank you,” Belle said, sincere to the bottom of her heart.

Rumpelstiltskin made a face at her. “Anything to make you stop,” he replied and with nothing more to tell her left the room promptly.

Belle set the cup back on the saucer and noticed there was a chip on it. No wonder he'd given it to her then, she mused, but she couldn't help but feel glad with the fact that he'd brought her something to soothe her pains. Perhaps he wasn't quite as awful then as he'd wish her to believe. With these
thoughts, Belle lay back on the bed. As the pain slipped away, she began to feel drowsier and drowsier. With the last of her strength she pulled her thin blanket over herself before she fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

It may be that someone bargained for the wrong maid.
A Gentleman and a Thief

Chapter Summary

It's four weeks later.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One evening, deeper into the summer, when the sun was about to set and was doing so with a wondrous display of bright colours, a common wood pigeon flew just above the canopy of the evergreen woods with a clear sense of purpose and direction. The bird seemed as ordinary as wood pigeons could be: a grey bird the size of a chicken, with pinkish breast feathers, and a spot of white adorning its neck. It would have appeared ordinary entirely, were it not for a small cylinder dangling from a string tied around its leg.

The wood pigeon approached the Dark Castle that was hidden in a valley between mountains. There it landed on the roof of one of the turrets of the tower. It cooed, *coo-coo-coo*, as it peered down into the wild rose gardens surrounding the castle. The pigeon flitted down along the outer wall, flapping its wings, descending slowly and ending up other roof tiles closer to ground. Then the bird waited.

It was dark and the night was upon the land, when a window opened on the side of the castle keep, just below from where the pigeon was sitting. Someone extended their pale, small hands through the narrow window, holding an enamel basin with both hands and pouring the dirty water out through the window onto the rose bushes below.

The pigeon plummeted down, its wings furiously flapping as it made its way down the wall, aggressively through the window, and finally inside the castle. The maiden at the window dropped her basin down on the flagstones, which made quite the clang and noise that echoed in the stony room. She cried out briefly, while the pigeon flew on bravely through the kitchen and out of it, down the staircases and corridors and into the dungeons.

The pigeon fluttered about uncertainly from space to space, from room to room, looking for a place to hide. Eventually it found a place that looked like the laundry room, where it dug its way into a pile of dirty laundry. There it lay still, very quiet, and listened. The pigeon heard hard heels clacking on the flagstones, and the gentle maiden's voice calling him softly.

“Oh, poor bird! Come here. Do you like peas? Coo... coo?”

The maiden went past the washing room in the corridor. The pigeon waited patiently. Then the voices of her softly spoken phrases and the clacking of her heels returned, eventually.

“As if it vanished into thin air,” the pigeon heard her mutter.

The pigeon stayed still and quiet for a while longer, for it had learned much patience during its life that extended far beyond that of a normal bird. It waited until the candles in the corridor became extinguished, and all the low, occasional voices from upstairs died out. By the time it was deep into the night, the pigeon left the pile of laundry.
Then it took the small case it had been carrying around its foot into its beak, pulling open a stopper. It was quite fiddly business for a large wood pigeon, and it took it a good while to manage that. There were small dry pellets inside the container, and the pigeon struggled to shake them out. He then caught them with his beak, and swallowed each one whole one at a time.

Ivy-green and black smoke surrounded the pigeon, and underneath there was a man in his late twenties. In his homeland of Arbonne it was usually agreed upon by the women of society that he was a very good looking individual. He was as he always was: his sideburns were impeccably kept, his hair and his short moustache combed, and when he smiled, the ladies of the balls and galas would almost always smile back helplessly in the face of the feelings he inspired.

He was wearing a black suit with a white shirt and white tie, a black opera cloak on his shoulders clasped just under his chin, and a black silk top hat on his head. In the pocket of his jacket was a creamy white handkerchief, and just next to them an elegant pair of eyeglasses with their lenses coloured purple. He took the glasses in one hand, his kerchief in the other, wiped the purple lenses, and then put the glasses on.

*These will allow you to see the more obvious traps*, he recalled a woman's voice. She had prepared the spell the had turned her into a bird, and she had tied the cylinder container with string around his leg. *It'll be dark, but with these your vision will be clear as day.*

He looked down at the handkerchief in his hand. There was embroidery detail in one corner: a long-stemmed flower with many tiny purple petals along its length, curling next to the initials *A L*. He folded the handkerchief carefully and neatly, and placed it back to his breast pocket.

With his soft shoes, and with the way he'd taught himself to move about on occasions such as this, he was as good as silent. He prowled through the corridors completely without any light, the lenses on his head granting him impeccable vision in the pitch black darkness.

*You'll need to find the tower work-room*, he recalled the words, *The stairs are in the main hall.*

He'd spent four weeks spying on the castle with binoculars from the depths of the woods, and he didn't even have to come up with a cover story for it this time. To all the locals and the tourists in the area he was nothing more or less than one of the two dozen journalists who were up in the mountains to get the story of their lifetime that would make them rich and famous, every inn and bed and breakfast back in the village was full of them.

When the girl had appeared in the castle, it had been a lucky day for all them, because she occasionally pulled open the curtains. He found the kitchen where he'd made his entrance through the window. Before her arrival, it had been impossible to try make sense of the layout of the castle's insides with every room shielded from the outside world. Not so any more!

He of course hadn't written anything down. He was well aware with the fact that few reporters up in the mountains ever managed to get their exciting stories and speculations out and published. Sometimes they would mysteriously vanish entirely along with their stories. But he wasn't here for a story.

He found the kitchen where he'd made his entrance through the window. It was a very narrow little thing, the only window that was never blocked to the outside world, but it had only given a tiny view into the kitchen. Suspecting there was opportunity there, he'd spent weeks looking at the scullery maid, concentrating his efforts on figuring her out. She had been rather erratic the first week after her arrival with her comings and goings, but during the second week she'd fallen into a pattern.

As for figuring out the comings and goings of the master of the castle, that had required a bit more
effort from his gifts of observing and deduction, but happily there had been signs, and the occasional help from the scullery maid, with her openings of the curtains and lighting fires. Watching her long enough, it was apparent that one might establish an educated guess on the master's presence based on where and how long smoke rose from the chimneys in the evenings.

Having spent two weeks making a tally of observations on a notebook, spending an average of six hours a day staring through binoculars, AL had decided he was ready to enter the Dark Castle.

Thanks to having made his observations, he had a clear idea of how to find the grand room with the fireplace, the large dining table and the pedestals. He'd had a lucky glance into when the maid had been dusting the curtains one morning soon after her arrival. The room was but a short corridor and few steps away from the kitchens.

Once he entered it, AL's enchanted glasses proved just how useful they were: He could see pale purple lights glowing from almost every item in the room, things hanging on the walls and others placed on pedestals. There were some more items in the glass cupboard, and other smaller, more insignificant and weaker things glowing with less distinct light on the mantelpiece.

Finding that looking at the things was giving him a headache, he concentrated his eyes on the least magical item in the room – the great oak table that had only one chair at one end. That was when he noticed the parchment. He'd taken it for a place setter at first glance when he'd been more interested in the other attractions around him. Curious, he prowled to read the paper, careful not to touch anything as he leaned over the back of the chair to see the words from the right angle.

I'm very sorry about the china. The tea pot is very large and heavy, and it's not easy to carry it up to the tower. Perhaps we might find a smaller one?

Additionally, I don't know how to manage a kitchen where everything is the size intended for feeding a hundred people at a time. Under other circumstances I wouldn't be bothering an important and busy person such as yourself about these terribly mundane things but you must realise I can't conduct all the housekeeping alone when I'm not allowed to step out of the castle or even send letters.

I might actually manage to make a decent cake with a stove that didn't require I first burn down a whole forest in an effort to heat it. Also, I'm sure my Aunt Hortensia's cook would gladly send me her cake recipe if I were allowed to be in correspondence with the outside world.

If we wish to have less broken china, then I would ask you to please stop shouting at me. It makes me nervous, and holding on to your tea tray coming down the stairs becomes infinitely more difficult.

AL lifted an eyebrow at the courageous words addressed to the dark lord of the castle. This maid looked a slight, frail thing from afar through the binoculars, but there seemed to be more to her than met the eye.

Abandoning his attention on the letter, he turned around to leave the room, through the doors that would undoubtedly lead him to the main hallway, unless his estimations were wrong. Then realised he had a bit of a problem, because the doors he was looking at were quite purple through and through in his enchanted vision.

He couldn't tell what sort of enchantment was laid on the doors, and he considered his options. He
might get the girl and make her open the door, but she might alarm her employer. He could go back
the way he came and see if there was a way to the rest of the castle through the dark corridors
underneath. Or he could open the doors anyway and make a good run up into the tower. What then
though, he'd be cornered once he got up.

It was obvious to him, after reading the letter, that the poor maiden was cruelly trapped here in the
castle. She might assist him willingly, he pondered. Especially so if he'd charm her off her feet. Now
feeling very self-aware, AL looked around the room for a mirror, but saw none. Too bad, he thought,
he'd just have to assume he looked as impeccably handsome as he felt.

He rehearsed a speech in his head as he descended down into the cellars and sought out the girl.

He found her in a room that was literally a dungeon, which sparked his anger. That was suitable,
because the flame of that emotion would make his story more convincing, he thought. The door was
not locked, so he let himself in quietly, and gazed all around the room, feeling pity for the brave little
thing that Rumpelstiltskin kept in his kitchen. She was denied fresh air and sunlight on her skin at the
height of summer, and she was forced to live in a damp cell with next to nothing, all her possessions
in a travel trunk and a wooden chest.

She was very pretty to look at, he thought, as he stood by her bed. Her long hair was in two braids
that started near her neck, and she hadn't pulled her sheet and blanket all the way up to her chin, for it
was still a warm summer's night. He watched her breath rise and fall underneath the cotton
nightgown she wore. Some moonlight from the tiny windows near the ceiling managed to creep into
the cell, but mostly this girl was doomed to live in darkness. All other kinds of feelings besides anger
stirred in him, but then a slight ache in his heart he felt for another woman reminded him of the things
he had to do.

He put his palm across her mouth to prevent her from screaming and shook her shoulder with his
other hand. “Please don't be alarmed,” he whispered. “I'm here to rescue you!”

Her eyes flashed open and there was shock in them. She tried to scream into his palm, but he kept his
grasp on her and repeated the gentle whispers and assurances that he was her ally and that she was
going to be rescued.

“I'll remove my hand now,” he said softly, “and you must not call out for your master, or we'll both
die.” AL moved his hands slowly away from the girl and then gave him a stunning smile of all pearly
white teeth, accompanied with a slow inclination of his head and a twinkle in his eye.

“H-how are you going save me?” She asked, keeping her voice as low as his was.

“There's a magic wand in the tower, it will allow me to let you out,” he replied. Of course he had no
idea if such a thing was possible. He didn't know what the wand might do, he was only in the castle
to retrieve it. “But I can't get up into the tower on my own. I need you,” he took her hand in his
palm, “to lend me a hand, and open the doors to the hallway.” She shuddered as he touched her, and
pulled her hand free.

“Why do you need the wand?” She asked. It was obvious she wasn't the kind of girl who wanted a
strange man crowding her so closely in her boudoir, so he stepped away from her, giving her space.

He hesitated in his reply, because the honest answer would meddle with the tactic he had chosen to
operate on. In the end, he replied, “I need it to save someone I love.”

She dwelt on his response for a moment, then began to search the dim room for more clothes, feeling
her way more than seeing anything. With his improved vision, AL helped her get more dressed by
finding her shoes. She put on a coat over her nightgown. AL noticed there was the faintest shimmer
of purple about the coat, but didn't mention it. There was no strong magic there.

Together they crept again through the Dark Castle in the night. Both stayed quiet, sensible of the
danger they were in if the master should return at an inopportune moment. The kitchen maid pushed
open the double doors that led into the great hallway, and they climbed up a spiral staircase that led
them to the tower.

“I'm not supposed to come here when he's out,” the maid whispered as the ascended the steps.

“It won't matter, you'll run free soon,” he replied assuringly.

“I, I suppose I should have taken more with me from my room than just a nightgown and a coat,” she
said.

“I'll escort you to safety and see you'll be properly clothed,” he promised her.

There was another door halfway up the staircase, which the maid opened for him. It was far more
dark beyond that, with the kind of darkness that ought to have belonged into caves beneath
mountains, not in upper tower rooms that by all rights should have bathed in bright moonlight.

“I can't see anything,” the maid said.

“I can. Wait here, I'll be back soon.”

He climbed up and up, still making sure to be more silent than a cat on the prowl. There was no
knowing of what lay ahead.

When he reached the top of the tower, the purple light he saw with his enchanted lenses was ten
times more confusing than it had been downstairs in the room of curios. He had no choice but to
keep the lenses on, for without them he would have surely bumped into the haphazardly scattered
furniture and relics cluttering the disordered room.

He'd seen a drawing of the wand, and he kept looking for something reminiscent to it. It didn't take
him long to make out the shape of it amongst the other magical doodads, and once he'd pocketed the
thing he wasted no time getting out of the room. He'd learned long ago not to be too greedy when
burgling houses and castles.

His steps lighter than a whisper, he descended down the winding staircase, back to the mid-level
door where the maid was waiting for him.

“I have it. Let's go,” he whispered, and pattered past her.

Down and down the staircase wound. This was always the part that required the most steeled of
nerves. It was no good getting inside unseen and claiming the prize if the adventure ended in a
botched escape attempt.

Silence, silence, silence.

Listening to her breath, he could feel her tension rising as her breath became more shallow and
louder.

“It'll be fine,” he offered her his assurance.

At last back in the great hall, he asked her to open the front doors, and she acquiesced silently. He
smiled, and stepped out quickly, where he spun about on his heels and lifted his hat to her and gave her a very deep bow. Then he fished the wand out of his pocket and made a show of waving it around, silently hoping that she wouldn't turn into a bear or a unicorn by accident.

He managed to get no reaction out of the wand, which was his plan. He really didn't like doing unrepairable damage to beautiful young women.

“Is it working?” She asked him timidly.

He shrugged. “I don't know. Try and step out?” He asked.

She nodded nervously, and plunged forward. And promptly vanished.

He considered that the best time ever to make a run for it. He was a very good runner, in fact. One had to be, in this occupation. He was also a very good climber of gates and walls, and a very good hider of getaway horses into the woods. Now the only thing he had to rely on was his foolish hope on the maid that she wouldn't summon her master back too early.

The castle gates were locked and the ironwork almost impossible to climb up, so he opted for climbing up the side of the wall instead. First he made a little bundle of his coat, hat and other possessions that might have fallen off during such an escapade, and tied a neat package of them with his opera coat, which he tossed over the edge of the wall. Then he followed them somewhat slower, but steadily.

He threw his grip to the top of the wall and was just about to push himself up when he felt a shoe sole touch his knuckles gingerly. He looked up.

The master of the castle had evidently returned.

Rumpelstiltskin didn't look too pleased, even though he was smiling. Slowly Rumpelstiltskin leaned forward, then put his weight on one foot.

Thanks to having hit his head coming down from the wall, AL had only the faintest understanding of how he had returned to the Dark Castle. Everything swam in his head for the longest time, and he didn't know up from down. Hours must have passed until he was back to his senses enough to see that there was golden daylight outside, and to realise he was hung from the ceiling of a small room by his wrists tied together.

He recalled having heard shouting during his long period of half-unconsciousness, and he feared for the maid's life. Perhaps she was already dead.

Dead like another lady soon would be, now that he had failed his mission.

He hadn't long to wait before the master of the castle was in the doorway, murder in his eyes, and a sharp knife in his hand. Rumpelstiltskin had a piece of cloth on his arm as if he were the maître d’ of a fine Arbonnese restaurant. With a flourish, the green impish man laid the knife on a little side table, and then took the cloth, folding it out to reveal it to be an apron.

“I know who you are,” the dark sorcerer told him, “but not who you work for.” Rumpelstiltskin tied the apron neatly behind his back and took the knife in his hand again, a literally dark toothy grin parting his lips.

“I tricked and bullied your maid to help me,” AL replied groggly. He had a hard time keeping his
head raised up.

“A gentleman and a thief, as they say,” Rumpelstiltskin mused. He used the knife next to cut off the buttons of the gentleman's waistcoat, one by one. “She'll be punished, after I'm done with you,” he said, his voice a low growl, the terrible grin not once leaving his face.

Thanks to his concussion, the gentleman was barely lucid when the knife cut his flesh. He fell unconscious very swiftly, and by the time he returned, the day had turned to another night. When he looked down on the floor, he saw rusty red stains, which he soon realised were puddles of his own blood. He was too tired to look up.

He felt gentle touches about his wrists, and soon his arms fell free. There was no strength left in his legs or his feet, so he fell into a puddle on the floor, knocking his knees on the bloodied flagstones so that they hurt.

“Here, you've lost blood, you need to drink something.” A woman spoke to him. He leaned backwards and parted his lips for the pewter mug that was held up to him, full of fresh cold water. Beginning to feel somewhat revived, he tried to stumble to get on his feet.

“He's gone out, there's no time to lose,” the woman said. Of course, the maid again.

“No, I can't climb up the walls,” the gentleman replied, “and he'll kill you if you let me go.”

“He'll kill us both if I don't let you go,” she retorted and helped him sit up.

She fed him honeyed porridge next and made him drink more water. Then the escape attempt number two began.

She had all his things, including the wand, all wrapped in his opera cloak that he'd already once tossed over the wall. She couldn't help him any further than the front step of the castle, and this time she didn't try leaving with him.

“Why are you helping me?” The gentleman asked, unable to leave so swiftly as he had the last time. “I tricked you the last time,” he said, feeling now somewhat ashamed about it.

The maid started closing the front doors on him, and then stopped briefly to give him her answer. “Doing bad things doesn't always mean you're a bad person,” she responded philosophically, and closed the door on him.

Out in the moonlit summer night again, the gentleman limped sorely and slowly around the garden of the Dark Castle. He hoped to find an easier exit out, although the hours he'd spent investigating the premises didn't give him much hope.

In the end he found a slightly shallower part of the old walls and climbed painstakingly slowly up, keeping his eyes towards the sky at all time in case Rumpelstiltskin appeared again to step on his fingers. There was no calm reassurance in himself this time as the gentleman listened to his heart beat furiously, urging him on to safety.

Up and up he went until he reached the top of the wall. He knew he should have climbed down the other side for safety, but he was in such a hurry to leave that he gave a rough estimate in the darkness at what he hoped to be the least rockiest part of the ground below, and jumped down.

He landed into a bed of ferns, but it was no soft fall. His body ached worse than ever as he limped
into the forest with pitiful speed, praying to the gods above that he might find his horse, or a way out of the woods.

Then he saw a white fox in the woods, running between the trees.

The gentleman fumbled his sack for the purple spectacles, and put them on. Not only could he see in the forest much better now, he saw the magic emanating from the fox that was scurrying back and forth between old fir trees not far away from him.

“Oh, Countess,” he whispered thankfully, and followed the fox. The fox didn't wait for him, but went ahead. New hope sprung in the gentleman's heart and he trailed the fox a little faster. Eventually they found his horse, which was not at all in the same place where he'd left it, but the gentleman didn't care. He spent his last efforts into climbing on the beast and then told it to follow the fox. It was possibly extremely nonsensical to speak to a horse and expect it to understand him, but he was very tired, and by some miracle the horse did exactly what he wanted it to do, so all was well.

Apart from the fact that he was still running away from Rumpelstiltskin.

The horse followed the fox and the rider clung to the horse limply until early morning light came shining from the east between the trees. It was about that time when they left the woods and found a road. There was a very modern carriage waiting for them there, shiny and black. The door opened and a grandly and fashionably dressed middle-aged woman with dark hair stepped out. A black veil covered her face, but her gown, coat and hat were all white, the hat had ostentatious white feathers pinned to it.

The fox leapt into the woman's arms and climbed on her shoulders, where it suddenly fell limp as it turned into an inanimate fur stole. The gentleman shook his head at that.

“Did you get it?” The woman asked impatiently.

“Depends. Is she here?” He replied, smiling triumphantly as he dismounted from his horse.

The Countess nodded, and commanded the other occupant of the carriage to come out.

A young woman stumbled into the morning light, visibly shaking as her eyes met his. Her swollen belly declared her late stage of pregnancy. The gentleman's heart leapt at the sight of her. They called each other by their names, but the Countess stepped between them.

“The wand,” she demanded.

The gentleman dug out the wand from the bundle he'd been holding on to so dearly. He tossed it to the Countess.

“Oh no, you're hurt,” the girl cried out with a whimper, as she now noticed the cuts and bruises on him.

“We're done,” the gentleman said.

The Countess laughed, then pushed the girl back towards the carriage. “No, you still owe me one more favour. We shall all return to Arbonne where your next assignment awaits.”

“This is not what we agreed!” The gentleman shouted at her with red fury. But he barely had the strength to keep himself standing, let alone wrestle his lover from the grasp of the wicked witch.

“We agreed you would help me in return for her safe return to you,” she spat maliciously.
“So you'll keep me 'helping' you forever?” He asked, breathless and tired.

“Don't be childish. Get in the carriage if you don't want to fall off your horse,” the Countess ordered him.

There was a sudden loud noise in the woods.

Then the Countess's hat with the black veil fell off her head.

Then the Countess fell on the ground on her back, blood pooling underneath her head and her hair. The Countess's eyes twitched, and her lips moved, but she seemed to be having a hard time doing much anything else.

The gentleman looked down, stunned.

The Countess's carriage driver, an over two-metre tall man with a wide frame built of muscle, crowned with a black bowler hat, also seemed very alarmed.

“You killed someone!” Belle screamed at Rumpelstiltskin, who was lowering the pistol in his hand.

“No, she can't be killed with a bullet” Rumpelstiltskin replied matter-of-factly, “she is going to use all her magic, and the magic of the wand, in order to put her brain back together,” he explained. “So her entire endeavour has been pointless.”

He snapped his fingers and Belle was free to move again. She'd been sucked into the ground when she'd tried to prevent Rumpelstiltskin from shooting the thief who'd burgled his tower with Belle's assistance.

Belle could see the thief in the distance, grabbing the hand of the girl he loved as he helped her out of the carriage. The carriage driver leapt down from his seat and lunged himself at the frightened-looking girl.

Another gunshot echoed in the early morning air, and Belle was startled again. She was amazed to see that the big burly man in the distance seemed only injured somewhere below his knee, not still and dead on the ground. The gentleman thief and the girl took the opportunity to get on the grey stallion and gallop off.

“You saved them,” Belle said, amazed.

“I was aiming for the thief,” Rumpelstiltskin replied gruffly and looked away. He didn't seem pleased at all. Belle found it hard to believe then that her employer's sour mood was due to a poor aim, especially so since he had just shot a witch in the head with perfect aim not a minute earlier. Then when he'd shot a carriage driver, he'd aimed for the leg instead of the heart.

“Get back to the carriage,” Rumpelstiltskin told her, his voice a little lighter, “I'm bored of this hunt.” He put the safety back on the pistol, still staring out through the trees at the twitching, shaking white witch lying in the ground, with her hulking giant limping to assist her.

“You're not going after them?” Belle inquired gently. She stepped a little closer to Rumpelstiltskin.

“I don't need to capture the pawn when I've shot the queen,” he replied.

Belle lowered her voice a little as she crept even closer to Rumpelstiltskin. “Yes, your aim with her
was perfect, and then you conveniently missed the thief while helping him escape,” she said.

Rumpelstiltskin sneered. “Or perhaps it was simply easier to hit a target that was still rather than a moving one,” he said and turned to see her. His expression of disdain fell apart when he noticed Belle was standing so close to him she almost touched him, she was staring at him with her eyebrows arched in a protesting inquiry.

It had been quite the night, day and night, Belle reflected. She'd been a bit of a fool, letting a thief talk her into believing he would help her escape the Dark Castle. Now she felt rather dreadful that she'd tried to go back on the bargain she'd made with Rumpelstiltskin. She'd spent the entire day waiting for him to kill her with a thought in retaliation, for surely he was capable of such a thing, with the terrible cruelty and viciousness he so often displayed, when he wasn't lost in thought in his tower, or spinning at his wheel.

But Belle couldn't reconcile that cruel and terrible image with the actions of what had happened in the woods that morning. Yes, he had shot a woman, but she hadn't actually died, and he knew that. He'd helped a thief – a man he'd declared he'd kill slowly – and his wife escape, even though there was no compensation in it for him, and what was Rumpelstiltskin known for, if not being a man of his word, and always with a price?

Belle thought of the brief moment a month before at Aunt Hortensia’s house, when he'd pushed up the fallen ladders and helped her down from the roof of the summer pavilion.

Belle leaned forward and wrapped her arms around Rumpelstiltskin’s neck. She tried not to press her body too close to his, for that would have been inappropriate and would have sent the entirely wrong signals, but she could feel how awkwardly the poor old sorcerer accepted the embrace. It was only a brief moment until she let him go and pulled herself back, feeling amazed that she'd had the nerve to do such a thing.

“Shall we go back?” Belle asked. The poor sorcerer looked so stunned that Belle decided to start off already without him.

“Mm. Yes. Let's,” Rumpelstiltskin muttered vaguely somewhere behind her after she'd already taken off.

“Are you still going to flay me alive?” Belle asked, peering over her shoulder.

“Not yet,” Rumpelstiltskin replied curtly, and Belle then knew well enough to leave him alone. But she couldn't help but smile all the way back to the castle anyhow.

Chapter End Notes

That was no Robin Hood. I left plenty of clues as to who he is though! I just didn't feel like mentioning any names because I just roll like that sometimes.

I was rather pleased to be able to introduce a new hat too.
The Dark Castle was cool inside, even during the worst heat wave of the summer. When Belle cautiously opened the window every now and then to get a glimpse of blue summer skies, or hear the birds singing in the garden and the forests, she was struck by how hot it was outside, even so late into the day. She'd always thought that it was always chilly up in the mountains. Apparently not always so.

She leaned her arms against the small window and took in the familiar sight of the thorny rose garden and the distant castle walls. The roses were in full bloom in three different shades of red. Belle would have liked to have reached out through the window and pluck one of the flowers for herself but she had the suspiscious that then her arm might disappear and reappear in the room of curios. So she settled for watching them attract bees, and butterflies of shapes and colours she'd never seen before.

In the past six weeks she had done more cleaning than ever in her life before. She had managed to properly take care of as many rooms as there were weeks behind her. Rumpelstiltskin had mentioned there were about a hundred and twenty rooms in the castle altogether, so Belle had counted it would take her well over two years to clean every room until they were in pristine condition. But then, across these two years the rooms she had first cleaned would decay over time, and she'd have to start over.

A woman always wants to excel at everything she does, the ideas of The Guidebook echoed back to her. If she wasn't such a perfectionist with getting rid of every piece of grime, fixing or replacing every worn or broken detail of every dusty and moth-eaten curtain, rug, missing piece of mosaic tile floor and levelling every loose flagstone, if she'd only done cursory dusting of every room, then she would have made far more progress throughout the castle than she already had.

But across six weeks, with six books, and no pen and ink and paper, Belle had become melancholy with boredom. She threw all her energy into minute details of her new profession as Rumpelstiltskin's housekeeper simply to pass time so she would be weary enough by the time she went to bed that she wouldn't stay awake all night filling her imagination with dread over how tedious her life had become.

Apart from the thief who had entered the castle, nothing truly exciting happened in the Dark Castle. When there were visitors, Rumpelstiltskin made sure that Belle stayed in the kitchen and was out of the way. He was home fairly infrequently, and when he was, he was either absent-mindedly distant, or putting up airs of his supposed viciousness, although Belle was less impressed by that these days. For all his enraged fits, menacing demeanour, and the now-postponed threat of flaying her alive, Rumpelstiltskin had not laid a single on Belle since they had left Aunt Hortensia's house. Most of the time he seemed half oblivious to her presence. Belle had taken to speculating if his penchant for sweet things was a sign of depression, for she'd read a brief article on the newly discovered
techniques of psychoanalysis the year before when she'd considered taking new courses for the starting university semester, and she faintly recalled having read about mood swings and sugar cravings, and Belle had certainly noticed that the peppermint sweets in a little bowl in the tower always seemed to disappear when the master of the castle was having a bad day.

Then again, Belle reflected, it might not be depression. Perhaps it was all the magic.

The magic of Aunt Hortensia had always been slow, careful work. As a younger yet equally curious person she had spied on more than she ought to have seen. One time Aunt Hortensia had caught her and given Belle quite the lecture on how serious magic was and how she never ought to trust it. When Belle had asked Aunt Hortensia why she was doing it, the reply had been a short and curt “I'm older and know better.” She had also grabbed her wheelchair fiercely, which Belle had interpreted as another kind of answer a little later on.

Rumpelstiltskin's magic was not pale and slow. It was swift and aggressive, and Belle suspected that if it was slow and pale magic that had put her great-aunt in a wheelchair, then the fast and angry magic probably did something much worse to him. Rumpelstiltskin was at least three hundred years old, if all the history books were to be believed on the matter, so he probably had some reason to keep at it.

Belle closed the kitchen window – not wanting magic pigeon to follow her back inside – and set to polish some of the hundreds of old and dusty, forgotten pans and pots of the old castle kitchens. As she toiled, she kept her mind busy trying to figure out the mystery of Rumpelstiltskin. As far as she knew, he'd lived in this castle for a long time. He appeared all around the Kingdoms every now and then in order to make deals, some quite serious and some less so (Belle had learned since her arrival that the mysterious never-seen cook of the Dark Castle was the head chef of a five star hotel restaurant in Arbonne, who owed his job to a deal – that explained why they so often dined on sea fish in the middle of the mountains.)

But Rumpelstiltskin didn't want money and he didn't want land. He kept almost all the world at a distance, except on the few occasions when he had a deal in mind, and even those errands didn't really change much in his sour and hostile demeanour, there wasn't really any joy when he returned back from where ever he went. Just as the day he'd dealt for Belle, as soon as there was no audience to show his wickedness to, Rumpelstiltskin had just withdrawn into whatever always occupied his mind.

It was like his life was as tedious and monotonous as hers, Belle thought, and stopped momentarily scrubbing the partially cleaned pot in her hand at that realisation. She found her hypothesis as comforting as it was somewhat disturbing, in the sense that it was odd to realise she had something in common with Rumpelstiltskin. Provided her guess was right, of course.

The idea seemed too dangerous to explore any further, so Belle concentrated all her effort into cleaning the pot she had her hands on, and then a kettle. Elbow grease, elbow grease, elbow grease, she repeated to herself, reminding her of lessons learned in Aunt Hortensia's kitchen.

In regards to her work ethics, Belle had deduced that Rumpelstiltskin remained mostly oblivious to whatever Belle was up to as long as she provided him with a tea tray whenever he needed one, washed a few dishes after dinner, dusted the spinning room every once in a while (and the tower never) and didn't scrub holes in his silk shirts. Belle had once spitefully given only the vaguest of efforts doing her chores one day, and that had been met with indifference. When she had experimentally repeated the same the next day, the results had been the same, and Belle had spent those two days reading through the Song for Three Towns from cover to cover.

The third day she realised she was extremely bored, and that she was somewhat disgusted by what a
poor job she was doing as the castle's housekeeper, so she resumed her chores normally. And Rumpelstiltskin said nothing, not a twitch of his lips or a glance of his eyes betrayed any interest in the actual cleanliness of his household, or in the capability of his housekeeper.

It had been relieving in the sense that Belle had felt less endangered. She had since the beginning imagined that a mighty sorcerer must have very high standards, and so she had started out fearful, assuming that unless she'd had the whole castle scrubbed and spruced and sparkling by the end of the first week, she'd die a gruesome and painful death – or at least suffer horribly under some unimaginably terrible curse.

Belle reflected upon how often she felt horribly unmotivated. Most of her work went unnoticed and unacknowledged. That was when she'd started asking for improvements to the castle, which had led into some arguments, and then broken china when Belle had become so nervous that a tray had slipped out of her sweaty hands.

Then two weeks ago she'd gone and given the silly man a hug as thanks for not killing the thief who'd broken into the castle, and Rumpelstiltskin had withdrawn the threat of carving her skin off. That had been the most awful thing anyone had ever said to her in her lifetime, Belle thought, but it had resulted in nothing. Not a finger laid upon her person.

It had been a very strange summer so far, Belle reflected, as she removed her kitchen apron after drying the dishes. An adventure that had been as dull as it had been exciting.

Belle took herself to the room of curios. There were 119 other rooms in the castle, but this one was the only one that was remotely cosy. Elsewhere in the castle the rooms were either cluttered with odds and ends Rumpelstiltskin had accumulated over his extraordinarily long life, except for the rooms which were empty. He had a bedroom where Belle supposed he occasionally might have slept, but it seemed to Belle that Rumpelstiltskin was always awake.

Of locations to choose from where to spend her lonely evening, Belle also had her pick between the kitchen, and the laundry room, as well as the dungeon cell where she slept with her meagre possessions, so most nights saw Belle try and entertain herself in the room of the curiosities. She only withdrew into the dungeon when she felt cross, and didn't want to risk her life by lashing out or dropping a too cutting remark to the lord of the castle.

That evening she chose not to bring any of the three books that now constituted her entire library. She was not in the mind for re-reading the Song of Three Towns again just yet. She was constantly reading the practical helpful parts of the Guidebook during the day when she worked, so Belle felt disinclined to read more of it in the evenings (and it was quite likely that she would have absolutely no use now for helpful tips on how to choose the right accessories for dark velvet evening gowns, not unless Rumpelstiltskin suddenly required her to present him with that exact information anyway.) She was saving the third book for later, in case she would feel terrible and lonely again some night, and she'd need something to cling to (and then that something would be an Arbonnese professor's treatise on the deconstruction of ancient myths and folklore – Belle hadn't read it yet, and she was fairly certain that Rumpelstiltskin would be mentioned in it at least once, which was another reason why she was not in the mood for opening the book just yet.)

Belle was almost used to the constant chill of the Dark Castle, but she set up a fire in the hearth just to have something to do with her hands. But it was only a short task. After she was sure the fire had properly moved from kindling to the logs, she stretched herself back up and stared at the dancing flames for a bit.

She imagined her family must have been feeling terrible. Belle at least had the comfort of knowing that they were all safe and sound. Her father's enterprise had been saved, her aunts' lives must have
continued as they ever had. Nothing would have changed in the Marchlands, except the fact that Belle's room in Avonlea was now unoccupied. In the past weeks Belle had often regretted the fact that she'd been a bit cross still with her father the day she'd left. There was no certainty if it was at all possible if they could see each other again, ever.

And how awful they must have all felt, not knowing at all if Belle was alive or dead. For all she knew, her family didn't even know which country she was in! And her father must have had the most awful nightmares and dreadful suspicions about the fate of his only child.

Belle wondered if she'd ever be able to persuade Rumpelstiltskin to allow her to write home. She had made the request three times now, and had tried to be almost clever about it. She'd been so desperate as to try a childish plot involving cake, but Rumpelstiltskin remained unmoved. She'd thought to earn the letters by excelling at her work, but again, Rumpelstiltskin remained inattentive to the quality of her work.

Watching the flames, a thought occurred to Belle all of a sudden, a memory sparked in her mind. She ran out of the room as quickly as she could, her heels clacking on the stones. Belle ran down the stairs and into the cellars and to her dungeon cell, where she tore a page out of a half-full notebook. She also grabbed a short stub of a pencil and then ran back up into the fireplace room with the paper and the pencil, her heart drumming in her ears.

Belle knew for a fact that her father knew next to nothing about magic, but he'd been able to summon Rumpelstiltskin using the most common invocation of summoning there was in the myths: throw an invitation into fire and wait. There would be no point of course in writing her father an invitation to the Dark Castle, for he would have no means of receiving such a thing, but Belle realised she did know someone who could.

Scrawling hastily on the small piece of notebook paper, Belle addressed the letter to Lady Hortensia of Blackwood, and wrote her an invitation. At the bottom, she wished her most warmest, loving and safest regards. Then there was nothing else to do except with shaking hands feed the paper to the fire.

Belle watched the flames consume the letter in a matter of seconds. Her heart full of wild hope, she squeezed her hands together and prayed it wouldn't take Aunt Hortensia long to receive the message. She felt so happy with her cleverness she wanted to jump up and down, and dance, and tell herself out loud that it was going to be fine.

The colour of the flames in the fireplace changed suddenly. The warm glow of yellow and orange was replaced by cool green-blue that gave almost no light. The temperature in the room dropped as well, and then there was a darkness to the room that suggest that... Belle's breath caught in her throat.

At the same time green hands grabbed her arms tightly just above her elbows, and held her in place.

"Trying to be clever?" Rumpelstiltskin hissed just behind her. He didn't sound too pleased.

Belle swallowed before she could reply.

"I-I only want them to know I'm safe," she said with a quiet voice, hoping that her sincere explanation for grant her amnesty.

There was no instant reply. Belle felt Rumpelstiltskin's nails dig a little deeper into her arms, she felt air from an almost inaudible sigh on her neck. It smelt of the pipe smoke Belle remembered from the night she'd first met him, with a side-reek of brandy.
“You're not safe,” he said with a sneer and let go of her. “Tea,” he added and ambled away to his chair as the light and the fire in the room returned to normal. Belle hurried off into the kitchen. When she returned with a tea tray, Rumpelstiltskin was holding the pencil-written invitation in his hand and reading it with an unfathomable expression on his face.

“I never signed any contract that forbade me from putting paper to fire,” Belle said stiffly as she laid the tray on the table a little less gently than she ought to have, perhaps, but Belle felt a number of things too many to be able to put up an exterior of gentle civility: she was frightened, upset and angry.

“And you'll refrain from doing that from now on,” Rumpelstiltskin retorted crossly, crumbling the letter between his palms into a little ball that then vanished with unnatural fairy-fire.

Belle uttered a wordless sound of disdain, and she felt her lower lip quiver. She tried to fight back tears but they wouldn't go away, and she felt them well up and then slide down her cheeks. Belle turned away, wiping her tears to the cuffs of her blouse, thinking she'd run down into her room and lock the door herself this time, but Rumpelstiltskin's sharp call of her name made her stop in her tracks.

“Sit down,” he instructed her. When Belle faced him again, she saw another chair had appeared by the table. Belle did as she was told, glad that she'd only shed a few tears and that she was managing to keep her chin up despite them. She crossed her hands in her lap and stared at the nailed curtains, not wanting to see Rumpelstiltskin's face just then.

“We had a deal,” he reminded her. He was about to say something, but Belle interrupted him.

“Yes and I've kept my end of the bargain so far, haven't I? What else do you want?” she demanded him irritably.

“I want you to be a bit less troublesome,” he replied tersely.

“Or else... what?” Belle asked him, shifting her gaze from dusty old curtains that needed washing to the frowning sorcerer on her right hand side. “Flaying?” She asked, tilting her face lightly.

Rumpelstiltskin slapped his hand on the table so hard it made the tea tray rattle. “I am damned near in the mind for just that!” He declared with a voice that was a barely contained shout. While he was seething, Belle took a deep breath to try contain herself.

When she next spoke, she tried to sound gentle and civilised.

“So what do you do here in the castle when you get bored here?” She asked him casually, as if talking about the weather.

That seemed to throw him off a little. “I find a diversion, of course.” Then something in his eye or maybe it was in the curve of his lip that signalled to Belle that Rumpelstiltskin had just understood what she meant. He nodded slowly. “Ah.” He thought for a moment. “Perhaps you should just spend more time working,” he suggested.

“Doing what, dusting rooms you never walk into? Mending rugs you don't even know exist?” Belle asked, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

Rumpelstiltskin frowned. “I've hardly the time to supervise you scrubbing floors.”

Belle shook her head. “Yes, obviously because you're far too busy smoking your pipe and drinking brandy while trying to find desperate pastry chefs,” she muttered from between teeth clenched
together.

The glare she earned for that comment made goosebumps rise on Belle's skin all over. “I'm sorry,” she said with a louder, quivering voice, eyes cast down to her lap. “I'm sorry. That was very rude of me.” Belle squeezed her arms closer to herself, as if getting ready to shield herself from a blow. But none came, not even a reply.

“I miss my family. And I don't have anything to occupy my mind with,” Belle said softly.

There was still no reply. Belle was not feeling inclined to look up and interpret Rumpelstiltskin's mood from his face, so she sat still, waiting.

“I wanted you here because I thought you're interesting,” Rumpelstiltskin said, eventually. His voice was not at all enraged, which surprised Belle, “and mostly because I thought you're independent and resourceful. I expected you'd get along fine here on your own,” he added thoughtfully. Belle heard him pour tea into his cup. “I suppose you've turned out to be a little too interesting.”

Belle felt herself blushing, at being called all those things by a living legend. He thought she was interesting, independent and resourceful. A breathy “thank you” was all the reply she could muster just then.

“You like being interesting?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her.

Belle nodded, and looked up again. “Well, in my opinion, it's a lot better than being called pretty and elegant. That's the kind of compliments most women my age want to hear. I can't remember ever having heard a woman called independent and resourceful like that... as a compliment.”

“Are you sure they were compliments,” Rumpelstiltskin said, rather than asked, with a wicked smile on his lips.

Belle felt her anger and fright leaving her. She felt light and more like herself again, and she laughed at Rumpelstiltskin's dark sense of humour. The fact that he was acknowledging her presence more as a person and less as a living piece of furniture also made her feel much better about herself.

“Yes, I do believe they were,” Belle said. A thought occurred to her. “Have you had other housekeepers, before me?” She asked.

Rumpelstiltskin poured tea into another cup that Belle was certain she hadn't brought from the kitchen.

“Some,” he admitted, after considering his reply. “And that was how I found that the only thing worse than being immortal and alone in a large castle is being immortal and alone with a feeble-minded cow.” Rumpelstiltskin pushed the teacup and saucer towards Belle. “They didn't last very long.”

Belle accepted the tea with some trepidation. “What did you do to them?”

Rumpelstiltskin leaned back in his chair. “Not much,” he said cryptically, watching Belle's hands as she twirled a spoon in her teacup. Belle decided not to push the question any further. Instead she pondered other venues of her interests.

“Do you know any games?” Belle asked next. When Rumpelstiltskin returned her question with a frown and a shake of his head, Belle found his silent reply hard to believe. “Cards. Board games.”

He gave it some thought. “I must have a onyx and alabaster set of draughts in... some room,”
Rumpelstiltskin replied at length.

Belle made a face. “I don't know. I don't care so much for draughts,” she said and sipped her tea at last.

“Chess?” Rumpelstiltskin asked.

Belle shook her head and smiled. “Even worse, I am truly terrible at it. It wouldn't be very entertaining.”

“You asked for board games and you don't like them,” Rumpelstiltskin said snidely.

Belle leaned forward in her seat a little. “Those are old dull games, I meant the new ones, like the Journey Through Kingdoms. It has got beautifully painted cards with pictures of all the oldest and greatest cities and towns,” she explained. “But of course I'll play anything you have. Even though you must excuse me if it becomes a bit dull.”

Rumpelstiltskin smiled. “And what makes you think I'd join in.”

Belle cocked her head. “You don't strike so cruel as to hand me a board game and tell me to play it against myself.”

“Would that be more or less cruel than flaying you?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, and Belle found that even though it was a cruel and distasteful joke, especially so since not two weeks ago Rumpelstiltskin had put a knife to a thief's chest, Belle still found it in herself to laugh a little. She'd had very few opportunities to smile, and even a quip such as that was somewhat refreshing instead of getting to hear bland requests for dinner and tea trays.

“Only a smidgeon less,” Belle declared after she'd shocked herself a bit sniggering to a joke like that. And in the end, Rumpelstiltskin had let the man run free, Belle thought as she drank more tea.

Rumpelstiltskin pointed at the clock on the mantelpiece. “Dinner is soon. We'll play after,” he declared, and then got off his seat. Belle followed suit, and gathered both tea cups back on the tray. Rumpelstiltskin headed out of the room. “I'll be in the tower,” he said absently. Belle wondered at that, because Rumpelstiltskin usually never said where he'd go or where he was to be found.

After clearing dinner and finishing the dishes, Belle returned to Rumpelstiltskin and she was delighted to find that instead of an onyx and alabaster set of draughts, there was a completely new fresh-out-of-the-store version of the Journey Through Kingdoms on the table. Belle exclaimed her pleasure with a gleeful sound as she hurried to the table to touch all the pieces and cards. Her own version of the game that was back home in Avonlea was quite worn and battered after fifteen years. To her delight it seemed that she was looking at a new edition with new illustrations of the towns and cities.

Rumpelstiltskin was leaning back in his chair, his face hidden behind the rulebook pamphlet. “This is not very tactical,” he commented.

“Yes. That's why draughts are boring. It's all... mathematics and no imagination,” Belle replied as she sat down and started setting up the board. “There's no story in little squares and round pebbles, but you can pretend to travel all over when you're playing this game,” she said excitedly.

“But I do that every day,” said Rumpelstiltskin, sounding a bit annoyed as he revealed himself from beyond the pamphlet.
“I'll imagine for the both of us then,” Belle replied. She was so happy that she didn't even care that Rumpelstiltskin had the privilege and luxury to visit all these places at his whim.

“Did you travel much?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her as she separated cards into piles.

“Not really,” Belle replied. “I meant to, after another few years in the university, so the travel wouldn't go to waste. So I'd know something about things before seeing them.” She didn't really want to think any more about her bygone plans for her future, but on the other hand it was nice to be asked.

Belle picked herself a blue marker and gave Rumpelstiltskin a green one. “Do you want to start?” She asked. “Or do you want to read the rule book again?”

“What's to read, it's a game of blind luck and no skill,” he replied, seeming already bored with the game.

Belle slid the die towards Rumpelstiltskin and grinned. “I like it because it imitates life better than a game of chess.”

Rumpelstiltskin cast the die and started his epic journey across the kingdoms from Dimhaut. “No, chess is better for that. It's pure and plain. Life's not a story.”

Belle reached for the die and threw it on the table. “I see we're to agree to disagree.” She started from Heartlands.

Once Belle had finished touring the kingdoms and winning the race hands-down, Rumpelstiltkin requested tea and took off his imposing dragonskin coat. He was spinning by the wheel when Belle returned, looking rather small and defeated in Belle's opinion.

“You don't want to play again?” Belle asked as she set the tray down.

“That tedious waste of time?” he replied gruffly.

“I can go look for the draughts. I think I may recall where I saw them,” Belle offered, heading for the hallway. “I'll just need some light with me.” As she for the twentieth time wished that Rumpelstiltskin had the decency to get a modern oil lamp or a gas lamp, instead of having her muddle about in feeble candle light, Rumpelstiltskin stopped her in her tracks.

“No. I think that was enough games for one night,” he said.

Belle surmised that perhaps he was a sore loser. She imagined not a lot of people would have engaged in a game with him and won. So she poured his tea into his cup and walked to his side by the spinning wheel and handed the cup to him.

“I think I'll withdraw then. Good night,” Belle said, “and thank you ever so much for the game. It was so kind of you.”

Hesitating first, Belle then rested his hand very softly and very briefly on Rumpelstiltskin's shoulder before she left, as an effort to soothe his ill humour. Belle fluttered off and heard the wheel stop for a moment, as if Rumpelstiltskin was about to reply to her, but the wheel started moving again, and he was back again in his magic of gold and straw.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading so far!

I'm going to be on an Adventure next week and the week after, so I'll be unable to update A Belle Époque in the coming two weeks. The lack of updates won't mean my death or my lack of interest in this fic. I did two chapters this week just to try and remedy for my upcoming absence.

Ciao!
The next day, the day after Belle had miffed Rumpelstiltskin over a board came, started with Belle's normal routines in the castle. Rumpelstiltskin was out of sight for the most part during daylight hours. He was either out, or in his tower, Belle couldn't be sure. Belle's day was preoccupied from the start by her chores, which were all centred around the kitchen, the room of curios, the washing room downstairs, and keeping the entrance hallway tidy in case of visitors.

The best way to catch a glimpse of the outside world was when she was tidying the hallway. Belle would open the great doors wide and open on such summer days, and enjoy the view of summer, even though she wasn't allowed the enjoy the feel of it while she was dusting the room or removing specks of dirt from the floor. Sometimes she caught herself standing and watching at the distant stone wall, and at the rising treetops beyond the wall, or the mountains beyond even the trees, taking it all in.

That day she did keep the doors open as she tidied the hall, but Belle spent no time gazing wistfully at the summer day currently transpiring in the mountains. Her purpose was to be done with chores as quickly as possible so she could set herself to the task of finding an onyx and alabaster set of game-pieces from one of the fifty or so rooms full of the most odd assortment of oddities and knick knacks, and she had barely seen more than a glimpse of these rooms!

As she was planning her afternoon of investigating the castle, Belle was so intently focused on the floor, she didn't notice the stranger approaching before he was practically almost inside. Or at least the man's shadow was. He was a very young man, with a face round with youth, and the awkward movements of someone who wasn't entirely comfortable within their body, because their legs and arms had just sprouted out. The young man was wearing a uniform of some kind, but Belle couldn't recognize it, and he was carrying a leather satchel, which bore an ornate symbol, in the centre of which, Belle now realised with rapt fascination, was a horn. She thought she'd seen a similar symbol many, many times.

The boy said something in a language Belle had no understanding of.

“Do you speak Lyonese?” Belle tried tentatively. She could of course speak Lyonese since her father spoke the language very well, it was where his parents were both born and raised.

The boy said something else. He seemed very nervous indeed, shivering in his boots, and his eyes darting glances all around. His hand went inside his satchel and dug up a weather-beaten letter, which had folded over during its transport, and Belle was happy beyond words to see the letter was addressed to her, which the boy uncertainly presented her with.

She almost wanted to kiss the teenage boy, but immediately changed her mind at the idea, instead settling for a warm, brief hug. Belle would have made him stay and gone to the kitchen to fetch him a tray of tea and biscuits, but she hazarded a guess that this would have made the boy even more uncomfortable. She shook his hands briefly, before giving the letter a better look. She'd expected it to be from her father, but instead she recognized the writing belonging to Aunt Sylvia instead, which she first thought was rather strange, but then Belle recalled that Sylvia's husband knew the local language here, because he was in business with some mines in these areas. And indeed, the address had been written twice on the envelope, to clear all misunderstandings of its origins for the poor postal workers who'd had to deliver it.
Belle looked up from the letter with a beaming smile anyway, and the teenager boy seemed quite
dazzled by her. He gave her many polite bows as he retreated back along the pathway out of the
castle grounds. Belle kept watch of him, just to make sure Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't appear out of
nowhere to torment the poor boy.

Only once the boy had vanished out of sight beyond the gates, Belle looked back down at the letter
in her hands and tore it open, revealing quite a lot of letters written by different hands. Excited, she
twirled around with great energy and enthusiasm, with the intention of going to the kitchen to read
them, and ran promptly into Rumpelstiltskin who'd stood just behind her.

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” Belle said, even though Rumpelstiltskin was hardly injured.

“Eh, I shouldn't have stood so close,” he replied, his usual leer absent this time.

Belle realised instantly that was because Rumpelstiltskin had had the intention of frightening her.
That hadn't worked at all, because Belle hadn't really paid any attention to where she'd been going.
She lifted an eyebrow at him and cocked her head a bit.

“Indeed, one might speculate why a great sorcerer would hide from a postal worker behind his
maid,” Belle said, and softened her expression into a sweet smile.

Rumpelstiltskin looked aside from her, directed his gaze at the doors instead, and they closed on their
own accord. “Just making sure you're not gossiping behind my back,” he said dismissively.

“I received letters from my family. Am I allowed such things?” Belle said, clutching the letters closer
to her person at the thought of him taking such precious things away from her, but then she thought
that Rumpelstiltskin seemed rather distracted, as if he wasn't listening to her at all, paying attention to
something that she wasn't able to hear or see at all.

“Is something the matter?” Belle asked, as a dark scowl formed on his face, and the room became
just a bit darker.

“That idiot boy is telling some writer all about you. He read your name on the letter, and the sender's
name.”

Belle was still clutching her letters. She stared at Rumpelstiltskin with horror, imagining the sweet
young boy in the clutches of an angry sorcerer who was very averse to journalism.

“Well,” Belle said hesitantly, “the letter would have already been seen by dozens of people on its
way here?” She bit her lower lip a little before venturing to ask the next question. “Would you
silence every single one of them just to make sure they don't talk about it to a writer?”

Rumpelstiltskin shot a brief glance at her, frowning, as if the question was somehow wrong. He
shook his head next. “The writers are like a cloud of mosquitoes around the castle. It's... interfering
with my work.” The unnatural darkness in the room gradually swept away, until there was nothing
left except the ordinary summer day's light, or what little of it reached the hall through the coloured
window glasses.

Belle wanted to ask what the work was about, since he'd never mentioned it to her before, but she
also wanted to go to the kitchen and read all the letters. So she did a small curtsey in the gesture of
excusing herself and was almost galloping off, but Rumpelstiltskin's voice halted him.

“Why is there a rag and a water bucket in the hallway?” He asked.

Belle bit her lip again. Dang. She had forgotten all about the cleaning.
Wishing yet again that her apron had pockets, for that would have been extremely useful, Belle opened the top three buttons of her blouse that reached her well up to her neck, and stuck the letters down the front of her shirt instead. She knew she looked incredibly ridiculous, but she wasn't about to let them leave her person. She was well aware of the incredulous look Rumpelstiltskin was giving her, but Belle returned to the dust rags, the duster and the wash bucket with her head held high, her poise full of dignity even as she picked up all the scattered cleaning things.

“May I please be excused?” Belle lifted her chin up a bit. “I've some reading to do.”

Rumpelstiltskin gave her the oddest look, and waved her off. He took to the staircase himself.

After that, the master of the castle wasn't to be seen for hours, and Belle took her time reading the letters that had finally reached her. Their contents were all unsurprising, filled with her family's miserable doubts and apprehensions regarding her current state and whereabouts.

Belle read each letter at least three times, and the one from her father as many as six, for she was so hungry for kind and meaningful words from other people. She was glad that her father had been able to take on servants, replacing the ones he'd let go earlier in the year. Aunt Sylvia was looking after Maurice and making sure the new staff was respectable, and for this Belle felt instantly grateful.

Aunt Sylvia's letter was a rather frank and straightforward guide on defending her maidenly honour, which made Belle laugh out loud the first time she read it, but at last, Aunt Hortensia's letter was the shortest, and rather nonsensical retelling Belle knew very well, of a ghost story of a girl visiting her aunt in the countryside, where she was spirited away on an adventure by a ghost, which the girl proceeded to redeem. Belle knew the story very well, because Aunt Hortensia had told it to her frequently on late hours of stormy nights when Belle had been a little girl. But Aunt Hortensia had only written the first part of it down, up until the girl finds a strange door in her room in the middle of the night, which hadn't been there before.

The ink-lines on the paper faltered and smeared, and Belle frowned at that. Aunt Hortensia always wrote with an impeccably crisp, elegant hand. And the Belle wasn't sure what to make of the real meaning of the fairy-tale, but a sense of comfort that had always washed over her at the end of the story had brought some echo of itself along with Aunt Hortensia's letter.

The hours of the brightest afternoon light were creeping away by the time Belle finished reading, and she became aware that there was a moderately noisy commotion going on in the room of curios. It sounded like stone slabs were being moved across the floor or the walls, perhaps? Belle hid her letters inside a kettle before she crept up the staircase to see what this strange disturbance was about.

When Belle got into the room and saw the recent, and rather glaring, and obvious change to the room that had taken place, she felt goosebumps all over her skin.

There was a new door in the room, where there had been a very dusty old tapestry before.

Where there was magic involved, Belle wasn't quite sure if she believed in chances. She had just reminisced about a fairy tale house with a magically appearing door, and now such a one had appeared. Was this Aunt Hortensia's doing?

Because it was between the windows, all logic demanded the door should lead out into the garden and a late summer afternoon. Belle approached the door cautiously, not certain of what to do. In the ghost tale, the door had led the heroine of the story to a dark and strange journey away from safety-

Oh, she thought. She knew exactly what to do.
Belle opened the door, very softly at first. There was no garden or daylight beyond, instead there was a short tunnel, at the end of which lay another door. Belle stood there, at the threshold, wondering if she should drag something to keep the first door open in case it got locked once she entered, when her intentions and plans were laid to rest by the door at the other end opening on its own and Rumpelstiltskin coming out through it.

“I was just about to come look for you. We're moving,” he said, in his stranger, more high-pitched voice, which he used when to Belle it seemed he was particularly excited or murderous.

“Moving?” Belle asked.

Rumpelstiltskin beckoned her closer. “I need to get away from the mosquitoes for a few months. Not everyone that need to see me soon want to be interrogated by the swarms of busybodies and gossips that have taken over Dinhaut's mountains.” He turned away and disappeared through the doorway that definitely didn't lead out into the garden. Belle followed in his footsteps, the fear over the door being locked behind her now forgotten.

Rumpelstiltskin was waiting for her impatiently on top of a narrow staircase that was lit with only light from small narrow windows a little above. Instead of centuries old stonework, the staircase was made entirely of wood. The stairs themselves had been painted with a bluish grey, and the simple panel work that ran, creating vertical lines on the walls around them, was cream white.

“Come along now,” Rumpelstiltskin commanded her, “don't dawdle and stop to look at things and doorways, these corridors can be a bit of a maze.”

Belle followed Rumpelstiltskin down the narrow staircase. There passed levels with closed doors, but they ignored all that. The floors weren't entirely level either, for half of the house was built half a floor lower or higher than the other. Everything door and every flight of stairs looked identical to Belle's eyes. Then they arrived at the level and a door Rumpelstiltskin had sought after, and were transported from a rather dull servants passage to a very grandly furnished foyer, with oriental carpets.

There was an exotic potted plant in the room, in a very large ornate vase. Belle recalled having seen the kind in grand houses of Avonlea. With large arching branches and long slender leaves, they made very sculptural interior decoration for sure, but someone had forgotten to water this specimen.

“Oh, poor thing. I should go find the water pump-” Belle said, having analysed the situation.

“Your sympathy for house plants can wait until after our tour is concluded,” Rumpelstiltskin cut her short.

A wide doorframe led them to a beautiful large room. Belle thought it had been rather tailored for Rumpelstiltskin's tastes, with the fireplace, the size of it as big if not slightly larger than the room of curios in the castle. The entire room was panelled with some dark wood though, and the ceiling vaulted slightly, like a dome, with a large chandelier hanging up in the middle. The brass metal shapes curved elegantly, not in the layered and overwrought styles of past centuries, but with the nodding grace of the current styles and shapes that were the hallmark of every piece of illustration, architecture and design made in the past ten years. Despite the ornate windows and their glass work that undoubtedly matched that of the latest fashions in the great middle kingdoms, the room still felt like a dark cave of some sort. But a very luxurious cave no doubt, and much warmer too than the cold castle had ever been.

There were furnishings already in place all around the room, with new textiles that wouldn't need Belle's very basic and amateurish skills in needlework and mending.
Belle caught a glimpse of the outside, and it seemed they were far removed from the mountains again. She was craning her head to see more when Rumpelstiltskin reminded her that she was not to dawdle. Belle hurried after him.

They entered a dining room next, a beautiful and airy room bathed in light coming from two sides of the house, and the walls were painted with stylised frescoes of shapes she wasn't sure whether they were climbing vines surrounding ochre blossoms, or green dragons guarding their treasures of gold. Belle was excited when she saw what was undoubtedly a kitchen garden beyond one of the windows.

“Still more to see,” Rumpelstiltskin reminded her, and Belle followed, more eager by the minute. She had only seen three rooms, and already she thought the house was amazing.

The kitchen was next. Belle sighed in relief at seeing it, for it was better equipped than the one in her father's house in Avonlea, and much, much more suitable for making tea for two than an enormous castle cook house. There was a door that led into the kitchen garden.

They marched through the kitchen and through yet another door, which led them to the narrow staircase they had climbed before already. Rumpelstiltskin took them first downstairs, where there was the wine cellar and a laundry room, and another door leading out of the house. Rumpelstiltskin opened the door and beckoned Belle to walk through it, and she did.

To her great pleasure, Belle felt sun on her skin. She closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy the sensation of real wind on her skin, and to hear birds in the trees surrounding the house. They were rather familiar birds too, unlike the strange creatures of Dimhaut.

Some memory surfaced, about an architect and a house, a pile of gold and Rumpelstiltskin... and Belle realised she was not more than four hours' journey away from Avonlea and her home. “Oh! We're in Marchlands!” She exclaimed, quite excited by the realization.

“Well, I acquired this place a while ago. Seemed a waste to let it rot,” Rumpelstiltskin said. He didn't seem too pleased at Belle's surprised expressions of joy. “More to see.”

They climbed the stairs up and up again. Rumpelstiltskin pushed open a few doors, but they were all to empty rooms. “You can have your pick of any rooms in the house, by the way,” he said. “I didn't have the presence of mind to request a dungeon for this house.”

Belle very much doubted that was the truth of the matter, and she stayed silent. She decided not to think about the room just yet, because there seemed still quite a few places to see.

From the servants' staircase they slipped into what Belle thought one might call a morning room. It was done in very pale colours. The room extended itself onto the balcony with sliding glass doors, which Belle found the height of ingenuity in combining a little engineering with house planning. “Very clever,” she thought, sliding one door back to its place. “How exactly did you meet the man who designed this house?”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “He was in an insane asylum and invited me over. I wasn't otherwise engaged at the time, so I decided to pay a visit.”

“And you got him to make you a house.”

“No,” Rumpelstiltskin's fingers animated a little as he explained the right of it, “he wanted me to make him the house so he could see if he liked how it ended up. I just took the house as payment.”

“And the gold?” Belle asked.
“He wanted that so he could try building a house of it next.”

Belle laughed. The financial world was all in uproar over economy and inflation, while all that threatening gold had been put towards a building a house. Literally so.

“There's my bedroom through here, but we can leave that out of our tour,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

There was a staircase on one side of the room that led back downstairs into the cavernous great hall.

“It looks like it needs just your spinning wheel and you're ready to move in,” Belle said as she descended the staircase behind Rumpelstiltskin.

“What it needs is more curtains. Damn architect was far too fond of windows if you ask me,” Rumpelstiltskin replied, but Belle heard he wasn't entirely as gruff as he tried to sound. He was excited as well, Belle thought.

They returned to the foyer and entered the other side of the house. Rumpelstiltskin put his hands on dark double doors with dramatic flourishes. “And here we have...” he declared, and pushed the doors open.

A library. A well-stacked, beautiful large room of a library, full to the brim with books.

Rumpelstiltskin allowed Belle to enter the room first.

Belle felt her jaw fall. She hadn't truly expected this at all.

“Is this to be... your... library? I wasn't aware you read.” Belle hadn't seen a room with non-magical, actually readable books, and the tower room in the castle where Rumpelstiltskin worked his magic was not such a room.

“No. I thought, maybe you'd find an eternity washing my dishes a bit more bearable if you had something to read,” Rumpelstiltskin explained somewhere behind Belle, but Belle wasn't looking at him, and now not really listening to him at all, really. She was reading the spines of the books, terrified that she might find the shelves full of antiquated gothic romance novels, but found herself not disappointed. There was philosophy, astronomy, algebra, geography, biology, art history, history, all neatly organised according to each discipline, and the list went on. There were classic novels as well as some more newer publications.

She noticed that the room was furnished with both a desk as well as a reading corner by a fireplace, and then she made an abstract noise of shrill delight as she saw what was on the desk by the window. A newspaper.

“At least you're easy to please,” Rumpelstiltskin said with a sardonic sneer.

Instead of leaping at the newspaper, Belle twirled about and gave Rumpelstiltskin another hug. “Thank you!”

Belle let him go soon, because she sensed Rumpelstiltskin felt extremely awkward about being touched.

Rumpelstiltskin stared at her for a little longer, he seemed a bit struck and at a loss for words, before he recalled where they were headed next.

“There's one more place to go to,” he said. “And we'll need to go through the rose garden.” He turned around and led them on. Belle followed close to him, excited.
They left the house through the front door and came down the few stone steps to the courtyard. Belle took a look around them, and saw the house was situated as if it were a miniature version of the castle in Dimhaut. It was perched on top of a hill on a peninsula surrounded by a lake. There may have been no mountain landscape surrounding them, but the house itself was as if it lay on a small mountaintop. The view was astounding, even through the evergreen forests below blocking most of the vistas towards the lake.

The rose garden was right next to the library, and a stone paved path led through it to a small white house at the end of the little rose avenue.

Rumpelstiltskin handed Belle a key and set her down the path to the white house on her own. Belle gave him a questioning look, but he was already returning to the house and seemed unconcerned with her for a change.

Belle looked at the key, and at the white house, it was like a little cottage really, and walked down the path to see what lay inside.

It was nothing truly spectacular, in a sense that it was not a magical house that might have been bigger on the inside than it was on the outside. It was merely a pleasantly and elegantly furnished cottage with a fireplace in the front room and a masonry heater in the back room. The back room was a bedroom, with the windows giving a lovely view towards the lake. There were only the sparsest of furnishings in the room, including a bed, a vanity, a wardrobe, and a rug right next to the bed that would keep toes warm on cool winter mornings, Belle suspected.

Belle returned to the front room, feeling a bit dazed. She looked around again, and thought, it wasn't a bad room. It wasn't the same as being set free to go about her own business and to be allowed to visit her family, and travel abroad, but it was a house of her own. Belle's Cottage, she thought, squeezing the key in her hand.

“This will do,” she said, whispering to herself, and wondered how and when she might haul all her things from the Castle dungeons down the narrow staircase. But that would probably have to wait until later, since now that they were moving house, there were probably significantly more bigger issues to consider than her trunk and her chest of clothes.

With light steps, Belle practically ran up the rose avenue back to the house, eager to get another glimpse of the library, pocket the newspaper, and find a new opportunity to thank Rumpelstiltskin.

Chapter End Notes

I thought it’d be shorter, and I thought it’d be longer.

I am sad for the lack of new hats in this chapter, except I know the postal worker must have had some fancy postal worker uniform hat, but I don't have a proper word to describe it. If I come up with it at some point, I shall return to retroactively put it in.
When Rumpelstiltskin decided to move house (they would stay at least for a year, Belle was told),
the downsizing from a hundred and twenty rooms to mere twenty rooms was its own dilemma. To
Belle's understanding, everything the both of them needed for their daily lives could easily be put
into three rooms, and that was including the clutter in the tower, but that was not quite enough for
Rumpelstiltskin, who had Belle relocate the entire wine cellar from the castle to the villa amongst
other things.

Belle also made the effort to pick and choose a few items from the clutters of the Dark Castle to bring
to the sparkling new house. Furnished though the place may have been, it included only the
essentials for the most part, and Belle tried to pad the rooms a little with whatever odds and ends she
could find, saving a few creature comforts for her cottage as well.

The rest Belle had enjoyed in her new bed had been short during the night first night in, because
she'd been quite giddy with excitement, and so she had gotten up and working as soon as the sun
was up, ready to spend another whole day going up and down the narrow staircase in the back of the
house. The sooner the move was over and done with, the better. Although the Dark Castle had been
exciting and interesting to explore for the first week, Belle didn't feel too sad about leaving it behind,
because it had been a chilly, melancholy sort of place. And besides, here Belle had wonderful
accommodations, and she was allowed outside, as far as the wall and the gate.

One of the things she moved to the new spacious villa on their first morning there was a light-
weighted chest, inside which she found very plain, very old clothes. Belle had only peeked inside to
get a clue as to where Rumpelstiltskin wanted the chest, and she took out a plain linen shirt and held
it up. It was quite small, and would have fitted an adolescent.

“I'll take that,” Rumpelstiltskin said, appearing practically out of nowhere, taking the chest from her.
Belle sensed she'd breeched some sort of personal space unknowingly. Under Rumpelstiltskin's
scrutinizing stare, Belle folded the shirt back the way it had been, and put it back in the chest.
Rumpelstiltskin closed the lid.

“I am having a visitor at noon. You'll keep out of sight,” Rumpelstiltskin told her, and took off as
promptly as he'd arrived.

Belle hiding from guests, and Rumpelstiltskin popping out of nowhere, and knick-knacks with no
rhyme or reason. There was nothing new to any of it, Belle thought, and got on with her work. Later
in the day, this work took her to the basement of the house, for the purpose of organizing the wine
cellar and the cool storage. The wines she'd stacked into the shelves were all old things from the
Dark Castle which she'd seen before, some of them old enough to be vinegar, she was sure, but there
were some new things in the storage Belle was fairly certain were recent acquisitions. Such as the
many jars of strawberry jam.

Belle was gazing at the rows of jars, lost in thoughts about pancakes and porridges and jam, when
there was suddenly a very loud crash in the wine cellar that caught all her attention. Worried that
she'd been careless with the bottles earlier when she had been stacking them, Belle ran, fearing she'd ended up destroying something precious with her neglect.

When she saw small dark shadows with tails scurry across the floor in the darkness of the wine cellar, Belle shrieked in her surprise, for this was entirely unexpected. The house was barely six months old, and had never been occupied, but it seemed it had drawn rats! Rather large ones too, Belle observed with barely contained horror. She usually wasn't skittish, but she felt rather unsafe in a dark cellar in the presence of vermin that seemed as big as cats. She'd never even seen rats before, but she'd heard tales of how vicious they were, biting people and spreading disease. Aunt Hortensia's neat household wouldn't have tolerated rats, and that household was the staple of cleanliness and comfort that Belle had as a model example in her daily tasks.

The rats were hiding, and Belle realized she was blocking the only exit out of the wine cellar. She stood in the doorway, uncertain of what she should do. Perhaps she should fetch a broom, she thought, and chase the creatures out through the cellar door into the pine forest ridge. The rats seemed too unimportant to her to bother the master of the house with, especially since he was expecting company at the very hour, so in all likelihood it was better she try deal with the problem on her own. And scared though she was of being bitten, she also didn't want to injure any poor hungry creature that had made the poor choice of judgement in entering the worst possible house.

After closing the door of the wine cellar, afraid the rats might run off to other parts of the house while she was gone, Belle ran up the narrow staircase, all the way up to the top, where the door to the Dark Castle was, a door that normally should have sent her right down off the side of the house, except it didn't. There was a broom in the kitchen, and so armed with that she made the way back from castle to house, down the winding, winding staircase, and she was quite out of breath, sweating and a little dizzy by the time she got back to the wine cellar door.

She had her hand on the door and was mentally preparing herself to face the horrors within, when the ever so annoyingly suddenly appearing master of the house made himself present. His shadow covered the little light coming from the open door at the end of the corridor.

“What are you doing?” He demanded simply, without conjuring clever word-play or smart remarks on Belle's upheaved state.

“There are rats in the wine cellar, and one of them broke a bottle,” Belle said, barely glancing back at him. “I'm going to show them the way out. I've everything under control.”

He snorted, and didn't reply to Belle. He just stood there, unmoving. Belle wondered shouldn't he have been upstairs. “What if your guest arrives?” She asked, wondering if she was now talking with him just to play for a little more time so she wouldn't have to open the cellar door just yet.

“She'll keep.”

Belle wondered at that for a second. She. What sort of a woman would call on Rumpelstiltskin?

Now she had to choose to either get on with it, or show him she was too afraid to open the door, Belle supposed. And she much rather be brave than skittish then, she decided, imagining she was on an adventure in the thick wild jungles beyond Hindia, opening the door of a long-forgotten tomb where they kept lacquered corpses of their philosophers, apparently the philosophers died sitting with their legs crossed and were swiftly covered in resin, resulting in their bodies' afterlife in statues, how dreadful and marvellously imaginative that practice was, Belle thought. She opened the door as she held her breath and squeezed the broom in her hand.

“And do you require light?” Asked Rumpelstiltskin.
“Yes, please,” Belle replied, trying to force her voice not to quiver.

The lamp hanging from the ceiling lit itself, illuminating the wine cellar. On the floor there were two small and broken wine bottles lying in a small pool of golden liquid. When Rumpelstiltskin saw which bottles had been broken, he walked past Belle impatiently, with the same look of complete fury Belle had seen when he'd shouted at him for helping the thief in the Dark Castle some weeks earlier.

The master's anger was of a less vocal kind now, and not directed at Belle. His eyes scanned the darkest corners of the room, promising murder, and Belle prayed that the rats' ends would be swift and merciful at least. Belle kept pacing right beside Rumpelstiltskin, clutching her broom like a shield, in case one of the large rats came at her with teeth and claw.

Something caught Rumpelstiltskin's attention beneath the wine racks at the end of the cellar, and he made a flicking gesture with his hand. Then it was as if he was pulling an invisible cord, fishing the perpetrator of the wine cellar tragedy in pantomime out from underneath the racks. The first to come was the tail and its tufty end, but the rest that dragged out into the light was no ordinary rat at all – it was a musktroll, clutching a bottle of brandy. The cork had been popped open and there was still some liquid left.

The musktroll was hugging the bottle for his very life, like Belle was attached to her broom.

“What... is that,” Rumpelstiltskin said, and Belle found herself as if snapping to a state of awakedness and out of fear. She laughed giddily, relieved now that her terror of being bitten was over.

“A Marshlands troll,” Belle explained, and set her broom leaning against the wall. She was just about to lean down to help the small troll up to his feet, but Rumpelstiltskin caught her by her arm.

“It's another thief, and this one is going to die,” he said with cold, decisive anger.

“Shit, bugger, cock, trout,” said the musktroll, letting out a hiccup at the end of the short litany, and both Rumpelstiltskin and Belle shot him short and very confused looks. The creature made a drastic effort to pour more brandy down his throat.

“No, you're not going to kill that poor drunken troll,” Belle said decisively. “It's not right.”

“Neither is destroying two bottles of seventy year old tokaj!” Rumpelstiltskin shouted at her, or the troll, Belle wasn't sure. “And you will leave the corpse on the back door step so everyone here knows how we feel about intruders,” he continued, adding the cruelly merry sing-song tilt to his words.

Belle threw himself on the floor, away from Rumpelstiltskin's grasp, and pulled the small troll into her arms as she turned her back to Rumpelstiltskin. “No! That's cruel and terrible! Its life means nothing to you, I can try and save what's left of the wine in the bottles, I'll sieve the glass shards away, and I'll explain to him that we don't like uninvited guests. You must understand, they don't have the same social rules as humans, it's perfectly normal for musktrolls to visit each other and help themselves to their pantries! He didn't know! You're very clever, surely you must understand this!” Belle stared over her shoulder at Rumpelstiltskin, who started to look suddenly indecisive.

“Rumpelstiltskin, please show him some kindness?” Belle asked. Her heart beat loudly in her ears.

Then a distant silver bell rang upstairs, and that caught Rumpelstiltskin's attention. “Clean this mess. The next time I see one of those creatures, I'll make a rug out of it for your cottage,” he said, and left.
Belle sat on the cold floor a little while longer, cradling the drunken little troll in her arms, catching her breath again. She was shivering, but not because of the cold.

The troll cursed at her, and repeated “trout, trout, trout.” Belle wondered where the creature had picked up human words, for he only knew four of them. She wished she knew troll words, but she didn't have a tail to intonate the words properly with, anyway.

“Let's see you out,” Belle said, when she could muster her thoughts together. She pried the brandy bottle from the troll's hands and put it aside. The cork, she presumed, was somewhere underneath the racks and shelves. She made a mental note to come find it later, when she'd return to see what of the tokaj was left and salvageable.

The troll was about as heavy as a large cat, and Belle managed to carry him out of the house, where he returned the creature back on its feet to the ground. “I need to visit your home,” Belle told it, and hoped the troll would have the good sense to head back to safety next. Perhaps some of his friends or relatives might know how to speak.

The troll Belle had rescued took into a wobbly, slightly detouring run down the hill, and Belle followed it, until the creature suddenly disappeared under a formation of rocks, where tall ferns grew. Belle pushed the ferns aside and saw a tunnel full of darkness.

The troll tunnel was not far away at all. In fact it was inside the very hill the new house had been built on, and so Belle felt like she was the real intruder when she was making her way inside the hill in pitch black, in a narrow tunnel on all her fours, occasional tree root brushing her face and hair, her hands and knees landing onto strange spongy substances sometimes that she prayed were only mushrooms.

Eventually, at long last, there was a faint light, or at least the illusion of it, ahead of her. The cave inside the hill was illuminated by green-glowing strands that hung from its tall ceiling. Belle was so caught up staring at it, she didn't notice she was attracting quite the crowd around her, not until there were a dozen pair of eyes surrounding her and staring up at her with keen curiosity.

“Hello.” She offered. “Does anyone understand me?”

There was a chorus of expletive words around her, and Belle sighed, once again wondering just how had these trolls come buy the worst possible words available.

“Tea?” One troll said, with a wavering, shy voice, underneath the noise of shits and cocks. Belle smiled instantly at the troll, glad that the venture underneath the hill might have not been for nothing after all.

When Belle returned to the house much later, she looked a frightful mess, with wet mushroom stains all over her clothes, slime over her hands and face, and twigs and dried roots clinging to her hair. It was late afternoon of the first day of moving, and she felt exhausted as she entered the house, wondering how she'd manage to get through the evening with how disgusting and weary she felt. Out of habit, Belle had the tendency to relax and fall asleep soon after washing and tidying herself, so she hesitated before she decided to nip back to the Dark Castle and go give herself a washing up there with cold water.

Chilled, and looking only slightly less haggard, she returned back to the Dark Villa and its wine cellar, which was in the same state it had been as she'd left it. She did her best to save what she could of the wine that had seemed so precious to Rumpelstiltskin, but there was not a lot she could do.
Only perhaps two glasses worth of the golden liquid was left in the remains of the bottles and not smeared on the stone floor.

Belle was only vaguely aware that tokaj was from a kingdom that hailed from south-east of Heartland, and that it was a rare and precious commodity. She licked her fingers after she’d collected the salvaged wine along with the broken glass surrounding it onto a soup plate, and didn't find the taste at all unpleasant. It was very sweet. Then again, that was not so surprising, for Rumpelstiltskin did have quite the tooth for it. Belle wouldn't have minded a proper sip, but that would have been a tremendous crime, what with there being so little of the stuff left.

Done with the mess in the wine cellar, some internal clock of intuition told Belle that it was time to eat dinner. She found all the dinner waiting for her in the new kitchen, a fact which made her feel that they had now officially moved house. Home was where dinner magically appeared onto the table from a five star hotel in Arbonne, Belle thought, and imagined if she should embroider the phrase and hang it on the kitchen wall, and grinned at her fancies.

She wasn't sure if Rumpelstiltskin would approve of time spent in such a frivolous activity, and she was fairly sure herself her spare moments were far better used in the library, but the thought still amused her, and she needed to think amusing things as much as possible now, because last she'd seen Rumpelstiltskin she’d been almost certain he would strike her for stepping between the troll and him. He hadn't though, but he had raised his voice, and spoken of troll rugs.

Belle opened the door to the dining area only narrowly at first, in fear that the guest might still be present in the house, and she'd always been strictly instructed to make herself as good as invisible when there were guests. But there was no voice of conversation, only the monotonous sweeping sound of the spinning wheel going round and round in the next room over, so Belle felt confident enough to bring dinner out to Rumpelstiltskin.

“I could save some wine, would you like me to pour it for you for dessert?” Belle asked him.

As sometimes was his habit, Rumpelstiltskin looked as if he was jumping to the present conversation with her from some memory, or some deep thought that had preoccupied him. That always made Belle feel like she was a little invisible, which she supposed was good. She didn't draw his ire, or any of the kind of unwanted attention that Aunt Sylvia had warned Belle of in her letters – oh she should fetch the letters from their hiding place in the old kitchen.

“You look ghastly. And yes. That'll be all,” he said distantly, dismissing her with his disinterest, and Belle retreated into the kitchen to eat alone.

Belle didn't particularly like feeling as though she were partially invisible or like a piece of furniture. She much preferred his attention to his inattention, because even on the sourest of days, even being shouted at made Belle feel less lonely, and she thought it a little sad that sometimes she felt even more alone in his service when he was with his presence, than without it. He was so withdrawn most times. Belle thought also that she'd usually been prone to seeking out solitude in her old life, but here as it was put upon her not of her own choice, solitude felt stifling. Was she desiring his company only because it was better than none? Or perhaps it was his appearance of loneliness, Belle pondered, that made her echo the sentiment in her?

Belle had often wanted to ask him if he'd brought her there really just to keep him company, but the question had felt impertinent and too personal. And delighted as Belle was that she felt she'd saved the lives of two thieves in the course of the summer when she'd tempered Rumpelstiltskin's rage, she wasn't sure if it was the most sensible thing to do to extend her hand in friendship to such a violent tempered sorcerer.
And he had such a scathing tongue, Belle reminded himself. She instantly recalled also how she actually, not so secretly, often found herself amused by his clever tongue, as terrible as it was. Wit was fun, she thought. She didn't know of any other person who spoke so freely and so wholly without censorship. Then again, who did an immortal sorcerer see eye to eye with? Queens and emperors were mere mortal flies to him, and served as well as targets of his ire as the postman.

The rest of Belle's dinner time was spent reflecting the multitudes of tasks left to her before nightfall. She knew she was in need of another scrubbing. Dishes would require her attention. There was laundry to do, so the slimy mushroom stains wouldn't keep to her clothes from earlier in the day. Listing the chores, Belle poured half of the tokaj from the soup bowl into a wine glass – sparkly new ones that had come along with the house – and headed back to the dining area rather absent-mindedly, her chores clouding her thoughts, so she was rather startled to be spoken to.

“You dealt with the trolls?” Rumpelstiltskin asked. “Did that involve swimming in mushrooms?”

Belle nodded twice in succession. “They live underneath the hill, and they won't be coming here uninvited anymore.”

Rumpelstiltskin rose from his seat and took the wine glass from her. “Good. Well done. Was there any wine left?”

“Yes, a little.”

“Pour yourself that and join me. One shouldn't drink tokaj alone, it's a drink for celebrating.”

Belle had no reply to that, except the involuntary rise of her eyebrows as she spun around and went back to get another glass of wine, and Rumpelstiltskin followed her. He looked around at the kitchen, his eyes taking in the small disarray from their used plates, knives and forks, tumblers and Belle's tea mug and the coffee cups and settees that had appeared there at some point during the afternoon along with a coffee pot.

“Are we drinking here in the kitchen?” Belle asked.

“And does my housekeeper have a preference to where she'd like to drink priceless tokaj?”

Rumpelstiltskin asked, with a cool sneer lacing the edge of his voice.

Belle thought. “How about the balcony of your morning room? It had a fine view over the lake.”

Rumpelstiltskin acquiesced, he seemed to not care so much, and so they climbed upstairs with wine glasses in their hands. Belle felt like her legs would give up soon, and she felt completely unfit to drink fine wine while still feeling squished wet mushrooms on some parts of her skin, but he'd asked for her company particularly, and she wanted to taste the wine very much.

“You're not trying to get me drunk are you?” Belle asked nervously, as she sat on the bench set in the middle of the balcony. The sun was hanging low, and the sky was turning orange and red.

“Not to worry. You won't have to resort to the kind of violence your dear aunt recommends you to apply in her letter.” He gave her a small bow of his head.

Belle frowned. “You read my letters, how terrible of you.”

“Hortensia might have sent all manners of curses in hers,” he reminded her. “I was simply being cautious.”

“Aunt Sylvia certainly did send all manners of curses directed at you,” Belle admitted, “although
they were all entirely unmagical in their nature." She stared at her glass, slightly afraid to be the first to taste. "Were you saving this for a special occasion?" She asked next.

"Hmm?"

"The wine. You said they're for celebration. What would give you cause to celebrate?" Belle asked. He only looked at her from the corner of his eye for a moment before replying. "When my work is finished."

Belle nodded solemnly. "I suppose now it'll have to be its own reward."

"Any suggestions for a cause to celebrate?" He asked her.

Belle's solemnity broke into a slow, shy smile. "Can we celebrate the peace between the house on the hill and the den under the hill?"

He sighed. "As good as any reason."

They raised their glasses to peace, and Belle sipped her wine. It tasted marvellous, much better than the half a drop she'd licked off her fingers. It was a pity there was only the two glasses left of it.

"Did you deal for the wine?" Belle asked, after the first taste. She wanted to savour the flavour a little longer, and conversation would draw the evening longer.

"In a way. It was a gift for a favour. I rarely do favours, but that one I was... very obliged to do."

"Who was the wine from?" Belle asked.

Rumpelstiltskin smiled, if only very briefly. "A very amusing woman."

Belle hazarded a guess as to why she was so very amusing, but didn't share her speculations with him.

"And how did you find summer?" He asked her in turn. "Without your friends and family?"

Belle sipped a bit more of the wine before her answer. "I miss them tremendously, of course. But I fair's fair, you saved my father's business. It would have been awful for him to start again from nothing at his age."

"I was under the impression you were engaged to the young man who wanted to shoot me in your aunt's foyer, even though he threw your hat on the roof of the pavilion," Rumpelstiltskin said next. "I meant to ask you about that earlier."

Belle laughed a little, mostly because the notion of her being engaged to Gaston was so absurd. "And no doubt you read that Aunt Hortensia turned him back soon after we left. No, we weren't engaged. Aunt Sylvia would have liked that very much though. And he was there only because his mother made him visit us." Belle also thought of how the only interest he'd expressed with her had been the touching of her bare ankle in the rowboat, when they'd been alone on the lake. The thought made her stomach turn a little.

"You must realize you'll never become engaged, if you're to stay here for ever," Rumpelstiltskin said, and Belle wondered at how gentle he sounded.

Belle hesitated in her reply, but decided to go with full honesty. "I'm actually come to terms with the idea. When I joined the suffragettes and then when I went to the university, plenty of people told me
I'd never get married. Men don't want political, or academic wives, apparently. I suppose I'm just not romantic enough either, to care.”

“Suffragettes?” He asked.

“Oh yes, I was sixteen when I joined. The vote passed next year. I was even jailed a few times. I guess the first week in your castle would have felt a lot worse if I didn't already have some experience of dungeons,” Belle said, with some forced mirth, but she found that the wine had a way of plying

“Why would you be locked up voluntarily?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her.

Belle shrugged. “Back then, I think I just wanted to be brave. Make a change, you know. I've never wanted that life, where I marry as soon as I can, give birth to as many children as possible, and spend my afternoons hosting tea parties and embroidering cushions. Some women want that, I suppose. But I never did. I guess it's because my father brought me up on his own.”

“I'll try remember not to ask you to embroider any cushions,” said Rumpelstiltskin with a wry smile.

“Actually I was just thinking about doing some embroidering earlier today, I've been so depraved of diversions,” Belle mused, and sipped the wine. “This is really good.”

“I thought the books might keep your mind engaged?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her.

“Oh, of course. I'll need to just get all the washing up and the laundry done first, and wash the slime off, and get my feet up. Then I'll have a moment to read.” Belle smiled as she sighed. “I'm afraid the wine is making me feel a bit drowsy.”

“If you need a bath, there's a bath tub with water taps not two rooms away,” Rumpelstiltskin told her. “If you want to use it, please do. I'll make myself scarce by my spinning wheel for as long as you like.”

Belle blinked in confusion. “I'm not sure I really should. I might fall asleep in there. I think a quick shower underneath a bucket of cold water will do, so I'll remember to carry myself to my new bed.”

Rumpelstiltskin nodded. “As you wish.” He'd already finished his wine. Belle drank the last of her own.

“Good night, Rumpelstiltskin,” she wished him, but a yawn caught her halfway through the phrase, for which she felt extremely embarrassed, and was too late to catch it into her palm.

“And I suppose I might be so lenient as to deal with the kitchen while you launder your disgustingly slimy clothes. I'd rather not see you fall asleep in the sinks, far less so than in bath tubs. Hmm?” He took the wine glass from her.

Belle nodded. “Very gracious of you. Thank you.” She imagined the white sleeves of his shirt rolled up and him, with all his strangeness and green skin, standing in the kitchen downstairs doing something so ordinary as washing the dishes, and the thought filled Belle with much mirth made all the more powerful by the wine she'd drunk.

“Why are you grinning, madam?”

Belle shook her head. “It's nothing. I'm just so glad, that you're not the kind of person I'd thought you were.” She got up from the bench and bobbed him a curtsey. He took the staircase of the morning room down to the room of curios, while Belle felt her to the Dark Castle through the back-alley
corridors of the house. All her things were still in the dungeon, and although she'd very much so planned to sleep the night in her new cottage, she thought she simply didn't have the energy to carry herself all the way there, not to mention the travel trunk and the chest of clothes.

After her laundering and second washing up, Belle went to her dungeon room and was astonished to find it empty, which meant now that she simply had to return to the wooden house at the other end of the magic corridor, descend the winding stairway down, cross the rose garden in the dark of the night, and find her nightgown somewhere there.

But she managed all that, and even with her long hair all wet from having been washed, and with the strangeness of the new room in the unfamiliar cottage with its unfamiliar shadows and smells, Belle felt wonderfully cosy, clean and ready to fall asleep the instant her head touched the pillow.
In the Library

Chapter Summary

They discuss a book and politics.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The masonry heater had kept Belle's cottage bedroom warm enough throughout the night, but she had been wrapped in the warm blankets in the afterthought of warm and pleasant dreams of summer. Belle delayed in bed for a few minutes longer than she usually would have, watching the arms of the clock move little by little in the dim, late autumn morning. It was much harder to get out of bed early when the sun rose later and later, but move she had to, for another monotonous day in a chain of similar days.

Belle gave herself a quick wash and changed into more or less the same clothes she'd successfully rotated for half a year now. She'd brought three skirts (one navy, one white and one periwinkle blue), four white blouses, six pairs of stockings and a few unmentionables. There were also Aunt Hortensia's hand me downs, but Belle could hardly put on the ball gown for serving dinner.

As she was dressing herself, Belle noticed there was a noticeable amount of wear at the cuffs of her blouse. The buttons that fastened from the narrow waist all the way up to the high collar were all also drooping, and she figured she'd need to re-attack every single one soon. It was a thinner summer blouse, made of thinner material, so she put Aunt Hortensia's green-gold coat before she ventured out into the day.

Her sitting room had transformed from a neat and pristine space into a far more lived-in sort of area. Belle had most of the newspapers from the past three months in the room. Some had been sacrificed for the noble effort of assisting the lighting of the heater or the fireplace, but she had been sure to use only the advertisement sections for that. She had her own tea pot now in the room, and could use the fireplace to heat up the water for it in the fireplace, but she'd only tried to do that once. It was much easier to just use the stove in the kitchen for making a single cup of tea, but she surmised she would feel differently about that in the dead of winter, when she'd have to cross the garden in darkness, surrounded by snow and ice.

The sitting room was where she spent her evenings, and most of her time alone at the house, when Rumpelstiltskin was gone for consecutive days, like he had been until late last night. Belle had heard his return and woken up briefly, because he'd been slightly noisy and – unless Belle was gravely mistaken – a bit tipsy, and he had given himself a short monologue in some strange language she presumed was related to whatever they spoke in Dimhaut.

Belle stepped out into the crisp cool air, wishing she had warmer things to wear for the biting cold wind that had decided to go past the courtyard as soon as she'd set foot outside. First thing, of course, she headed for the gate and the letter box there, which she might open from the inside and claim the morning newspaper. It was always the previous day's paper from Avonlea, and some poor soul from the nearest village made the climb up the steep hill to deliver her the paper five times a week without fail. Belle was sometimes tempted to leave letters of her own in the box, but she was very certain that Rumpelstiltskin would have noticed that, and that would have been the end of journalism for her, so
she'd decided not to tempt fate just yet.

She walked across the courtyard to the house itself, surveying the rose bushes that carried the darkened orange-brown fruit, the rose hips, where Belle hadn't harvested them. She'd made some jam of them earlier in the autumn, but there were far too many roses to use up all the berries, not if she wanted there to be some walking space left in the cellar. The leaves of the rose bushes had all withered and died, and there was nothing left but the skeletal branches with their spiky thorns.

Their solitary little island cut off from the world was surrounded by only nature as far as the eye could see, and it was brown with autumn where it wasn't green with pine and fir. The summer birds had flown away long ago, and the forest was quiet except for the distant sounds of crows that sometimes cut across the silence. The lack of colour was distressed upon by the overcast sky, which made the surrounding lake grey as well.

Oh, to fly away like a summer bird, to south.

But that morning she might not do so, Belle reflected. However, she had some hope, and she revised her plans of hope as she entered the main house and went straight to the kitchen to start on breakfast and put fire in some heaters.

During the near half a year she'd spent with Rumpelstiltskin, Belle had managed to get her way quite a few times with him. On some things he was adamant, but whenever Belle was made reasonable and practical arguments, she was likely to acquire whatever she needed – or stop Rumpelstiltskin from murdering someone. She was almost certain that Rumpelstiltskin had brought him home for company as much as doing the dishes, although she couldn't quite say how she knew, for all various times he kept himself more than an arm's distant with his behaviour.

Perhaps, for all the immortality and magic, he simply wasn't good with people, Belle thought. She'd certainly seen him make impressions on people, mostly with his terrifying dramatics. When there was no one to impress around him, it was as if he shrunk into a small man who happened to have green skin and an extra shadow about him. That was the person, Belle thought, who'd had a library in his new house, to make sure his housekeeper wouldn't lack for reading.

And that was also the person who tried very hard not to topple the chess board when he was once again losing a game (Belle had been very surprised to learn she was in fact better at it than him.) With time, Belle supposed, there would build more trust, and that would allow her things such as Yuletide holidays with her father, and for him to bring her along to all the exciting places in the world where he frequently visited. With time and patience, things might not be so very dull, or so Belle hoped.

Rumpelstiltskin rarely had anything but tea for breakfast, but Belle thought he might be rather hungry from his adventures, so she made more porridge than usual, gulped her own share down, and put the other half of it on in a bowl with a helping of strawberry jam in the middle. She placed it on the tray next to a small teapot hidden underneath a rather darling white crochet tea cosy that was a fairly new feature in the household, designed specifically for the small teapot that might contain only three cups of tea. She added a bread roll as well, and covered the whole thing with a large white napkin to keep the porridge at least moderately warm until it got up to the morning room.

It was perhaps too early to try wake up someone who had arrived well past midnight, but Belle had never been scolded for knocking on the doors before, and so she went to the bedroom door and rapped it softly a few times, but there was no answer. She took a peek inside, and saw the bed had been slept in, but only on top of the sheets and the comforter.

She crept halfway down the stairs from the morning room to the great sitting room downstairs, but
there was no one at the spinning wheel there. The room had been perpetually shielded from daylight
since the end of summer by thick curtains, so she couldn't see every nook and dark corner plainly,
but Belle felt certain that Rumpelstiltskin was not in the room.

There was the Tower, of course, the turret sticking out as the highest part of the whole house. A
narrow circular staircase by the morning room led her there. The door to the staircase was usually
locked, but that was not the case now, and Belle thought she'd finally found the master of the house.
She knocked on the door and went up the stairs until they simply ended and the workroom began,
and Belle could plainly see Rumpelstiltskin's absence.

Since this was the room she saw least frequently in the whole house, Belle spent a minute gazing at
the glowing potions, and old leather-bound grimoires in the shelves. What she was most interested in
was Rumpelstiltskin's work table, since he'd casually mentioned in passing that he had some work
project, whatever it was. The table was cleared except for the map of the Great Rift, and an ancient
pencil-sketch of something. The paper it had been drawn on had gone yellow with time, and the faint
names had been written with foreign letters she couldn't read, although she was well versed in some
quite exotic languages. Oh yes, she had taken time to learn the two main dialects of Hindese, in case
she ever got that far.

As Belle was staring at the paper, she realized that the letters were not quite as foreign as she'd
initially thought. Some of the shapes were familiar, and some were skewed by the pencil-artists
imaginative use of stylization. She made some quick assumptions about a few letters. It wasn't
Hindese, but it was fairly close. And the two words themselves were very basic and easily
understandable.

“Winter... Cave,” Belle said aloud. She considered the drawing again, and thought it rather
resembled a very crude old entrance to a tomb. It was such a basic shape made with crude methods,
the cave, or tomb, might have been hundreds of years old, or thousands. No distinct cultural features.
Belle wondered if it might contain any lacquered philosophers stuck sitting cross-legged for all
eternity.

But she was doing Things She Was Not Supposed To, and there was tea getting cold downstairs, so
Belle cut short her investigations in the tower room and returned to the task of finding
Rumpelstiltskin somewhere in the house. She decided only to go through the villa, since the Dark
Castle at the other end of the magic passageway was very cold and draughty now that it was late
autumn, and Belle had no interest in searching a hundred and twenty rooms for Rumpelstiltskin.

She soon found him in the library, doing something Belle found rather unexpected. He was in the
comfortable reading chair, sitting in a rather unorthodox manner there with his legs flung up over one
of the armrests, teeth clinching to a pipe in the corner of his mouth. He seemed a bit dishevelled, hair
and attire both, and he was reading A Song for Three Cities so intently he didn't immediately look up
when Belle entered.

“There's breakfast in-” Belle paused when she saw the book he was reading. It was her book, not
his, but she'd forgotten it in the library after reading it there one afternoon. “Are you well? You
arrived very late. Are you perhaps... hungover?” Belle asked him. It struck her that she'd never seen
him read a book that wasn't one filled with questionable spells and incantations in his work room.
And there he was, reading a work of fiction and barely acknowledging her.

“The Dark One doesn't get hungover,” he said rather absently, his eyes stuck on the page even as his
pipe fell out of his mouth and into his lap. Belle stepped a bit closer to see how far along he'd gotten.
It was quite a long novel, after all. She was shocked to see he was halfway through.

“When did you start reading that!” Belle demanded.
Rumpelstiltskin looked up properly from the book the first time now, and glanced at the wall clock. He cocked his head a little. “Four hours ago.”

Belle frowned. “Are you skimming?”

He returned his eyes on the page. “No...” His voice was rather quiet. Subdued. His thoughts were away in the book. Belle was fascinated that it was so.

“I could get you a book mark, because breakfast is hot and ready and waiting for you in the morning room,” Belle said, and was already turning away to fetch a bookmark from the desk. There were plenty of them, since she’d been bored in the evenings, and so she’d made some with bits of scrap fabrics and bird feathers. She’d also pressed some autumn leaves a month before when they had fallen down to the ground, so there were small golden leaves of alder glued to sliced newspaper advertisements as proofs of her boredom and her efforts at keeping herself occupied.

“Can't I eat breakfast downstairs?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her, and started unwinding his legs from the armrest and sitting up properly.

“Of course,” Belle replied. “Shall I set it in the dining room, or bring it here?”

He seemed hesitant. “Here, if it's alright.”

“Why wouldn't it be?” She asked him and hurried off to get the breakfast tray, although she was certain it was all cold by now. As she went back and forth, she wondered if Rumpelstiltskin had asked her permission to eat in the library out of consideration for her, since it was more or less within her personal space. He rarely entered the place, and when he did, it was never for longer than seconds. When she returned to the library, Rumpelstiltskin had moved a small side table next to the chair, and had returned his attention to the novel.

“I'm afraid it's all gone cold by now,” she regretted. “I spent quite a while looking for you.”

“Perfectly fine. Why don't you join me for breakfast?”

“I already ate something, but I could have another cup of tea.” Truth be told, Belle was rather pleased that he wanted to have breakfast with her. “And read my newspaper while you read the book.”

A little later they sat in companionable silence, the kind that marched on with the tick-tock of a wall clock that filled the morning air and made the atmosphere of the room warmer with its reliable plodding, occasionally disturbed by the sound of one of them turning a page. Belle cradled her tea cup in her hands while it was still hot and examined the news of the world so devotedly that she heard nothing at all.

Yesterday's news in Marchland featured a double homicide and horse theft in the north; the court trial of someone who'd used black magic in the stock exchange; the confiscation of a dangerous magic mushroom farm; and the tragedy of a 17-year-old young lady dead, having fallen off a steam boat on a channel cruise. She had her dress tangled in the wheels of the boat which had mutilated her. Belle shuddered, and moved on to the politics section, which always served to irate her. The paper's political journalists were very subtle about criticising the female parliamentary representatives for their abilities, since half of the men of the parliament had longer careers than any woman. “And that has nothing to do with the fact that women have only been eligible for six years,” Belle said.

“Speaking to your newspaper?”
“Yes, I am,” Belle replied, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, and carried on.

The news of Avonlea were all bourgeoisie gala luncheon and art gallery opening things. Belle was glad that they had squeezed in a short article, a black and white photograph included, of the Ladies' Entrepreneur Society of Avonlea having been formed and their founding documents notarized. There were two familiar faces Belle recalled from her days rioting at the parliament, and she felt glad, more truly glad than she had in months.

She considered telling the exciting news to Rumpelstiltskin, but then caught herself – he'd most likely be exceedingly uninterested. And if she followed the news with a request to send a letter of congratulations, then he'd be annoyed – he had been already very unmoved by her pleas to be allowed to write for the past three months, and even the Ladies' Entrepreneur Society would be unlikely to change his mind. So Belle settled for coughing and moving on to the foreign correspondence news.

The fiscal crisis in the kingdom of Heartland was worse than ever, and speculation was growing that king George was seeking an alliance south, not by any business proposition, but through marriage. There was a photograph of the king's son, Prince James, who looked quite fine in his very fashionable and well tailored clothes, even though the kingdom was stuck in all manner of poverty and chaos. Next to his picture was a photograph of Princess Abigail, the bride-to-be if gossip was to be believed.

“They're posting gossip instead of news again, how intolerable,” Belle said to herself.

“I hope not about me,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “It's far too early in the morning to kill journalists.”

Belle replied with a laugh, incredulous with the fact that Rumpelstiltskin would carry out the threat even if the article had been about him. “It's about royal weddings, that's all.”

The other major headline was again about the missing princess of Whiteland. She had fled Heartland in the summer in order to avoid being arrested by king George's men, and had now been seen again in her home country, rousing royalist support in the countryside and avoiding all attempts to be caught. The photograph of the black-haired princess was old archive material, showing a frail-looking girl with piercing eyes. Next to it was a close shot of her step-mother, Regina, chair of the Whiteland parliament's, who had transformed quickly from aristocracy to progressive new parliamentary politics.

Belle decided to save the rest of the paper for the afternoon, with its advertisements, opera reviews and sports highlights, and folded the newspaper back to the smaller shape it had arrived in.

“Why do you like this book?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her suddenly. Belle turned on her seat, surprised by the question.

“Why do you ask?” She replied.

“You've read it twice in the past six months,” said he, and Belle felt it was odd that he should have taken notice of it.

“I suppose because it's... The story has many levels, about society. How... family, and friendships and history, and social revolution, all come together to a single story.” Belle felt she sounded ridiculous trying to explain herself, but she pushed it anyway. “I think I keep reading it because, I feel like every time I come back to it, I find something new in it. Like it has... these hidden layers, and you need to return to it again and again, to truly understand it.”
He didn't say anything, so Belle presumed he wouldn't mind if she spoke a bit more of her favourite novel.

“The first time I read it, I was sixteen, I remember getting very angry about the factory worker conditions, that was the only interesting part at that time.”

“Sixteen? And you preferred the labour story over the romance?”

“If I should ever become interested in romance, I'll need to read the whole thing again from a whole new point of view,” Belle shrugged. “but until then, I must presume that two people's personal affairs have very little importance in the face of greatest social turmoil of the past century. Anyhow, that's how I became... political. I found my mother's suffragette friends, and they took me to their outings.” She smiled at the memory, and at the memory of the picture in the newspaper, of her friends. “It was rather well I did get some practice of being thrown into dungeons with them, or my first weeks in your castle would have been far more upsetting,” she said flippantly, and grinned.

“I did wonder how you managed to keep such a level head,” he grumbled, as if she'd somehow cheated him, or as if he'd lost another round of a board game.


He shrugged. Belle thought he looked rather tired, with darker than usual shadows underneath his eyes. “Clever writing. Addresses impressionable idealists with no critical thinking of their own, tricks them to join his cause, and succeeds in that, obviously.”

Belle already almost heard an insistent exclamation of denial demanding entry to her vocal chords, and her mouth was already open and her face full of indignation, but she held herself in check, because she had wanted to hear Rumpelstiltskin's opinion, no matter how scathing or dismissive it might be.

“Do you disagree?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her.

“Strongly.”

“Why?” He asked.

Belle considered. “I think it's a thoughtful analysis on the morals of a society, and what they ought to be.”

Rumpelstiltskin “There are no morals. Only blind faith in them. Rules are always established by someone with the most power, and people deceive themselves by telling good is good and bad is bad, because it would be intolerable for most people to live being aware of being only pawns. Richard Blake was upper class himself, wasn't he? And the book certainly isn't written for illiterate factory workers. So he is writing about someone else's life, to other people. How does that sit in your world of morals?”

Belle shook her head, but she found herself unable to say anything to contradict him. “Surely though, there is some basic, true and good heart of goodness in the world...” she managed to stammer, grasping for her memories on her brief studies on ancient moral philosophies, but she could remember nothing specific about ethics.

“You must tell yourself that if it makes your world happier. To my experience, all people are selfish at heart,” Rumpelstiltskin said, “and I've had centuries of experience.”

“I... I don't think I am selfish,” Belle said. She had never in fact given any thought to it.
“Aren’t all young ladies of societies brought up to be selfless, so they can selflessly dedicate
themselves to their husbands? Except, in your case, you are in a hurry to be thrown into jail for other
people’s politics, and to save drunken thieves and your fool of a father. And your rewards have been
an opportunity to dive in a tunnel of mushrooms, experience of dungeons as accommodations, and
spending your short life-time doing dishes and laundry for an evil old sorcerer.”

If that declaration had become with Rumpelstiltskin’s more cruel sing-song voice and wicked
laughter, Belle would have already been halfway out of the library, but he sounded merely tired, and
Belle thought, a little despondent. She wondered if that was due to his philosophical ruminations, or
the fact that he’d neglected to sleep during the night.

“Perhaps your selflessness is selfishness at heart, trying to prove yourself you’re good, in order to feel
good. Maybe that’s why aristocrats write novels about poverty, as well, to make themselves feel
noble in the excess of their good fortunes,” Rumpelstiltskin mused. “We’re all after something.”

Belle thought about how she’d planned to get what she wanted, her solstice holidays, and her
adventures, by being good and kind to Rumpelstiltskin, until he’d cave in to her subtly and carefully
presented plans. Belle felt a twinge of terrible, shattering self-doubt, but brushed the worrying
thought aside.

“I do think parliamentary procedures will make a much better world in the long run,” Belle said,
despite her instincts telling her to stop sitting there and take insults for her naivete, but she felt
compelled to at least try and defend her point of view.

Rumpelstiltskin snorted. “The only thing it does is confuse the mob over whose head they are really
wanting to chop off come the revolution,” he said.

“And I suppose, instead of the world making progress, you’d prefer all nations return to medieval
feudalism?” Belle said, rather frustrated that she was now getting angry, even though she didn't want
to.

Rumpelstiltskin looked at her, actually looked at her in the eye, instead of staring into some far point
in the distance. “Actually, I don't really care.”

Belle felt calmed, but also sad, by the expression in his eyes. He looked away again, and there was
an awkward silence in the room, that was not at all made comfortable by the ticking of the wall clock
this time. Belle knew she would have been better off leaving, but she wanted to take the opportunity
to be engaged in a discussion that didn’t involve board games rules or the state of tea cosies.

She glanced at the newspaper for inspiration.

“Regina Whiteland was in the newspaper today. I suppose you know her, she jumped ship from
aristocracy to republic parliament, and now she’s a head of state. I suppose many women in
Marchlands think of her as a role model, not just in politics, but also for her bravery and
independence, do you think she hasn’t she done good?”

The laugh Belle received in reply from Rumpelstiltskin was terrifying. He then seemed instantly
more energetic as he had put on the wicked skin of his magic that made him so oppressive and
intimidating to people. “Aren’t you bothered there is only a single party in the Whiteland
parliament?”

Belle shrugged. “I admit, I've some concerns about that, but if the people vote so, who am I to make
judgement?”
Their heated conversation grew still because of the noise of a heavy bell at the gate, announcing a visitor. An unexpected visitor, Belle thought, since Rumpelstiltskin had not bothered to inform her of such a thing, and he always told her when he knew someone was coming.

“To work,” Rumpelstiltskin said, as much to himself as to her, and took away. Belle cleared all the dishes in the library to the tray and hid herself to the kitchen, as she always did. She felt quite rebellious now after the talk they’d had, and thought she wanted to punch something to ease the flared up aggression that had built up so stealthily, for all the effort she’d put into containing herself. And now Rumpelstiltskin probably knew how to easily get under her skin to irritate her, a fact she didn't care much for. She was thinking he was a miserable cynical alcoholic and she should never sympathise with him again, ever ever – it irked her that at times she had – when a thought occurred to her.

She decided to break the rules. Instead of starting on the morning’s washing up, she took the service staircase to the floors above, to the half-empty rooms above the library, and cautiously approached the window, curious as to who was to visit Rumpelstiltskin unannounced so early in the morning. She crouched low next to a curtain, thinking she might not be spotted so easily there.

A beautiful carriage rolled out to the courtyard from the gates. It was white, with silver ornaments, driven by a man in black, surrounded by men on horses, all dressed in black. The carriage halted to a standstill at the door, and out stepped a single woman dressed entirely in black, but it was not a mourning black. It was shimmering silk and satin black with thousands of embroidered beads. The black hat she wore with a wide rim had a veil which obscured her face, but the woman suddenly halted, as if she’d heard something. She tilted her face up, and Belle realised the mysterious lady was staring straight up at her, and smiling, her pearly white teeth gleaming between her parted lips.

Belle shot back from the window. She wondered if the woman had really and truly noticed her. She even expected Rumpelstiltskin to do his annoying soundless appearances to scold her, or at least an angry call from the doorway, but there was nothing. She crept out of the room and onto the balcony above the foyer, as quiet as she could, and just saw the richly dressed woman walk into the greatroom, strutting as if she owned the place, the heels of her shoes clacking on the wooden floors.

“Well, Rumple, I'm so glad you're home. And I do adore this place, it's much more refined than your dusty old roost,” Belle heard her say. The woman's voice was that of a self-satisfied cat. Then the doors closed and it was quiet, Belle could hear nothing else, and she wasn't sure she cared to.

“Rumple?” Belle whispered out loud. What an oddly familiar way to address Rumpelstiltskin, she thought.

Perhaps, perhaps it was his lover? Belle wondered, but then thought that it was hardly discreet, with the small army of her entourage still all standing outside in the courtyard. The lady must have been seeing him about a deal. Perhaps she was a frequent customer. Belle was surprised that she cared. She did not. She told herself to stop being nonsensical and get back to work, and that the only things she felt she should be bothered about were the fact that she didn't have any negotiable holidays, and that she needed warmer clothes. She'd forgotten that. Best make a note of it.

And as soon as the day was then, she would get back to the library and find something to read on ethics, just so she'd have ammunition for her next conversation with Rumpelstiltskin. The man may have had his terrible experiences, but he didn't have any regard for writers unless they were working with spells. But she felt determined to find some bright and burning idea in some book, somewhere, and change his mind about the nature of goodness. They had all the rest of her life for that debate, Belle thought, for she had a hunch it might take a while.

/p
This chapter pretty much was the initial reason why I wanted to start writing it. I now have more ideas towards the end of the fic. If I didn't, the road would end here.

Going abroad for a couple of weeks, so I'll be back when I'm back.
Belle was to stay out of sight for the most part of the day. After she was done with the mundanities in
the kitchen, she decided to put on her coat and go out through the door in the cellar that led straight
out to the steep hill and the path that led down to the lake - and to the cavern entrance of the
musktroll den.

She'd had the opportunity to converse a little with them every now and then. Belle sometimes sought
them out when Rumpelstiltskin was gone, and it had been on one such occasion when she'd learn the
mystery behind why so many musktrolls repeated the uglier vocabulary of the human languages,
because it made most people's brows rise up in alarm or wonder. The trolls used their tails in their
own communications to create context or significance to their utterances, which sounded quite simple
and small in their number, but reality was a bit more complex than Belle had thought, and she
remained certain that an academic study of the trolls was far overdue. She even entertained hopes of
writing such a paper with her spare time and submitting it via post to the university.

The key to her new understanding of the trolls was one of them, a frail smaller troll (Belle was
uncertain whether or not it was male or female, there was no telling) who was the most accomplished
linguist of any of its kind Belle had ever encountered. Her regret was having met the troll too late in
the summer, because they had all been busy with gathering food for winter throughout the months of
autumn Belle and Rumpelstiltskin had spent at Whitewhit Lake and its peculiar house, and Belle had
had very few occasions to speak with the eloquent little troll.

The troll - Mumble by its name - was found easier than its friends from the den, who were quite wary
of Belle and the house after not only what had happened with one of them in the wine cellar, but
there had been an occasion when Rumpelstiltskin had set another troll's tail on fire at the sight of the
creature in the rose garden. Mumble was a fair bit more unaware of its surroundings, preferred to
move about in plain daylight, and paid fairly little attention to its surroundings, and thus was much
more likely to be sneaked up on, like now, by the waters of Whitewhit Lake.

"Good day Mumbler," Belle greeted, "how goes the harvest?"

Mumbler was startled to have been found, but was easy in calming down. The creatures tail moved a
fair deal less than its friends' tail, which gave it the name equivalent of a "mumbler" in the
musktrollish language.

"Good day, Reader," said Mumbler. It had a wicker basket full of needles from the tall fir trees, with
an assortment of late autumn mushrooms in the middle. "Need for caution. In case winter long."
Mumbler returned its attention swiftly to the removal of needles from the branches of the fir tree. The
musktrolls had cleaned the lowest branches, and so Mumbler had climbed higher and was now
sitting on a branch so high up it was at eye-level with Belle.

Belle had become Reader when they had discussed Musktroll names and gender. Belle wondered
how the trolls knew who was a girl and who was a boy, and Mumbler had explained to her that it
didn't really matter to the trolls. Trolls were far more interested in what one did, and thus Mumbler
was identified as Mumbler - mostly because it was shorter than Talks-With-Humans - and that was
how Mumbler had decided that Belle's name ought to be Reader, when Belle had explained to
Mumbler the concept of reading and writing, and how she wished to write down Mumbler's
language so she and others might read it. When Mumbler had wanted to call Belle Writer, Belle had
insisted to be called Reader instead.

"When are you coming back to the surface?" Belle asked Mumbler. "I will miss talking with you."
Mumbler smiled coyly and plucked pine needles down from the tree. "As soon as spring comes, dear Reader." Mumbler seemed satisfied with its work at the tree and climbed down from the branch. "Snow is coming soon," Mumbler remarked and looked up at the overcast autumn sky. "You be safe with Monster while I sleep?" It asked, its large eyes a bit watery and scared as it glanced up the hill at the house looming at the top of it.

Belle pursed her lips. "I don't think he's a monster," she said, after a moment's thought, but she could tell Mumbler was not convinced.

"Fire-Thrower, Angry Green Man," Mumbler mumbled, and walked on towards the next fir. Belle followed Mumbler and watched him climb up to the dry clean branch to reach green needles. "Dark One," said Mumbler, as an afterthought.

"The fisherman who taught you how to speak, do you know where he lives? In case I find him when I'm allowed to go to the village," Belle asked.

"Fisher," Mumbler said thoughtfully, "lives in a tent," it said, and beamed. Belle couldn't help but smile at Mumbler's reasoning.

"He must have had another name besides Fisher," Belle said, "Do you remember?"

Mumbler stopped plucking needles for a moment. "Hmm. King?" It said.

Belle smiled, imagining a fisherman living in a tent by the lake, calling himself Kingfisher to the musktrolls, fishing for trouts. Trout was generally agreed upon by the musktrolls to mean good health, a large meal and abundant happiness, depending on the height of one's tail or eyebrows, Belle could say abundant happiness with trout and the use of her eyebrows to the musktrolls under Rumpelstiltskin's house and she considered this as a great accomplishment.

"I should like to meet Kingfisher sometime. I think he must have been frightened off by Rumpelstiltskin, though," Belle said. Then she produced a surprise to Mumbler from the pockets of her coat.

"Do you like rose hip? Berry of the rose?" Belle presented Mumbler with a jar of the jam she had made herself from the rose garden's bounty.

"I don't know," Mumbler said, and regarded the gift with wary curiosity.

"Please take it. I hope it'll help keep you through the winter," Belle said, and put the jar in Mumbler's basket.

"Oh. Heavy," said Mumbler. Belle held the basket that was now quite full, while the grey-coated troll climbed down from the tree branch, and then took back the basket.

"Thank you, Reader," the Mumbler said, and did a curtsey like the one it had learned from Belle, and Belle returned it, bowing her head down deep. When she straightened up, she noticed two stray snowflakes falling from the sky, landing on Mumbler's fur coat.

"It's snowing," Belle said, realizing that it was now time to say goodbye. There would be no day or two left to play around and discuss troll things, they were to depart now.

"So it is. Good winter, Reader," Mumbler wished her, sounding like it came from the bottom of its heart.

"I'll walk you to the cave?" Belle asked, and Mumbler acquiesced. It was no long walk at all, and
they soon reached their destination.

"Oh, dear Reader, may I ask something?" Mumbler said, and its voice sounded more timid and shaky than ever before.

"Of course!" Belle promised.

"How, how do I get a thing on your hair-tail, as yours?" Mumbler asked.

Belle reached around her head to grab her braided her, secured with pins and a navy blue bow, and brought the braid across her shoulder. "Do you mean this?" She asked, touching the blue ribbon between her thumb and index finger. Mumbler nodded.

She pulled open the bow and Mumbler was so excited its tail was shaking terribly much so, and it was speaking something in Trollish that Belle could not understand. It was possibly an overflowing thank you.

"P-p-put it around my tail?" Mumbler asked her.

"Yes, just turn around." Belle felt ridiculously happy as she tied the ribbon a few times around Mumbler's tail, and then made the bow just underneath the tuft of bushy hair Mumbler always kept clean and free of tangles. The navy blue looked good against the grey fur. The act of making someone happy with a little simple kindness warmed her heart like a candle, and washed away the feeling of frustrated ire she'd departed the house with after her morning conversation with Rumpelstiltskin.

Mumbler lifted its brows as high as they could go and whispered "trout" with a soft gentle voice.

"See you in spring, Mumbler," Belle wished the troll, and kissed its forehead. Then Mumbler took its wicked basket and vanished into the cavern hidden beyond ferns.

Belle started the climb back up the steep hill and watched snow fall across the quiet forest surrounding her. A crow somewhere made noise, and then fell silent again. As she got closer to the house, she heard the dark and ominous riders converse in the inner yard, but she couldn't make out the words, for they were too distant and their voices low and muted.

She entered the house through the back door of the cellar and crept up to the kitchen, where it was warm, to watch the snowfall from its narrow windows and drink a cup of tea. By the time she was settled in the kitchen, perched on a stool with a hot cup of the garden's own peppermint in her cup, she noticed her hair had become very unwound from the braid it had been tied to, and her hairpins were dangling from loose tresses which were all going about their own ways.

As she was removing the pins, Belle heard the rolling of carriage wheels on the courtyard. So their guest was leaving. Outside, the snowfall was developing from few scattered flakes to a more proper pourdown of white fluff. She could still make out the colours and details of the kitchen garden, but she doubted it would be so by the end of the afternoon. A cold northern wind was picking up, and she decided the fireplaces needed tending in the greatroom and upstairs in the morning room, and the masonry heaters in Rumpelstiltskin's room and in her own cottage all needed to be loaded again since they had been last seen to by her in the quiet hours of the morning. Better heat the library as well, Belle thought, for the place had been chilly while she'd been there.

First though, she made tea in a small teapot, put some of the buttery shortbread that had appeared that morning in the pantry onto a plate, and went to the greatroom with a tray. She found Rumpelstiltskin there with a most self-satisfied smirk on his face, standing by the fireplace that was already blazing.
He barely paid any attention to her as she laid the tea on the table. She waited to hear any particular requests of his, but he took his tea to the spinning wheel and was lost in thought and spinning until Belle was almost out of the room.

"You've let your hair down," he observed.

"The ribbon stayed in the forest," Belle harked back to him and slipped out of the room, reminding herself to re-braid her hair once she visited the cottage to fire up the heater the second time that day. She couldn't do so in the house, for there were no mirrors anywhere - another peculiarity of Rumpelstiltskin's rules. But she did have a small hand-held mirror that she had brought along with her luggage.

Warming the house and watching the snow fall took away the better part of the afternoon that day. Belle kept peering out through the window anxiously. While she had been sitting in her cottage bedroom and kindling a fire with newspaper advertisement underneath birchwood logs, she could have almost sworn she had seen a shadow pass across her small mirror she had left propped up leaning against the wall on the top of her dresser, but she figured it must have been the shadow of a crow flying past her window. She resumed her duties without giving it another thought.

The sun was setting behind the snow clouds when dinner time was upon them, and more snow kept falling. Belle ate in the kitchen, watching the garden she could barely recognize any more become hidden under a white icy blanket. She kept a fire going on in the wooden stove all the time, for how much hot tea she drank to help keep herself warm in her thin summer clothes. She reminded herself again to bring up the topic of new clothes with Rumpelstiltskin, but the idea always seemed to slip her when she had the chance to talk with him. It wouldn't do to freeze to death.

The request to retrieve her winter clothes from town was already on Belle's lips when she went looking for Rumpelstiltskin, but she found herself laughing the moment she found him - he was again in the library, sitting with his thing legs dangling across and over the puffy stuffed armrest of the high-back reading chair, with The Guidebook in his hands, and he didn't deign to acknowledge her even with a glance.

Belle crossed the floor as quick as she could, and circled around to peer from behind Rumpelstiltskin's shoulder. She took a hold of the back of the chair and leaned a bit closer to see what was written on the pages. She was close enough to Rumpelstiltskin to smell him. Her logic told a green and black creature like him, with his talon-like nails and dark teeth should have had the stench of rot about him, but now without the touch of recently smoked tobacco or a whiff of brandy, Belle thought his scent was surprisingly lacking in unpleasantness.

"Why are you reading that?" Belle asked.

"Why have you ever?" He asked.

Belle giggled again, seeing the section that was open. Etiquette! A Gentleman's Behaviour in a Restaurant. He was then self-consciously closing the book and giving it to her. She accepted the book and quickly sat precariously on the end of the armrest next to Rumpelstiltskin's dangling legs before he could climb out of the seat.

"It's not entirely full of middle-class pomp," Belle explained. "It was a gift from my aunt Sylvia, and it turned out to be invaluable when I was learning how to deal with your silk shirts."

"Your aunt Sylvia," Rumpelstiltskin said with a grimace, for apparently Sylvia's imperious manners at aunt Hortensia's house, and then later on her letter regarding the matter of how to best injure a man with his genitalia exposed, had left Rumpelstiltskin with an Impression. Belle suspected that few
people did that to him, that a sorcerer with such lifetimes in his memory would deign to remember only few names and faces, but aunt Sylvia had stamped herself there whether he wished it or not. "I think I can see where you've inherited your fearless forwardness."

Belle grinned, although in truth she felt sad. The fact that she was missing aunt Sylvia alone ought to have been alarming, but there you had it. Had she appeared to the house that very evening, Belle wouldn't have hesitated to throw her arms around the grand lady's shoulders and weep from joy while ignoring her aunt's resistance and attempts of swatting away such an undignified embrace.

"Aunt Sylvia can afford to do much as she pleases. She has money of her own, and friends. She's almost entirely independent from her husband now that my cousin is married and with a family of his own and new heirs on their way."

"But you've no money, no friends, and your life will depend entirely on an old monster's whims." Rumpelstiltskin folded his legs up and lifted himself on the seat to put his feet down on the seat of the tallback chair, but Belle protested.

"No mud on the new library chairs!" Belle said, unthinkingly, and Rumpelstiltskin obliged her by crashing back on the seat.

"Either you are very stupid, or trying to be stupidly brave," he said, miffed to have been ordered about.

"No, my lord, I am trying to be a good housekeeper," Belle replied. "I don't think you'd be very impressed by my efficiency if I spent every waking moment terrified, instead of dedicated myself to my duties. Would you like me to quiver and stutter, turn over trays and let my tears ruin your tea and dinner, because you like provoking fear and terror?" She asked. Because he didn't seem to have a reply at hand, Belle continued.

"Sir, that is of course entirely your right and your privilege to have me behave as you wish, and working in your service to the best of my ability is now almost all the fulfilment I'm to expect in life, so I throw myself into my duties whole-heartedly." She hesitated a bit, but then put her hand on his knee which was so close to her. "But I shouldn't think you would really like that, because we've managed... well, these past six months."

He put his hand on hers and carefully removed it, trying hard to avoid her gaze. "Be careful," he said, with sombre wistfulness.

Belle stood up and released him from the chair prison she'd cornered him into. He seemed to be in ill humour with her having once again spoken too forwardly with him, and he having no means or real intention of doing something monstrous to prove how terribly villainous he was. Then Belle thought back to how he'd turned Gaston and his mother into animals in aunt Hortensia's house (both had been transformed to themselves by Hortensia), and how he'd shot a woman in the forests of Dimhaut. She shuddered a bit as she thought of the bleeding wounds Rumpelstiltskin had carved across the skin of the thieving intruder he'd had chained in his dungeons.

The lightness and humour she'd managed to summon at her entrance to the library vanished from her thoughts as she reminded herself that despite her perhaps naive wishes and hopes regarding the real nature of Rumpelstiltskin, he was still a quite vicious, wicked sort of a person, and if it wasn't for the fact that she offered him a friendly and unthreatening sort of companionship and a clean home, she might have found her flesh cut or a bullet in her head. Or perhaps become turned into an animal of sorts.

Belle set her guidebook aside and walked out of the library like an automaton, to see if their magical
dinner had arrived yet, reminding herself that she'd yet again forgotten to mention her winter clothes. The kitchen and its cupboards were still empty, so she settled for turning down the lights to small flames so she might see something of the snow still coming down outside in the dark of the evening.

Even though the kitchen fire had been on all day, Belle still felt cold and shivery. She made herself a cup of tea and sat, waiting, with the sound of the wall clock ticking the only voice in the room.

"You seem cold," said Rumpelstiltskin and Belle was so alarmed by the sudden voice that came out of nowhere, she dropped her teacup on the floor. A piece took off, which alarmed and horrified Belle, for these were new, beautiful porcelain cups!

"Oh, oh no," Belle said, retrieving the poor little thing from the tiled kitchen floor, "it's chipped," she said, and twirled about to look at Rumpelstiltskin who didn't seem to think much of the issue.

"It's just a cup," said he.

"A very new, pretty sort of cup," Belle said with regret, and estimated the damage. One could hardly see it.

"Middle-class concerns over a tea cup? Will you be able to call yourself a socialist after this?" Rumpelstiltskin said with his dark-humoured scorn.

"Even a socialist can appreciate fine craftsmanship," Belle retorted, "and besides, if you weren't always sneaking up silently behind me, I would be having far fewer causes for frights and destroying your property."

"But I must have some way of retaliating to your sharp commentary," Rumpelstiltskin said, but the wicked edge of his humour was now passed, and there was more warmth in his voice for a moment, "since I'd be out of my steel-nerved laundress if I flayed you instead," he added, cruelty returning to his voice again.

"Where will you be having dinner?" Belle asked him, hoping he'd leave.

"The dining room will suffice," he said, and took himself out of the kitchen.

After dinner was done, the dishes washed and dried, the last tea cup of the evening carried and the working day done, Belle wanted to her leave of the house sooner than usual. She wanted to get the heater going as soon as she might before turning down and going to sleep.

In the foyer, as she was headed for the doorway and the snow and the darkness, she was interrupted by Rumpelstiltskin's voice beckoning her to the greatroom. Belle felt a bit drowsy already, and hugged her gold-green coat closer to herself as she approached him. He was sitting at his wheel, but he'd stopped spinning.

"There's some things for you on the table," he said, half-muttering.

Belle saw a shape of some kind of cloth folded there, with a lump underneath. On closer inspection, she realized she was holding a knitted woollen shawl, of very plain colour but with nice texture, warmed nice and snug by a hot water skin underneath. Belle slipped the hot water skin underneath her coat immediately and clutched the shawl in her hands.

"Thank you," she said, with thankful wonderment.

"It was nothing. I'd rather you not freeze overnight," Rumpelstiltskin replied, his voice perhaps a tad friendlier than Belle was accustomed to. He resumed his monotonous task of spinning straw to gold.
"I meant to talk to you about some warmer clothes for winter, but it has slipped my mind. But I think we should discuss it tomorrow, since it is getting late now. I'd rather be in bed soon."

"Until tomorrow then."

"Good night, sir," Belle wished him, and took her leave. "I hope you'll stay warm as well."

"Good night, Belle," she heard Rumpelstiltskin say. Belle thought she rarely heard him pronounce her name. It felt pleasant to hear her name out loud so, she thought. As if it made her more real. As she trekked across the snowy yard in the darkness through the dead rose garden, Belle lifted the shawl up to her face and inhaled it, thinking it smelled like Rumpelstiltskin had in the library, when she had leaned over his shoulder and watching him read silly etiquette things.

As Belle stumbled in the darkness of the cottage through the sitting room and into the bedroom, she chided herself for being so silly as to smell a shawl. It was just a thing to keep her warm. Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't want her to catch a cold and spend days on end with lung fever when she ought to be doing his laundry and carry his tea trays around the house, or hunt for meaningless trinkets in his treasure troves back in the Dark Castle, when she wasn't supplying him with her unblinking friendliness – a service she now thought she might have to withhold, thanks to Rumpelstiltskin's ominous warning regarding her conduct. She wondered how she could help her habit of seeking his mesmerizing and challenging company, especially since now at snowfall he would be the only person in the world she might speak to at all.

As she undressed, she thought she saw something on top of her dresser, from the corner of her eye, like how she'd looked at fairies and once almost caught Rumpelstiltskin when he'd been playing at being invisible in Aunt Hortensia's house. Belle's breath caught, and she stood still, and strained her eye a bit. But there was nothing, no fairies or Rumpelstiltskin trying to catch her in her stays and underpants. There were just her few hairpins, ribbons and mirror resting on the tabletop.

She slipped into a shift found from Aunt Hortensia's inheritance, which had purposed her as a sleeping gown. It hardly kept her neck and shoulders warm for the neckline was amply generous, as young Hortensia had preferred. Belle stroked the wool shawl in her hands for a little while, measuring if it were soft enough to be wrapped around on her bare skin for the night, or would the wiry sheep hair give her a rash. She deemed the thing soft enough, and unwound the entire shawl – which in full length was large enough to wrap almost twice across her – and lay herself to bed underneath the blankets.

As sleep and dreams grew nearer, Belle let go of guiding and steering her thoughts in the abstraction of drowsiness. She entertained glimpses of her future conversations with Rumpelstiltskin, where she might candidly point out that if he gave up his cynical and violent ways he would live a much happier life, and in her fantasies he believed her, and then the rest of their life would be a carefree, wonderful adventure from one exotic country to another.

In the chill darkness, she was aware that she was inhaling the scent of the shawl wrapped about her, and enjoying it. It made her feel safe and cared about, that her taciturn employer wanted to keep her warm. "Rumpelstiltskin," she muttered as she hid her nose into the soft wool and blankets, while the hot water bottle spread its heat by her feet.

Even though the weather outside was abysmal with the snow coming down hard now, a beautiful carriage and its ominous entourage in black made their way swiftly from a winding forest straight towards the border between Whiteland and Marchland. The single occupant inside the carriage had no desire or intent of taking rooms in the meagre wayside inns. And besides, the journey was made
swifter by a little magic. The entire troupe might be home as soon as nightfall the following day, provided the snow didn't turn into a blizzard.

The veiled lady inside the coach sat in unnatural light that had no source in flame, so even though her carriage rocked and jostled on the seldom-traveled road they had chosen, the light stayed the same, unflickering. She held a beautiful mirror in her hands, but it didn't reflect her pale and regal features, instead it showed her a view into a sparse and simple cottage, to a bed where a slip of a girl was hugging her blankets, whispering a name in her sleep.

The veiled lady was very amused, and put the mirror away then. She was intrigued that she had almost been caught earlier by the maid. There was obviously more to her than met the eye, for what sort of a maid knew how to look for magic in a dark room?

“Watch her for me,” she reminded the mirror, and then she took out the produce of her latest deal with the nasty old fool. A vial. It would change her appearance for the quest she was about to embark on. She, Regina, regent of Whiteland, would find Princess Snow and for once and for all end her family's dynasty.

It was past midnight when Rumpelstiltskin climbed up the staircase from the greatroom to his small apartment above it. He'd been lost in thought all evening so deeply he hadn't had any interest in tobacco, tea, brandy, or the buttery shortbread he'd found himself taking a fancy to once again. All the diversions that only served him to cope with the tedium of the oceans of time he'd had to swim to get to this point were now all lacklustre, with perhaps once exceptions.

With Regina's most recent plans, things were set in motion. Thresholds would be crossed. Pieces of the future revealed themselves to him slowly, and he might plan in more detail his coming journey to Heartland, to save king George from disgrace by producing him with a new heir. A flaming red promise of war and utter turmoil was in the horizon, and his chance to cross the Great Rift was almost tangible.

But when he lay down in the dark in his bed, not tired at all, but warily excited, coolly containing himself, and thinking of the future, and calculating his plans, Rumpelstiltskin found a great black hole when he sought to find out how his impertinent little housekeeper featured into the great weave of his schemes for the future. But the gift of foreseeing he'd stolen from an eyeless woman centuries ago had always been sketchy at best. Still, it was curious that he could find nothing of Belle.

For a month now, he'd been trying to justify himself logical and concise reasons as to why he should keep her after the Rift was closed, but he was beginning to find the only reason he wanted her to stay was because he wanted her to stay. But if... when Rumpelstiltskin would find his son, he could hardly introduce him to a maid he'd practically kidnapped away from her family.

It would be a few years more though, he thought. He'd have the time to decide what to do about her. Most likely he would enjoy her lively company for two more years, and then send her on her way with her memories of her time with him stolen and silenced. She was far too curious and forward for her own good, Rumpelstiltskin thought, but she wasn't afraid of him, and that in itself was a nice change of pace.

Before he fell asleep into a shallow, fretful nap, which was how he'd slept now for two centuries, it wasn't Belle's place in his grand scheme that he was thinking of, or the vigorous energy with which she launched herself at everything she did. It was the way her hair had tousled down in the afternoon for a brief moment, when she'd brought him his tea. He thought about that for a moment, and then realized exactly what his reason for wanting to keep Belle nearby was. And it had very little to do
with her lively wit, and much more with what she had hidden underneath those long skirts and high-collared blouses.

Rumpelstiltskin swore under his breath, and tried to steer his thoughts away. When he'd decided his next housekeeper should be a person he'd actually tolerate to have around the house and near him, this had not been what he'd had in mind.
A warmly clad Belle walked from the black iron gates and tall stone fence that cut off the tall hill of a peninsula sticking out over the lake. The house perched on top of the hill had a truly magnificent view over the surrounding woods and the lake. In the summer the view had been twice as beautiful with the lake clear and beautiful around them, but the winter view was not rough to look at either. The road leading up to the house was a narrow snake path with steep climbs and falls, which Belle figured must have been the reason why no one had bothered to make the effort of building anything there before – why built on a site so far removed from civilization and so difficult to travel to?

Belle recalled the newspaper report that it had taken three days for the house to appear on the hilltop, according to the architect who had given interview to the press. Sometimes, in the mornings, she looked out into the cold woods and wondered if the journalists that had flocked the mountains of Dimhaut had already relocated to surround this house as well, but there was no tell-tale signs of light reflecting off camera lenses or binoculars from odd hiding places, such as there had been in the mountains. Belle hadn't even met the mysterious postman who delivered the newspaper she retrieved every morning. Perhaps it was delivered by magic, such that made soft tracks on the snow in the middle of night, or by a ghost.

The snow softened all the sounds, which made the woods and the lake surrounding the house even more eerily quiet than they had been in autumn. Now Belle sometimes caught herself talking or singing to herself just to hear something. It had been disturbing to find herself doing to unintentionally, at first, but she had gradually gotten almost used to it. She tried not to do it when Rumpelstiltskin was in the house, but he had gone off on his adventures.

“Ghost... post,” she told herself, opening the door to the house. It was still very early in the morning, the sun was not up yet. It was only dim outside, thanks to the light allowed by snow, but it was dead dark inside. Belle crossed the foyer towards the corridor leading to the kitchen, walking past the library as she went.

“Ghostal postal worker, what rhymes with worker? Shirker? Worker, shirker of... his... corporeal self... or perhaps he's a postal elf?” Belle mumbled, holding the newspaper under her arm as she struggled out of her winter coat.

“Going insane?” She heard Rumpelstiltskin call her from inside the library. Belle grimaced.

She stopped at the door of the library and peered into the relative darkness, thinking she caught the gleam of Rumpelstiltskin's eye somewhere in there.

“No, I was just amusing myself,” Belle replied. “There's very little conversation had here when you're gone. And you? Did you just get back, or did you sit here all night in the dark by yourself?”

“Mmmh,” he un-said. “Tea. If you please.”

“As quick as I can,” Belle promised him. It wasn't very quick, for all the regular morning chores she
did as she usually would. Rumpelstiltskin was rarely awake when she appeared in the house in the mornings, and she recalled this was only the second time since their arrival to the house it had been so that he was awake so early. She suspected it was thanks to him not having gone to bed at all. She took the tea to him on her way doing the round of setting fires to the heaters in the rooms they most used in the house. When she returned to the library, the room was lit, and he was reading one of his vile-looking grimoires there – alchemy, Belle suspected by the quick glance – in the cosy reading chair by the fire, legs dangling off the side again. He'd worn a dark suit during his trip, as hinted by the pressed trousers and the waistcoat and the white shirt. There was no sign of his tie. When he noticed her, he was demanding more tea and shortbread and informing her there were fresh blood stains on a shirt he'd worn during the night.

Belle sighed deeply and headed off to see what could be done. She found the offended garment in Rumpelstiltskin's room upstairs, and there was a splash of blood on the cuff of the shirt. She wondered why Rumpelstiltskin insisted on wearing his best silk shirts to the scene of a slaughter, and that thought halted her on her way down the staircase. How desensitised to his terror was she allowing herself to become?

One week he was acquiring soft shawls and warm winter clothes for his maid, the next he was making a bloody mess out of some poor creature.

“And I thought it was almost nice to get to know him,” Belle told herself, and bit her lip next. She would have to get rid of this new habit of hers.

Belle thought of the off-hand way how he'd mentioned about he bloodied shirt, that had been as important to him as a cup of tea, or less important really, (Belle knew how much he liked his cup of tea,) that was alarming. He and his magic were so far above everything else. The last time she'd washed a shirt from blood had been in high summer. The thief's blood had been on it. Whose blood might have this been? Perhaps it belonged to some poor journalist that had dared try and photograph him, or had broken into the Dark Castle for a scoop?

Instead of marching into the cellar and the laundry room, Belle returned to the library.

“Whose blood is this? Did they die?” She asked him.

He peered up at her from the book. “Does it make a difference?” He asked. Belle wasn't sure if there was a sneer in his voice or not.

“Yes, it does!” Belle said, hearing her voice get a little bit too loud and shrill in her ears. But someone's life might have been taken during the night.

He lifted his face now from the book. “Yesterday evening I was watching two men fencing. Blood was drawn, and some of it splashed on my shirt from the blade.” He didn't sneer so much as contain a little pent-up anger. “Is that a sufficient explanation, housekeeper?”

Belle felt flustered, but still stared him down. “I believe violence is not good for the soul.” She glanced down as she was taking her leave before she might say something she didn't intend to or want to. She wasn't even sure what that might be.

“And you... have an interest in the integrity of my soul?” He asked, his voice subdued now. “Even though... I am wicked.”

Belle stopped short and turned, speaking with heartfelt plead. “I think people do wicked things, but I don't think anyone really wants to be wicked. I think goodness is in human nature by default, although for some reasons it may sometimes be misplaced, or forgotten.”
“Hmh. Human nature. But you forget, I am not human,” said Rumpelstiltskin, and returned to his book, indicating that was the end of their conversation.

Distressed, Belle took the shirt to soak in hot water in a basin in the corner of the kitchen. The morning had been a little longer than she had expected, and she still hadn't eaten anything or opened the newspaper. She spread the paper wide open on the worktable and prepared herself a meal before she set to giving herself a moment.

“Wash the shirt, dust and polish the greatroom, dust the library, clean the puddles in the foyer, clean the privy,” Belle told herself as she poured her tea and laid her late breakfast out by her newspaper, the only thing that made her feel like she was a part of the living, real world outside the surreal and silent nests Rumpelstiltskin made his home in.

She hadn't gotten far down the third page before Rumpelstiltskin made his appearance in the kitchen. Belle didn't see him walking in, he just was there, on the other side of the work table, looking down at her like she had sprouted a third eye in the middle of her head.

They stared at each other for a moment.

And then he spoke, with such a small, tender voice, Belle found herself quite speechless for a moment. “Why aren't you reading your newspaper in the library, like you do every morning?”

She blinked a little, and kept staring at him.

“I thought you wanted the library for yourself,” Belle said as soon as she found her voice.

Rumpelstiltskin fidgeted a bit. “But if I wanted to be alone, I would have been in the tower,” he said, and Belle stared at him in awe. She almost wanted to laugh, because she felt a bit absurd, but she had the good sense of realising that Rumpelstiltskin might not take it well if he thought she found him amusing right now. Belle also wanted to extend her hand across the table and put it on his, but she was unsure if such a thing might be done. Last time she had touched him, he'd simply taken her hand and put if away. She couldn't even remember why she had done so, not at all. She just had. It had felt like the thing to do.

Now he seemed like he was about to run away, thanks to the prolonged silence, and Belle decided to dart her hand across the table. The worst thing he might do about it was slip away, or remove the hand. He didn't. Belle patted, then tugged his hand reassuringly. She smiled, happy that he wasn't brushing her off. “Please, sit down. I'll get you another cup of tea, there's some in the pot.”

Belle had him a fresh teacup in front of him in seconds, and retook her seat. He remained standing, and looking uncertain. Belle closed the newspaper and folded her hands in her lap, and there was another awkward moment of silence.

“It's very human to feel lonely, especially after a hundred years of solitude,” Belle said, hoping she sounded delicate enough. Rumpelstiltskin said nothing, his eyes wandered on the piece of the newspaper that was legible on top of the table. “Is that why you really wanted a housekeeper? To have someone to talk to?” Belle asked him. “Not just to dust your collections?”

Rumpelstiltskin accepted his tea and it seemed to give him the power to recompose himself for a moment. “The Dark One doesn't dust,” he said with the wry tilt to his voice Belle had learned to take as part of his flavour of humour. “Nor is he human,” he repeated.

“But you... you appear so ordinary, no not mundane...” Belle struggled for words for a moment, trying to put it in a way that he wouldn't take as insulting. “I think you have an interesting sense of
humour. And you have such a sweet-tooth, and you like nice clothes and luxuries, and you have the most extensive tea collection I’ve ever seen, surely. You like reading, and lively conversation. And you seem worried about how you look, isn't that why you don't have any mirrors in the house?"

He seemed to now follow her train of thought, and Belle could not blame him, for she wasn't exactly sure what she telling him. “I just don't think you can be so terribly inhuman, when you act very much like one.”

“Even if I were a human, I'd be a monstrous one,” he said, with a sly grin, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. He sipped his tea and looked elsewhere.

Belle remembered then.

“There was that chest. In the summer, when we were moving here. It had clothes inside. Small, as if they might have fit a boy. You were upset when I touched them.” Belle said. “Whose clothes are they?” She asked, her voice timid with careful tenderness.

Rumpelstiltskin weighed his answer for a moment. “They belonged to my son.” Rumpelstiltskin smiled back at her, and Belle thought it was the most beautiful smile he’d given her, for how genuine it seemed, entirely without irony, but it was mingled with sorrow. He seemed intent to try and calm his face of emotion then.

Belle nodded slowly. “What happened to him?” She asked.

“I lost him,” Rumpelstiltskin said, and turned his face away from her. “I lost him, and his mother,” he said.

Belle nodded nervously. They were quiet for a moment. The clock in the kitchen measured time between their silences.

“But you must have been a man, once, then?” Belle asked him. “An ordinary man.”

He said nothing.

“We're all alone in your castle and your house, and I think... I must feel as lonely as you do,” Belle said. “Don't you think it would be more comfortable for us both if we knew each other a little better, if we're to spend an eternity together?”

Rumpelstiltskin sipped his tea and resumed cradling it between his hands, looking down with his hair curtaining his expression. Then he looked up and seemed a bit more the usual imp Belle was used to. “You're a clever niece of a rather clever enchantress. I don't think I shall be divulging any of my terrible secrets to you, Belle,” he said, but with friendly warmth in his voice. “Do tell me though,” he said as he pulled a chair and sat down, “something about yourself.”

Belle shrugged. “What do you want to know?”

He thought a moment. “Why did you choose to come with me?”

A fair question, she thought. “If father had given up his mills, he'd have lost his life's work. We were already living on debt, so I couldn't continue my studies, or travel. I thought, if I accept your offer, those terrible people would have failed to bully my father into giving up his business, at least. So there was a chance of some justice. And I'd often had this sense of not really earning my keep. Young ladies in the societies I ought to have taken part in should school themselves to be good wives and mothers, forging alliances between well-bred families of good money. They don't get themselves involved with academics and politics. I was never sure if I would ever be anything but an expense to
my father, with my odd ways. Not that he minded, he really liked showing me and teaching me things. Like chess, or how engines and gears work.”

He listened to her, seeming amused.

“Do I talk too much, sir?” Belle asked him.

“Not at all. Do go on.”

“I would do all I could, even when we did have money. Help with the household. Make sure he didn't forget his appointments. So I figured, this wouldn't be so bad. Not unless you were horrible. But I already had a hunch you were not, since you helped me down from the roof of my aunt's summer pavilion.” Belle smiled.

“Where's your hat?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, leaning his jaw on his palm then.

“It's strictly against the Rules to wear the student cap after summer. It is hanging from a nail I put in the wall of my bedroom.” Belle felt now terribly self-conscious to be talking about herself at such a length now. “What sort of education does one have as an immortal sorcerer?” She asked in her turn.

He smiled and shook his head ever so slightly. “Did you have a lot of friends?”

Belle looked down at her hands. “Not really. I've never been very good at making friends, or keeping them. I hope I am friendly enough, in my behaviour, that I don't come off as... rude. Or unkind.”

Rumpelstiltskin lifted an eyebrow, just as Belle glanced up, and she took it as a question, and an inclination to let her tell more.

“I had a good sort of friend only once,” Belle said, “in the school we went to in Avonlea. But I did and said maybe, something hurtful. She couldn't understand why I was so bookish, and I couldn't understand why she'd just planned to spend her life waiting for some man to come along and make life for her. I think I got very angry about it, and she was very upset. Anyhow, when school ended, we never spoke again to each other.” She bit her lower lip a little, wondering where this tirade was coming from. She rarely had such a raptly attentive, listening audience, and she found it pleasant to be the centre of attention. Perhaps she ought to not worry, Belle thought, for it was hardly state secrets she was divulging.

“I do have friends, or some kind, but they're all for saying hello and goodbye and talking about the weather with. I suppose most people find me either odd, or amusing. Except my father who thinks me an ignorant child.” Belle sighed. “And of course, aunt Hortensia. She's always made me feel good about myself. I miss papa and her the most.”

“And what about the handsome gentleman who was trying to rescue you from the burden of your hate, and then brandishing a weapon at me in your aunt's house?” Rumpelstiltskin asked, smile in his voice.

Belle laughed. “Oh dear. I'm glad aunt Hortensia saved him and his mother. But I can't say I was very impressed with his company, even though aunt Sylvia was trying to set up a match. She was so keen to see me engaged soon, especially with the state of my father's mills. But I've never really seen myself getting married. I suppose the ladies I used to demonstrate at the parliament with, my mother's friends, very few of them were married, they either didn't have the time or the inclination. And men who want to marry hardly want wives who have no time to stay home and keep house.”

“And yet here you are, housekeeping.”
“Very few housekeepers that I know of eat as well as I do. Nor do they have perfectly fitted libraries to keep themselves amused after the day's work,” Belle said.

“So until last summer, your only focus in life was education?”

Belle nodded. “Maybe focus is a bit too generous. I may perhaps been drifting a little. I didn't know what I wanted to pursue the most, so I've dabbled in lots of things, but never committed to anything in particular. Whenever I thought I'd decided what I wanted to study, I'd always feel this regret, like the world is too big and amazing and wonderful, to solely focus on a single facet of it.”

Belle found herself so caught up in the passion of explaining her fascinations with the surrounding reality, that her eyes wandered around the kitchen as she was imagining all the lectures of law, medicine, philology, history, biology, philosophy, aesthetics, and so forth, that she had attended during her time at the university. When she found her at the end of her meandering thoughts, she saw that Rumpelstiltskin was looking at her with a soft smile on his lips which made him seem ever so much more human than he'd ever seemed to her before.

“Do I work hard enough?” Belle asked him. It seemed to catch him off guard, for how he seemed surprised. “I feel as though I should be doing more. Some households have whole armies of servants who seem busy all day through. I get to have moments to myself very often here. To be honest, the work isn't as hard as I thought it would be.”

Rumpelstiltskin's hand made a nervous little gesture. “Magic does much.”

Except keep you company, Belle thought. “Is there anything else I could do with my time? Maybe we should find another board game, or some other diversion?”

Rumpelstiltskin's expression turned into mischief and he seemed like he was about to say something particularly nasty – it was his face for making jokes about blood and flaying – but caught himself, and his features softened again. “If you want to entertain me, you can do so by telling me more about yourself.”

Belle blushed. “I think that was all of it, really. I can't think of anything else. I'm hardly anyone interesting.”

Rumpelstiltskin cocked his head. “You've chained yourself to the parliament house at sixteen, gotten arrested numerous times, your great aunt is the most fabled witch in the land, and you are the Dark One's housekeeper. And you have a knack for modesty.”

“Haha. I'd much rather listen to you. I mean, you've lived through so much, seen so much! You've been alive in the world of Richard Blake. Did you ever meet Dulcinea Thatcher?”

He frowned a bit. “Who is Dulcinea Thatcher.”

Belle slammed her hand on the table and almost stood up. “Only the most amazing scientist in the world! The author of The Origins of Life! She's been everywhere!”

Rumpelstiltskin didn't seem convinced. “Do we have that in the library?”

Belle found the question absurd, since she knew it was. Maybe her disapproval showed on her face, because Rumpelstiltskin suddenly turned defensive. “You have no idea how tedious reading has become in the past century, since every university produces more text in a year than most people read in a lifetime. When I was... In the past, there was only three hundred books or so, and you were set for life with literal knowledge.”
That lit up Belle's imagination, and her smile returned, as she imagined a world with only three hundred books.

"Where did the books come from, the ones in the library?"

"They're someone's collection."

"What did they get in return?" Belle asked.

"A magic potion," Rumpelstiltskin replied.

Belle felt stunned. The books in the library were all fairly new editions. No torn hand-me-downs from anyone's great-grandfather there. And someone had thought them all worth a single magic potion.

"What did the potion do?" Belle asked.

He smiled and shook his head.

"Anyhow, I think you should read The Origins of Life, it's really good. Bit long though, I've only read sections of it."

"And is miss Thatcher a witch? Does the book cover magic?" Rumpelstiltskin asked.

Belle had to admit there was no magic to The Origins of Life as far as she knew. "It's really mostly a book about strange birds, and about animals and humans and trolls and how and why everything came about, and how they are different. I'm surprised you don't know this, when the book was published it challenged all the concepts about every species having been created to become as they are, but according to miss Thatcher there was only a single thing in the beginning, and that branched off into two different things along with time. Miss Thatcher's experiments and studies with breeding insects and sheep along with her observations made on remote islands support her thesis very well."

"Wait, breeding insects with sheep?" Rumpelstiltskin asked.

"Good grief, no!" Belle laughed. "She had a fruit fly farm, and she studied that. And she also bred sheep. Separately. Or rather, she had people who helped her with that. I read the fruit fly things. I think that was how I decided I wouldn't pursue biology, because I don't really want to spend the rest of my life staring at dead flies through a microscope."

"Why didn't you ever decide to follow your aunt's career and become involved with magic? With magic, you can do anything. And you seem to like everything." Rumpelstiltskin's question was intriguing. Belle also thought she heard some kind of a trap in it.

"I hope I won't offend you, sir, but from what I know of magic, is that it comes always with great price. And aunt Hortensia says it's a lot better to know things yourself, and do things yourself." Belle looked into Rumpelstiltskin's eyes coyly, fearing what she might see there, thanks to her blazing honesty. "She said if you can always get your way without a thought, and not knowing or caring about the consequences, your life becomes shallow and vapid and meaningless, because one can only get out of anything as much as you put in, and when it all comes down to it, she says, magic is nothing."

Rumpelstiltskin's eye made a most curious twitch. Then he looked aside. "Your foolish aunt is quite wrong. Magic comes from somewhere. And it has its costs."

He looked back at her, and he smiled, a wicked smile. "Magic is power. She knows that."
Belle shrugged, and looked down at her hands again, for how piercing Rumpelstiltskin's gaze could be. “That's about all I know.”

“All you've heard,” he corrected.

“So uhm. You used to read a lot then? Those three hundred books?” Belle asked, wishing to steer the conversation away from a sea of topic she had no idea how to swim in.

“I was in a situation where I had to. I even liked reading for a while. Then it got dull after a hundred years.”

Belle couldn't imagine becoming ever bored with reading, the very idea was incomprehensible. “I think if I should live to be over a hundred years old, I'd still love books and reading more than anything else,” she said. “And you'll stay as you are? You'll look the same and be the same, when I'm a hundred?”

He nodded into his palm, and glanced at the newspaper on the table between them. The front page headline was about a mass grave found in southern Whiteland, a tragic business if there was ever one to be seen. The rebel royalists claimed it was the government's work, and the government said it was the royalists' crusade punishing the small people since they had no power left to strike straight against the Whiteland parliament. “Aristocracy and peasants both dying,” was written in a subtitle near a photograph of sombre people in black going through the pile of corpses.

Belle had often felt grateful for and amazed by the very civilized manner of Marchland's own inner reformations. A very intellectual and learned king had simply looked at the post-revolution Arbonne and the rivers of blood that had ran there. The king had considered the future and had decided that they should not have to deal with the same in Marchland, so he had set up the new parliament and abdicated. Belle also recalled having read that the same king now lived far south, had divorced his wife, and spent his time at roulette tables in a city by the Aquamarine Sea, having scandals with dancing girls from the floor show. Gossip column, page six.

“You vanish inside your own thoughts,” Rumpelstiltskin said, his voice bringing Belle back from the short journey the newspaper had taken her to.

“I was just thinking about showgirls,” Belle blurted in a moment of unthinking honesty.

“Of murdering them, by the look in your eyes?”

An easy smile returned to Belle's lips. “No, not at all. I was miles away. It was all a bit of nonsense, really. There was a puddle in the foyer from melting snow, I should really go take care of it before the wood or the rugs get spoiled, I'm terribly sorry by the way if that's already happened. But it has been very nice talking with you, perhaps we can continue a bit later today, when I bring your afternoon tea.” She patted the back of Rumpelstiltskin's vacant hand and then launched herself up on her feet to get to work.

His eyes followed her around the room and he said nothing. Belle collected the tea cups and saucers and rinsed them, feeling bemused and delighted by Rumpelstiltskin's timid steps out of his secretive shell. “Do you need something before I go?” She asked.

Rumpelstiltskin took to his feet with his strange acrobatic grace. “Thank you, Belle. I'll see you in the afternoon.”

But there was no afternoon tea talk. Something else had attracted Rumpelstiltskin's attention by the
time Belle was making the tea tray, and he'd simply announced he'd be gone and not be back for dinner. Belle was alone in the house again, with only her thoughts to keep her company. Those thoughts were entirely occupied by her fascination and wonder with Rumpelstiltskin for the rest of the day. In all honesty, she couldn't wait for another opportunity to talk to or with him. She couldn't remember anyone ever before having paid such rapt attention to her, and she supposed it had been so almost since the first moment they had met, although his first observation of her had been her state of stun in aunt Hortensia's dining room.

Wicked and sinful though he was with his violent quips and bloodied silk shirts, Belle felt undeniable pleasure at his interest in her. There seemed to be nothing sinister or inappropriate about his behaviour, all they shared were tea and words. And to think she of all the people in the world would be telling him about advances in scientific research!

For the rest of the day, Belle went through her work with a light, giddy feeling in the pit of her stomach, feeling like her life was strangely beautiful in its own haunted way even though she was trapped in a house that wouldn't let her leave. But she had hope, and faith, that it might not always be so, and it was partially that great optimism that kept her spirits high as she tidied the house that day from top to bottom, from dusting the relics of the greatroom to scrubbing Rumpelstiltskin's bathtub. As per the usual directions, she only left the tower untouched, for her safety as much as the house's.

It was well past dinner time by the time she was done. The food that had arrived by magic from another country had gone cold, but it didn't ruin her appetite for it. Belle ate even a portion off the other plate, hating to think such lovely food might go to waste, and by the time she was done it was night outside. As much as she thought that she needed to give herself a sponge bath for how much she'd toileed and sweated during the day, Belle felt it was far too late in the night to be doing such things. She'd also neglected to heat up her cottage in her state of excitement, so she visited there briefly to assess that it was very cold there indeed. She filled the masonry heater with logs, kindled a fire with what felt like were the last of her energies, and then returned to the house where it was lovely and warm, so she might eventually come back home to a bedroom that was at least a little bit warmer than a cellar.

That was why she ended up falling asleep in the big comfortable chair by the fire in the library that night. She had her woollen shawl wrapped around her, and she had been reading a book on classic human virtues, since she'd recalled she wanted to debate with Rumpelstiltskin about the nature of goodness in humanity, but she hadn't gotten very far. The ink had danced and swum around the page as she'd struggled to stay awake. The fire had been cosy and warm near her, and the steady tock of the library clock had marched her towards sleep.

Of her sleep, she could only remember that she wanted to be very much in it, when a ginger touch on her cheek woke her up, along with a softly phrased remark: “you'll wake up sore in the morning if you sleep there,” but Belle had shook her head at the darkness, and mumbled no, she'd be fine as soon as she had a sponge and a cup of tea, and “I'll say I told you so in the morning,” he'd said, and then Belle had felt a little warmer, and fallen asleep again.

Belle woke up the second time that night at some hour later. It was dark in the library, and she could feel her limbs and her back hurting for the way she'd nested in the chair. Stuffed and cosy as the chair was, it was not a bed. Furthermore, it was a terrible idea to fall asleep sitting while wearing a corset. As she unwound her tangled and aching legs and spread them out, she was confused for a moment with the extra weight of a blanket of some kind that had been spread over her. By touching it in the darkness, she thought she could recognize it as the comforter from the end of Rumpelstiltskin's bed in his room.

She felt stiff and sick as she finally got back to her feet. Reason told her to leave the blanket on the
chair and take her leave of the house, go to her own bed in the cottage and get rid of the corset that felt like it was squeezing her lower ribs so hard now that they wanted to give in. But another urge, one which Belle preferred to follow, was to creep up the stairs at three in the morning, to bring the blanket up to Rumpelstiltskin’s room. Just to return it, Belle told herself, although she thought she felt much more motivated by the idea that she wanted to see him asleep, like he must have seen her asleep. Not that she thought for a moment that Rumpelstiltskin could be sneaked up on, silent as she managed to make her steps in the eerie quiet of the dark house.

Then what am I doing? Belle wondered groggily, as she pushed open the door to the master bedroom, which gave no sound or creak. There was no one there. Belle peered in from the doorstep, just to make sure that the room was empty, before she crept in and folded the comforter at the foot of the bed, neat and nice.

Belle was headed back to the staircase, when she noticed a green light glowing at the door leading up to the tower. Rumpelstiltskin was awake, and working, Belle realised. She thought it was as good a chance as any to go see him, wish him good night, and thank him for wrapping her up warm.

Despite her aching legs and the sting around her midriff, Belle made her way up the staircase quietly as a ghost, in fear of interrupting something important. One could never know with magic.

There were flickers of light in the room above. Once she made it to the upstairs, she saw where they came from. The lights came from tiny flower fairies, all trapped inside glass jars. She could see them perfectly well. There were perhaps a dozen of them.

There was a strange smell in the air, presumably coming from a lantern that gave off green light, which illuminated Rumpelstiltskin's face as he leaned over the rows of fairy jars on his work table, staring at the tiny winged creatures with contempt. He opened one jar, and plunged his hand in swiftly, to catch one of the three fairies inside. He pulled it out as swiftly, and regarded it for a moment, keeping hold of it by its wings. The fairy flickered. It was too small for Belle to make out its expression, but she knew with certainty that the fairy was drowning in fear.

Then Rumpelstiltskin pulled out the wings off its back. They were thin, long things, like the wings of a dragonfly rather than of a butterfly. There was a high-pitched groan in the air, and the fairy began to crumble, turning into colourful dust. The other fairies all flickered in the jars in panic.

Rumpelstiltskin went through the jars, fairy by fairy, creating a pile of dust that had all the colours of the rainbow. After the torturous demise of the sixth fairy, Belle felt she couldn't breathe. She realised she had been holding her breath all this time, hoping to stay so quiet that she wouldn't be noticed. She returned down the stairs as silently as she had climbed them up. There was bile turning around in her stomach, and all the stiffness of her limbs, all the pinching of her corset was far forgotten now. She felt dizzy, nauseous and sharing the terror of the fairies that were dying up in the tower one by one.

She kept quiet as she descended the stairs from the morning room the the greatroom. She gave the spinning wheel a glare as she walked past it and out of the room. She retrieved her winter coat and stepped out into the biting cold winter night, and then her tears started forming in her eyes. Violent sobs overtook her. She felt worse than the night when Rumpelstiltskin had brought her to the Dark Castle. He was terrible, and evil, and Belle felt absolute despair for that.

Her feet wouldn't take her to the cottage. She felt as if going there would have been a sort of a lie, to further overlook the darkness that she shared a house with, to pretend that everything was fine. She felt far from fine. She felt confined, with a dire need to breathe great big gulps of air. But the constancy of walls around her, the solitude, even the rows of fir trees surrounding the house and crowding it with their shades were suffocating her and she couldn't ignore them any more.
The openness of the lake beckoned her. The very look of it drew her closer, not that she saw much from the downpour of tears. In the bleak darkness, she took the narrow path that led her down to the shore of the lake. Snow on ice made the view a serene, pristine field that seemed somehow comforting to her. She wanted to keep on going, get as far as possible from the house as she could. She stepped on the ice then, and it felt secure and strong underneath her.

The ice under the snow was slippery, so Belle had to move forwards as if she were skating on the ice. Her shoes were not really made for winter outings, so her feet began to feel cold soon, but she decided not to care. She needed to do something to calm herself down before she returned to the horrible, vile house where she never knew when murder might happen.

But the horrible vile house still had her under its spell. Perhaps thanks to some oversight, the spell hadn't really thought of what it should do with Belle leaving by walking across ice towards another shore.

So instead of turning her back, it made the ice crack underneath the housekeeper's feet. She fell through in half a second, so swiftly she didn't even realize what had happened, before she was engulfed by utter, truly horrifying darkness, and felt her whole body grow uselessly numb in the icy water.
“Shh. You fell, but I caught you. I caught you.”

Belle heard the words repeated a few more times, and she tried to answer, but she couldn't make her mouth move. It was because she had just been drinking tea, yes, that what it must have been. She had been drinking tea, and had accidentally inhaled it. That was why she was coughing now. The tea had gone so cold, but she had drank it anyway – waste not, want not.

It was so very light out, it must have been summer. That explained why she felt so hot everywhere. It was the hottest day in all of the months of July Belle could recall since ever, and she was reclining in Hortensia's parlour in the countryside, on her back. How remarkable that she had been drinking tea while she had been lying on her back. The large windows let all the heat and the sunlight in, and there was no escaping it.

Belle caughed, and she felt aunt Hortensia's gaze on her. Belle tried to explain her she wished the doors and windows opened so they might get a draft in the room, for she simply couldn't breathe! But aunt Hortensia didn't understand her. “Calm down,” she said, but she didn't sound like herself.

Frustrated, Belle turned her head to face the windows and the striking, blinding sunlight. She thought she saw a strangely familiar yet extremely unrecognisable shape of a woman strolling just past the windows. Belle knew she had never seen her before, but there was something about the way she walked, the way she dressed and the way she carried herself that was as familiar to herself as her own soul. Her face was hidden under a hat with an enormous brim, with lots of pastel coloured flowers pinned to it. She gave Belle the briefest of glances and walked on, out of sight and beyond the windows.

Then the curtains of the parlour were drawn, and there was much less light, but Belle still felt hot. She recalled her corset had felt horribly stifling, and she still felt like she couldn't breathe. If she hadn't been coughing tea, she would have begged her pardon of aunt Hortensia for her present need to unbutton her blouse so she might unlace her corset, and aunt Hortensia was very understanding about the matter. Belle pushed away the thick down blankets and picked at the pearly buttons at her collar. She got almost halfway down, before she was wrapped in blankets again.

Vexed, Belle slapped weakly at the hands. She was in her aunt's house, and Hortensia had given her permission to undress, so if anyone had a problem with it, they should be the ones to leave.

“No, you need to stay warm.”

Belle felt very differently about the matter, and continued defiantly to take her blouse off even as she was cocooned into the blanket. She felt a little apologetic about the way how she was still spitting tea on the blanket, but she couldn't help herself. It was that, or choke. But she was still too hot, and she started sitting up in order to remove her blouse so she could work on the corset.

“The corset? Do you want it off?”

Of course she wanted it away. Aunt Hortensia helped her with the damned thing, and Belle was amazed to find it was already loose. All Hortensia had to do was remove it, and then Belle took a big lungful of air and spat more tea over the lovely and thick blanket, wondering how aunt Hortensia had
the same kind of blanket as she did in her cottage in the shadow of Rumpelstiltskin's house by the lake.

“You need this back on.”

Belle shook her head and fought weakly back at the blouse being put back on. She would have preferred to nap on the parlour sofa in her undergarments, for how hot she felt. But while her arms and hands were being occupied, she realised her feet and legs could move. That was swell, because that enabled her to kick the stifling hot blanket away, not that it did much good. But she managed to kick the damn things quite far away, almost into the fireplace!

“Oh, Belle,” she heard, and wanted to laugh. No one had sounded that despondent with the declaration of her name since her secondary school history teacher, when she had felt the need to correct Miss Cottington about some grave mistakes she had found in the grading of her final examination.

While the blanket was being retrieved, Belle took the opportunity to discard her unbuttoned blouse yet again, and did so with a triumphant feeling of success. She had pulled off one sleeve and was dealing with the other when hands stronger than hers took hold of her.

“Stop. You need to stay as warm as you can,” sincere, worried words tried to persuade her, but Belle couldn't understand the necessity for all these clothes and blankets. She fought back feebly, but only ended up being trapped in her guardian's embrace against her will, held like a doll against their body, wrapped in the blanket like she was a moth trying to break out of its shell. It was too warm, far too warm, and she was also beginning to be vaguely aware that not all was well in the insides of her. Everything felt wrong. She wanted to ask aunt Hortensia why she had decided to redecorate the parlour, but there was just more cold tea coming up her throat when she tried to speak.

Rumpelstiltskin had gotten Belle back to breathing and had spent a little magic drying her clothes, but he had no idea at all what to do next with the creature. She was unable to do anything except puke cold water and make her lips twitch with the effort of trying to make words, and she seemed to have a great desire to remove her clothes, but he was fairly certain that the white-blue icicle as she was, that would have been a bad idea.

His spirited housekeeper wasn't entirely without willpower though, for she almost burnt the blanket she'd been wrapped in, and had twice now tried to remove her blouse. Since Rumpelstiltskin had no intention of allowing Belle to set the house on fire, or to let her die of hypothermia, he'd wrapped her in the singed blanket so tightly she couldn't move her limbs, and had pulled her against him and kept her still, trying to remember anything useful from his collection of three hundreds years' worth of memories, but nothing useful occurred to him. There was no particular spell or potion either that he might have thought useful for half-drowned frost-bitten maidens. Some memory of a memory told him not to just use a spell to make her warm again, because of some... reason. Had he known the reason why, he could have taken it to account and designed the spell around it, but right now he was not entirely in the position to smoke his pipe and do a little walk around the room muddling over it, since Belle was in danger right now, in his arms, and he knew it was thanks to his spell that had gone slightly awry.

Rumpelstiltskin was aware every time Belle tried to step out of the house, always had been. It was like the lightest of spider threads, tugging in the back of his mind, when such a thing occurred, and he'd get some faint notion of what was happening, and most often it would amuse him. But that night, instead of a faint tugging, there had been a frantic trashing and pulling as the spell had began to unravel, not knowing what it was meant to do. Spells were like small children, who had to be told
in no uncertain terms what exactly it was that was expected and demanded of them, up until some unforeseen change of circumstances would confuse them.

As a result of this spell backfiring, he had found his housekeeper sinking into the depths of the lake, pulled down by the weight of her voluminous skirts no doubt. He'd been angry that she'd been trying to escape. He also knew full well that she'd crept up the stairs into the tower that night, a little before, seeing him make fairy dust which he needed delivered to Princess Snow as soon as this little mess was dealt with.

He needed to be working, to make sure Princess Snow would get away from her step-mother’s wrath for a few months more. He needed to make sure Prince James would die, so he could introduce the twin David, who would fall in low with Snow and save her with his kiss, and marry her, and incur more of Regina's wrath on Snow. All of that required Rumpelstiltskin's attention, but he found he couldn't leave Belle cold and alone, blue-lipped and delirious by the far-away look in her eyes. She looked like she were dead, only slightly warmer, and twitching.

“You shouldn't have tried to escape,” he told her, trying to sound wrathful and spiteful, but he could hear himself, his voice ringing only with misery.

His grand plans and thoughts in shambles, Rumpelstiltskin just stared at the girl for a moment, as he held her, hoping the colour would return to her on its own, that she might start speaking again, tell him she was fine and just needed a little rest by the fire, that everything would be well in the morning. Yet there seemed to be no positive developments, stare as he might at her, only willing her to live since he couldn't quite trust his magic right now, not until he knew how he might do about it.

It occurred to him that there was plenty enough knowledge stored on the shelves of the library, so Rumpelstiltskin’s next thought took them both there. It was chilly, and he'd considered leaving Belle behind in her sitting room in the cottage where it was already warm, but he needed only to glance at the fireplace in the library to make the flames leap and roar, and another magic poured into the room, making the air warmer. All the lights flickered on as well. Rumpelstiltskin left Belle on the plush chair near the fire and set out to look for a book. It was nervous, flighty work since he had to return to wrap Belle every minute or so when she was escaping her blanket and clothes. He considered tying her down, but he felt his housekeeper had suffered enough already without having to be confined like a mental patient.

Not that Belle didn't look exactly like a mental patient, with her hair free and wild and unruly, her eyes strange with pinhead pupils seeing another world, her lips twitching and her shivering hands in constant motion trying to get herself undressed. She looked so very unlike herself, like she were some terrifying caricature of herself, and Rumpelstiltskin found it distressing. He wanted to find some cynical and vicious remark to throw at her about her conduct even amidst the rising fear – perhaps this was why he couldn't see her future? Because it was so very short – and found he had no quips or vehemence to throw at the situation to divide himself apart to a distance from it.

In his angry frustration, Rumpelstiltskin pulled down some books from the shelves as he went through them, as if the ones that were not the one he needed were put there only for the purpose of standing in his way. He swore at some of the books, for he couldn't fathom the order they were in. Every single book seemed just placed at random, and he was angry that Belle hadn't put them in an order that would have made sense, it would be her own fault if she were to die, not his, he swore, and with a gasp of relief found what he thought he was looking for.

It was a small struggle to leaf through the pages and find the symptoms and treatments of frostbites while he was simultaneously trying to keep Belle dressed and warm. He would have made a better job of both if he'd had four hands and arms instead of two, but once he'd picked up Belle and held
her between himself and the book the task was easily accomplished. And from the book, he found he’d been right, that the thawing should be slow. Warming her up too quickly would have resulted in shock or death, Rumpelstiltskin read, skimming, skimming. She was most likely suffering from a temporary malfunction in the brain that made her mistake cold for hot, and there was a good chance she was hallucinating.

Belle was still managing to move her limbs, so that was well and good, but that was also a part of the trouble at hand. She couldn’t be trusted to be left alone, in case she ran out into the night naked. The book clearly stated her chances were better if she were left conscious, so sleep medication (or sleeping spells) were not advised. The best perceived cure for her condition was to be held against something with human temperature, such as another person.

Rumpelstiltskin felt horribly unqualified for this, and wanted to go out and look for a “volunteer” to hire for the job, but unless he now started working on elaborate time spells, he simply didn’t have the time to go about looking for a human radiator.

“It suggests you try a warm cup of tea,” he said, and felt a surprisingly strong spasm of shivering and shaking taking over Belle.

“No,” she replied with a whispering, croaky voice, the quietest voice that had ever been so full of resolution.

Belle woke up. She had no idea what time it was, she wasn’t even sure if she was at aunt Hortensia's house, or in her father's house in Avonlea, in a Dark Castle or in a wooden house by a lake in the forests of Marchland. She felt cold, that much was certain. She remembered a moment of blind panic, not being able to feel her arms, and the sensation of being pulled down into darkness, piercing pain inside her lungs. She also remembered coughing and spitting, and some strange vision of aunt Hortensia, and another woman in Hortensia's garden.

Shivers all across her body made her feel very much real and alive now, compared to where and how she’d been. Belle could feel half of her body on her right hand side was almost warm, but the other half was icy cold despite the almost suffocating layer of blankets she was under, in addition to clothes. She reached her warm hand to touch her waist and found no trace of her new corset there.

She swallowed, and slowly opened her eyes. There was daylight outside. Belle recalled the last time she had seen Rumpelstiltskin he had looked like a merciless and cruel predator slaying frightened little fairy children for his distorted pleasure. She turned her head slightly, pulled herself up, and looked at him. He seemed to be asleep there, half-sitting. Belle was distraught how far apart he seemed from that monstrous vision that had sent her fleeing into the night. He now seemed only tired.

Belle could feel the raggedness in her breathing. Sitting up seemed to have taken most of her energies, and she sunk back under the blankets. She squirmed around to lay on her stomach, to get the other half of her warm again, and that stirred Rumpelstiltskin. Belle could hear his breath change, going shallow at first, and then quiet.

“How? Do you want something to drink?” He asked her with a quiet voice.

“I'm fine,” she replied, surprised how exhausting even the effort of making speech was.

As soon as her left side began to feel warm, Belle fell asleep again. When she next woke up, it was dark outside the window of her bedroom in the cottage. There were a few candles in her bedroom,
which evidently hadn't burned for very long yet by the look of them.

Belle's stomach growled in the most unladylike manner, and she felt very hot underneath the layers of blankets she was still under. There was no sign of Rumpelstiltskin. She called him by his name, and he appeared – not by magic, but by walking in from the other room.

“Oh. Thank you,” Belle said, as she clambered up to sit, feeling immediately weak and faint as she did so. She felt like she hadn't eaten or drank in days, her tongue was dry and her stomach an empty pit.

He anticipated her, and had produced a tray of morning food on a tray by her bed before she had the presence of mind to ask for a bite to eat.

“I think I may need a little trip to the privy,” Belle said, feeling like every word had to be gagged. It was a realistic yet embarrassing fact of life in the world of bodily needs after spending a small eternity in bed.

“Don't worry, I can take care of that.”

“With magic?” Belle asked, a drearily weak hand shaking as it reached for the tray. “So you haven't been to the loo in hundreds of years?” She asked him, incredulous to have solved the mystery of why she never really needed to do any cleaning with the toilet bowls.

“You do have the most extraordinary choices for conversation topics after a near death experience,” he replied. Belle felt strangely unattached to everything, the falling through the ice, of small talk etiquette of polite conversation. She could tell she was being scolded, but she didn't care. She took a plateful of bacon and eggs and dug in. She had wanted to ask about her rescue, and what had happened, but then a mood of apathy swept her questions away. She had the awful sinking feeling that Rumpelstiltskin had caused the accident somehow, and for how warm and nice he had felt lying in bed next to her, Belle couldn't bring herself to give the least care for how inadequate her conversation was.

Maybe her brooding anger was showing on her face while she was eating, for the next thing Rumpelstiltskin was to say to her was a quiet, small apology.

Belle was in the habit of being very forgiving too, once an apology was made. She felt the tension she had gathered flutter away, and when she put the tray of food aside, she felt rather relieved, and even a smile passed through her face.

“I was out on a walk. I needed the air,” Belle said. “That's why I was out on the lake.”

Rumpelstiltskin removed the emptied tray from their presence, and seemed to accept the explanation she gave him.

The food she'd eaten made her feel tired and warm. Her body had been shivering and suffering spasms so that she felt like she had ran the whole day through. Belle barely noticed slipping back into sleep, and thought she'd only closed her eyes for a moment, but the next time she opened them it was morning, or perhaps day again. There were beautiful flowers by her table, spreading their sweet fragrance into the room. It was a bouquet of hothouse flowers with dark red roses, small creamy carnations and pink gerberas. The prettiest bunch of flowers she'd ever been given, Belle reflected.

It was time to get out of the clothes she'd worn for two days in bed, and she ached as she forced her limbs to move and do as she told them to, but she was hardly an invalid. The moment she dug her way out of the blankets, she felt a little chilly, and she sneezed so badly she felt mucus explode out of
her nose and land all over every textile in the room.

“So I have caught a cold,” she ventured to tell herself, also to see if she could speak, and was satisfied that she could. Belle sat up on the edge of the bed, thinking it had been laundry day the day before, so there was little to wear that wasn't soiled. But the things she'd been wearing simply had to go, they were moist with her sweat, and smelt of sick – she recalled she'd thrown up at some point, so that was probably the reason why.

Having changed into the very last of her clean clothes, Belle realised she had no shoes at all. She'd never asked for a new pair of shoes after summer, having come to the Dark Castle only possessing the single pair. She looked about her two rooms for the shoes, wondering what Rumpelstiltskin had done with her shoes, until she recalled she'd not bothered to lace the shoes too well, that night after she had put them on, waking up in the library. She'd simply slipped them on and hid the laces behind her ankles before she'd gone about the house.

There was something dreadfully awful about the idea of two shoes lying at the bottom of a freezing cold lake, that shook Belle as she thought she might have been there with them. No, it was too dreadful to think about, she told herself. She thought it a very foolish idea to go walking out in the cold without her shoes on, even as another fit of sneezes took her over. She needed Rumpelstiltskin.

That idea in itself was a bit alarming. Belle hadn't at any point during the previous months particularly felt that she really needed Rumpelstiltskin for anything besides making sure there was occasionally enough food in the pantries that she didn't starve. Most of her requests for him had been for practical matters, she'd needed clothes, and she'd needed something to engage her mind with.

She hadn't needed the help or the conversation of the master of the house, if she had had a problem he would have been the last person to take it to, and somehow try to muddle over it herself until she'd either succeed or fail. That was, after all, what Rumpelstiltskin liked about her being the housekeeper, her being resourceful and independent and clever, and not bothering him with every minute detail. Belle had given him her society whenever she'd found it diverting or interesting, or serving her pursuits of making him see her point of view at times, but now she found herself in quite the emotional state of wanting to be in his presence. Not in a state avoiding solitude, but most definitely him, in her house.

“Goodness, I must be really very ill,” Belle said aloud to no one in particular. She thought of putting on a few more layers of socks, but decided against the idea. Instead she pattered over to her little sitting room, and gazed into the very last dying embers of a fire that must have been lit there in the morning, and there she spoke Rumpelstiltskin's name.

He didn't appear immediately. Belle sat by the fire a moment, blowing her nose into a handkerchief, worried she might have to get on with it and walk to the house through the snow after all. Feeling dreadful and irritated that he should ignore her summons on this occasion, Belle was already heading back to her little boudoir when she found herself walking straight into him again.

Rumpelstiltskin was dressed for outdoors, with a cloak so dark red it was almost black, and had a few snowflakes in his hair, and was regarding her with the most intense of gazes.

“You called?” He asked.

“I seem to have misplaced my shoes. I can't leave the house without them.” Belle wondered at the timidity that was threatening to take over her voice. She made a strange half-laugh, and felt a sneeze coming, so she had to cover her face with her handkerchief again. She felt so curiously foolish, being watched by him while she was in a state of such unappealing fits of sneezes and coughs.
“Of course, but perhaps you'll not go outside for now?” She heard Rumpelstiltskin say. “You'll need something for the cold. Do you want any books from the library?”

“Thank you, for your consideration. So, so very kind of you,” Belle said, and allowed herself to be escorted to take a seat by the fire. “You were outside when I called, I'm sorry I disturbed you.”

“No matter,” he said, a smile flickering on his lips.

“Truth be told, I think I'm a bit too tired to read. And the laundry needs doing, and I'm sure the kitchen could use my attention. Perhaps if I'm very careful, I might something around the house?” Belle was already climbing out from the crook of the sofa, but Rumpelstiltskin pressed her shoulders down. With a wave of his hand he produced a shawl, the shawl he'd given her, and wrapped it around Belle's shoulders.

“Just try not to catch your death,” he said, and was gone next.

Belle obstinately got back to her feet and walked around the room as she waited for Rumpelstiltskin's return. She looked outside into the snowy garden, but the white view offered little to look at. Then she stared at the sitting room. It had not changed much since her arrival, except for some books she'd left lying about. There were the few dried leaves and flowers from the summer she had kept as a memory, but she hadn't made much of a mark in the space. She had very little make it more personal with.

It felt good to walk around, even if her feet felt chilly on the cold floors. Eventually she decided it would be foolish to overexert herself, so Belle returned to the sofa and lifted her legs up on it, hiding her feet under the long skirts she wore. She pulled out a fresh handkerchief from her sleeve, for the one she'd started with had become a too moist for her liking.

When returned, bringing her tea and breakfast and books, it felt better than when he'd given her the library, the board game and the willow herbs he'd produced her with every month, all of them put together. Belle wondered at that. She'd decided to put aside the matter of the reason behind her falling under the ice, but she thought she ought to have been more guarded. And a cup of tea and some books hardly should have been cause to give her such feelings of familiar affection!

It was because he'd not really been very concerned for her at the time of the library, or the board game, Belle thought. They'd been offered as ways to appease her, bribes to motivate her to stay and work hard, stay pleasant. Now he was offering her a book and a cup of tea, for how concerned he was for her. He was concerned! For her! And she was certain of it. Thoughts raced through her head and her eyes stood glazed while she stared at the fire and drank her tea.

“Sit with me, for a while?” Belle asked him, before he had the chance to leave. She thought she probably sounded at least as strange as Rumpelstiltskin had, when he had come looking for her company in the kitchen. He obliged her wordlessly. Gone were all the winter clothes, left with a black suit and a white silk shirt, and an emerald tie. He sat at the other end of the sofa.

“Please tell me something about life centuries ago.”

Rumpelstiltskin shrugged. “What life?”

“What were the Kingdoms like before the great revolution in Arbonne? Through your eyes?” Belle asked.

He smiled. “You mean the time before all your favourite ideas were ever spoken of.”

“Were you there?” Belle asked him.
“Yes, I was,” said Rumpelstiltskin. He didn't elaborate, so Belle realised she'd have to pull out every tidbit out of him one by one.

“Where did you live then?” Belle asked.

“In an area between Dimhaut and Arbonne. The place does not exist any longer, so it's no use to go looking through your maps and books for it,” he replied.

Belle thought of it. There were no large towns or cities on the map in that area, and there had never been. At that time, Rumpelstiltskin would have been in the middle of absolute rurality, but that was hardly surprising. He seemed to like the wild and distant places of the world.

Thinking of maps, towns and cities, another idea popped to Belle's head. She'd once overheard him speak something she hadn't understood.

“What is the language you first learnt in your life? A dialect of Arbonnais?”

He shook his head. “I shouldn't imagine it has any name. People didn't go about writing things down and naming them, like they do now. And there's no one left in the Land With Magic who speaks it in any case.”

He smiled, but Belle didn't feel any meaning to it. Belle had always thought Rumpelstiltskin a very lonely person, but to think that he was the only person left in all the world who spoke his own language. What a singularly sad existence it must have been.

“But you know how to write, so you could write down that language,” Belle said.

“I suppose I could, if I cared to,” said Rumpelstiltskin.

“I'd like to learn it.”

“There's hardly any point learning a language no one ever wrote anything in, and is spoken by so few you need less than one hand's fingers to count them,” said Rumpelstiltskin.

“No, I think you'd like it, if you were able to tell me to bring your tea in a culture imperialistic language like Avellone,” Belle suggested.

“So how many languages do you know?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her, and Belle made a face, trying to think of them all.

“Arbonnais, Avellone, the Major Cyrian dialect of Whiteland,” Belle started, and counted to eight.

“How did you go on about learning these languages?” He asked.

“The president knows nine languages, I'll have you know. When he was schooled as a youngster, his tutors had a system, they gave him one language to speak in, and only in that language, on every day of the week. When I was ten, I wanted to do the same, but I couldn't really manage it, not like every day. I think I got up to six before I went to the university. I studied some more exotic languages there.”

“You really do need to go to Shambhala so people there can ask you to bring them tea in their own native language,” he said, and Belle smiled coyly at being teased.

“How many languages do you know?” She asked him in turn.

“All of them. Of course,” he replied matter-of-factly.
“Right. Magic.” Belle's smile froze on her lips.

They sat in what started to be the most awkward silence between them that had ever transpired yet. Belle brought her handkerchief to her nose and sneezed, hating herself for the noise and the display she was making with it.

“I got your shoes from the lake. I dried them. They're right in your bedroom.”

“How wonderful. Thank you.”

“I was looking at them, and I thought, that perhaps you need some better shoes. Winter shoes. You should go and buy some from the village. It's called Mayshire, I'm sure they have a cobbler there.”

Belle shook her head slightly, amazed by what she was hearing. “I'm sorry?”

“There's a road down the hill, where I think you'll find a carriage passing by tomorrow morning, it'll be headed to the village. A train stops there daily and will take you to Avonlea. You'll probably manage your suitcase, but I can have the trunk delivered anywhere you wish. Although I think the moment it gets out of the sphere of my influence, it'll most likely appear at your aunt's doorstep.”

Belle blinked. “What, I have a magical trunk?”

“Or you could bring me more straw. In any case,” Rumpelstiltskin took to his feet, “I have work to do. You'll have dinner here tonight, and go to bed early. It'll be a long day for you tomorrow.”

Belle jumped on her feet as well. “I'm sorry, but I don't understand, what is it you want from me? Am I to go home? Do you want me to come back?”

He smiled. “You need to go where you can walk safe. I'm sorry to find out I can't manage that. Enjoy your books, Belle.” And so he left, through the front door too, not with a whiff of magic.

And Belle walked him through the window, retreating to his house through the dead icy remains of the rose garden. Bewildered, she wasn't sure what to make of it. She tried to remember the details of the contract she'd signed. What would this mean for her father's enterprise? Did they owe him money? She hurried into the bedroom and pulled her shoes on and without even bothering to lace them, she ran out and into the house. She searched every room all the way up to the tower, but there was no one inside, and no signs of life. No light, no warmth anywhere. She went to the Mysterious Door that connected the house to the castle, and made haste through the corridor.

There was a little light in the room of curios, a faint ghost-light that came out of nowhere. Belle stood still and silent, trying to listen. All the hundred and twenty rooms surrounding her were all quiet and as forlorn as ever.

Chapter End Notes

Heute back ich, morgen brau ich, übermorgen hol ich der Königin ihr Kind; ach, wie gut, dass niemand weiß, dass ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß!
Chapter Summary

Both travel arrangements and the fast approaching Yuletide call for book shopping. Other things also happen.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There had been no sight or sound of Rumpelstiltskin on the morning of Belle's departure. She had spent the day before fussing about the cottage, cleaning after herself, and packing her things. Some items she was forced to leave behind for there was no room for everything, not after she'd gotten a whole new set of winter clothes. As she'd been choosing what to pack and what to leave, she'd been very sorry to leave aunt Hortensia's golden gown behind, for it required more space than anything else in the chest it had arrived in. She'd wanted to ask Rumpelstiltskin about having the gown sent after her, but he'd inconveniently disappeared.

The flowers in her bedroom were were the last thing she dealt with. The gerbera daisies wouldn't dry well, so she left them in the vase, which she took to the library. She carnations and the roses she hung up from the pot hooks in the kitchen, where they might dry. It was such a shame to waste the beauty of the flowers so soon, still so far away from summer, Belle thought, but she really had no practical way of bringing any flowers with herself.

She also would have very much liked to have said goodbye to her new friend Mumbler, but it was hibernating underneath the hill with all the other musktrolls. Belle couldn't even write a letter to it, with Mumbler not ever having learned how. It was just something she felt she could do little about, and had to be let go of. Perhaps, perhaps some day Belle might return, perhaps in the summer some years from now, if she was studying trolls and their tails and their language at the university by then.

The entire path downhill leading to the road had been cleared once she set out on her journey. It was a bright sunny morning, and the light reflected from the snow banks all around her. She had her chest and the travel luggage she’d packed early in the previous summer for a month at aunt Hortensia’s house, and she’d secured them on a sled with a piece of rope. As she made the way down the hillside slowly, she tried to balance the act of pulling the sled while not letting it slip off on its own off the path and into the forest.

As the sun rose, Belle began to feel hotter, and it became increasingly difficult to look up, for how brilliant sunlight was on snow. She kept her eyes cast down and made her way to the main road, which was no highway at all. She knew the village of Mayshire was due south, and she had already seen some of the smoke rising from the chimneys of their houses as she’d descended down the hill. She headed south along the road – a marvellously clear road, considering how much snow they had – by foot, pulling her sled, and hoping someone might some along on a sleigh pulled by something stronger than an unemployed housekeeper, and pick her up.

Belle felt tired. She shouldn’t have been in any condition to be travelling on her own in the middle of a winter forest unknown to her, but the herbal teas she’d taken had been miraculously effective in restoring her back to her feet, if not to full health. She still kept coughing and sneezing, but that was something perhaps to be expected in the winter, with shoes as poor as hers. She walked slowly,
trying to spare herself from overexerting herself. The snow wasn’t too deep, so she didn’t have to wade in it and get any in her shoes. There was just enough snow to pull her sled.

A sleigh pulled by two horses approached her from behind, the reins jingling with bells adorning them. Excited, she turned about and waved at the man driving the sleigh, hollering him to stop, please. Her voice was a poor croak as it came out, but the driver had the sense to understand what she wanted, and pulled his reins to stop the horses and the sleigh.

“Miss, are you headed for Mayshire?” He asked. “With all these trunks? You seem a bit overburdened for such a journey!” It was hard to deduce anything of him, all dressed in brown tweed and plain wool, and a beard hiding half of his features where his knitted cap didn’t do the rest.

The woman sitting in the sleigh peered over the side of the equipage. Then a child’s head appeared, a small solemn boy, who gave Belle a shy look.

“Yes, I'm going to catch the afternoon train,” Belle replied, having taken stock of the travellers. They seemed like nice, decent people. It seemed unlikely they would lead her astray and steal all her clothes or do her any harm.

“Where did you come from? Were you visiting someone here?” The strangers were very curious, once they had lifted her things into the back of the sleigh, and had her sitting under a warm blanket next to the matron.

“I was visiting a friend. They needed company,” Belle replied. And that was all she'd decided to reveal about it to them. “Thank you ever so much for your generosity. Whereabouts are you from?” Belle asked her. The lady smiled and gave Belle all the details of their farm. She listened and smiled, and whenever she threatened to ask Belle something, she had a question ready to ask her kind hostess to explain something in more detail.

By the time she was left at the train station in Mayshire, her helpers had grown a little put off by her lack of wanting to explain the particulars of her unusual predicament, but Belle gave them more of her sincere thanks in any case, and helped herself inside the station house. The station house was a small, modest wooden house. The waiting hall had two benches and an old fashioned stove in one corner that heated the room. There was no one in the ticket office when she arrived, and no information regarding where that person had gone. Belle sat there for hours, and it was possibly midday, and her stomach was growling, when a freckled young lady appeared in the booth and opened the shutters.

“So sorry, I was away in the inn. I had no idea anyone would come here today, what with the snow and the tracks and all. I thought it was perfectly well known.” She smiled, a tight and superficially polite smile that was anything but kind.

“Snow and tracks?” Belle asked.

The young lady nodded. “There was a telegram this morning from Kirkmoorstone. The whole coastal track has been cut off by an avalanche in a pass near there. So sorry. Anyhow if you need to buy a ticket, I can sell you one now.”

Belle shook her head. “No thank you, I think I'll wait. Is there any place here in the village where I could wait while they clear the tracks?”

“It might be days, miss. But I'd try the Black Peacock. Pretty much the only inn in town.” The girl closed the shutters of the sales booth.
Tired and hungry, Belle went out into the bright sunny day to look for the Black Peacock.

The village square was easily found, for the only road leading away from the train station ended at the square. There were shops on all the sides of the square, and Belle spotted the sign of the inn on the far side, an unmistakable painted black peacock perched on top of the yellow letterings. She pulled her sled behind her and made her way, enticing her imagination with the promise of food and a bed to rest in, but something else caught her eye as she walked close enough to see the other shops and establishments. Next to the baker was a book store. Belle was amazed that such a small village could house a shop for books, but she harboured no displeasure over the matter, for that night she would curl up in a warm inn bed with a new book.

Belle dealt with the inn and the food first though, since it would have been utterly foolish to go into a book shop with a trunk and a chest, and then fall over the shelves because of malnutrition. She conducted herself with suitable restraint until she had her things moved up in her room, her belly full of hot soup, and the first night's accounts settled with the patron of the house. As soon as these were out of the way, Belle went to the book shop, full of cheer, for every book store in every town and village she had been to were all friendly, quiet sort of places, and the books there beautifully handcrafted things waiting to be touched, read, and made friends with.

It was no different in Mayshire.

The proprietor of the shop was sitting in the corner by the fire, reading a book, when Belle came in. The woman seemed old enough to be in her seventies, with stark white hair piled up. She was either extremely severe, or a widow, judging by the all black clothes she wore. A white cameo was pinned to a black lace scarf just underneath her throat. She smiled at Belle as she approached, the wrinkled lines of her face springing to life.

The shop sold new and used volumes. Belle walked the narrow aisles, looking for something small that would travel well. She had often went to book stores with no idea of what she was looking for in them, and this time was no different. She found books – much like the world at large – much more enjoyable to discover as it was a treasure hunt requiring she kept her eyes open like her mind, seeking for new things, relishing the discoveries she made, even in small poky little boutiques like this that seemed very modest to the untrained eye.

“Anything special you need?” The proprietor asked, and Belle returned to her.

“I like looking around, but I don't suppose you could tell me if you had short, bound fairly small? It's for travel. I was thinking of perhaps some fiction, with adventure. In the vein of the Island of Fortunes, if you know it?” Belle asked.

The elder woman gave her an amused look and laughed. “That's a novel for young boys. A girl such as yourself need another kind of adventure.” The imperious woman got off her rickety chair and made her way through the shelves, Belle thought she was remarkably spry for her age.

“Here's an adventure I think you'll find most appealing. I dare say I think it has some instructional value as well, of a certain kind of magic.” The proprietor pulled out a small enough book from a shelf full of brand new books, and returned to Belle. “Tell me, what are you doing in Mayshire? I've never seen you around here before.”

Belle accepted the book and gave the grey covers a single glance. The silvery name of both the work and the writer hardly stood out from the fabric. Tenderness, by a W. Grey. Belle had never heard of such a book. “I was just visiting a friend here. Now I'm headed home. I thought I'd get some reading until the tracks are cleared, I expect you've also heard about that.”
“Oh yes, yes of course.” The woman walked over to the till slowly. “Headed home for Yuletide, I expect you are? It’s next week already. My my how the year has gone by. Do you want any gifts for the family? It would mean a lot to me if you could perhaps browse some of my books, there’s not a lot of demand for reading here in this village.”

Belle bit her lip, amazed to hear what time of the year it was. She might have taken the festive wreaths at the inn as an indication, but she'd been too engaged in food and other creature comforts to give it any thought.

“I think I'll take this Tenderness. Do you have a section of non-fiction? Natural sciences?”

Belle followed the lady around the shop as they looked for a gift for his father, but Belle couldn't catch a glimpse of anything he thought might be appealing to him.

“If you want to buy something for your friend, I could have it delivered for you,” the lady said demurely.


“He?” The old woman smiled. “Is he your lover?”

“What, no!” Belle took a step back. “I think, ma'am, it's time I stop taking your time in your shop and go find some other amusements in this village.”

The old woman returned to looking at her shelves. “There's not much to look at in a small provincial place like this,” she replied. “Pardon my curiosity. It's just, I think it is quite wonderful that a young woman is able to travel the countryside alone, about her own business.” She gave Belle a fond, soothing smile. There was something mesmerizing about her eyes, Belle thought. It was as though they belonged to a far younger person. “It was not at all so back in my day. We were all tied to chaperones. Sheep and sheepdogs, you see. But the world is getting much better now, of course. Ladies in the parliament and so forth.”

Belle hesitated. “He's just a friend,” she said. “I was keeping him company, for he lives alone. That's all. And now I'm going home.” She smiled and nodded.

The book and money exchanged owners. “Thank you for your business,” the elderly laid said, and returned to her seat in the corner. “What a pity though, for your friend, to have to spend Yuletide alone. But I suppose it's nothing to fuss about. Some people prefer the solitude!”

“Merry Yuletide, ma'am,” Belle said, as she left the shop.

“Merry Yuletide, miss,” she heard the old woman reply before the door closed behind her.

After a cursory tour of the few local attractions, Belle returned to the Black Peacock, ate dinner in quiet solitude, and received news that there had been another avalanche on the tracks, thanks to the warm sunny day which had warmed the snow loose. With no idea of how lengthy her stay in the village would be, Belle went to her small room in the upper levels of the inn and with the waning of daylight outside, she lit as many candles as she could, hoping she might read a bit before she went to bed.

As she opened Tenderness, she found it hard to concentrate on the words for the noise of people coming and going downstairs and in the staircase all around her. All the noises had a way of startling her, and Belle reflected it must have been thanks to seven months spent in almost no company. She hadn't thought she might miss the quiet, but she did.
The book soon disappointed her, since it appeared to be nothing but a romance novel. The setting was unusual though, for unlike the popular romantic stories featuring princes and princesses, wealthy gentlemen and beautiful if financially destitute daughters of very well brought up families. The woman of the story was a gentle lady, whose life had led her into needless solitude. And then there was a gardener. In a world ten years ago it could have only ended in tears, but Belle wondered whether or not the world would tolerate such a division of class during her lifetime.

Despite these thoughts, she found she had no interest in finding out what happened to the heroes of the story, magic or not. She packed the book away and put herself to bed, listening to strangers move and laugh and be so very alive inside the inn just below her. She thought of how quiet it had been in her cottage for the past months, and much warmer than in this draughty room they’d given her here. She thought of straw, and of the Yuletide decorations that could be made of it. Stars, wreaths, shapes of all kind.

The Yule Goat, a monster half-animal and half-human, it came and ate the old year and brought the new one with him in a sack, and if you had been naughty he’d put you in his sack and take you away. If you were nice all year round, you’d have gifts instead. Wonderful, silly stories all the parents told their children to make them behave. Belle smiled at the thought of what a pleasant surprise it would be to his father that she should appear at his doorstep soon, just in time for the season of the Winter Equinox.

Belle chased away the idea of Rumpelstiltskin sitting alone by his spinning wheel, endlessly making golden thread.

“I ought to get something for Aunt Sylvia,” Belle said aloud in her effort not to think about Rumpelsitltskin. “She doesn't like anything, though. Except the crown jewels of the king of Heartland. They would do. Although I think she might find fault in them as well. It must be very tiring to live your life so displeased by everything. How do you find joy with such an outlook on life?”

Time trickled on as the night grew darker and the inn gradually calmed down. Sleep eluded Belle, no small thanks to the cold she had. It had taken a turn for the worse, and she had a hard time breathing through her nose. As a result, she fell asleep late and woke up late. It was already lunch time when she appeared downstairs to hear the news of the rail tracks.

The snow would have been cleared that day, but now there was a problem with the train that had been on the tracks. Something about the engine. It would take another day at least to find a replacement. Belle took the news well, in fact she was a little bemused by how difficult travel had become just then. But these were all fairly normal events in winter. With as much snow as they’d had for a month through, it was amazing that the coastal trackline to Avonlea was open at all, and spoke very well of its maintenance.

All the attractions of Mayshire had been exhausted during her first afternoon there, so Belle returned to the book shop by the square. She was partially in the mind of returning Tenderness and asking for some other book instead, but the money purse she'd parted the house with had been so amply supplied, there was little cause to. And the writing had had some merit, she had to admit, so Belle promised to give it another chance at some later date.

No sooner had she entered the shop that a fit of sneezes and shivers overcame her almost from nowhere. Belle hid her face underneath her gloved hand and suffered the attack through, feeling very unseemly by the time it had passed.

“You poor thing, you ought to be in bed! Not travelling about in trains!” The old lady of the bookshop called to her from the back of the store.
“I'm sorry, you're right,” Belle said, wiping her face into a handkerchief as soon as she could pull one out of a sleeve. “I thought I was getting better, but it's gone worse again. It's cold in the inn.”

“They don't warm the place up enough, they're avoiding expenses. Those cheapskates!” The lady called, and got to her feet. “Excuse me if I don't come any closer, but I think you might be quite contagious. Have you thought of returning to your friend, perhaps he might let you rest until you're fit to travel?”

Belle shook her head, her hand already at the door, pushing it open. “No, I need to be home by Yule.”

“You'll be home in a casket by Yule, if you don't rest, take my word for it!” The old crone replied. As she sat down, she vanished beyond the lines of bookshelves.

Belle left the shop in state of mind not entirely familiar to her. She felt as much compelled to wait for the train in Mayshire as she wanted to walk back to the house on the hill by the lake. She even wanted to run to her room in the inn, light the fire and summon Rumpelstiltskin to whisk her away, but that was not the course of action a sensible person really should ever, ever follow through.

Belle made another circuit around the square, just a small one, to see the merrily decorated windows of the shops and to breathe air that wasn't stuffy with too much heat. Sneeze, and a growing ache in her muscles brought her soon indoors and she asked for news of the train, but there were none. With her stomach full of hot soup and bread flavoured with too much garlic, Belle returned to the room in the falling dark of the evening, concerned for her health while bored out of her mind with the lack of things to do as she waited.

_Tenderness_ brought Belle some escape from her situation at least. The lady's other gentleman suitor, in his rage of jealousy, had the devoted gardener cursed and disfigured, made so entirely inhuman that he believed the lady would see the error of his unwise affections and understand the redirect her heart's course elsewhere. But the lady recognised her transformed gardener, for his eyes could not be changed for eyes were always the true mirror to a soul. And so she saved him with a kiss which broke the curse that held him in its thrall.

And the story was only halfway through, Belle wondered, looking at the rest of the pages.

It was very dark out, and she was burning candles to their stubs. Belle didn't want to continue reading now in any case, because the kiss appeared to her as too contrived as a plot element for her to take the rest of the book seriously.

She still couldn't sleep, for her ragged breathing and the crowd of regulars downstairs. Someone was playing music, and that in itself was amazing – Belle hadn't heard music in a long time, not since she'd played a childish little polka on aunt Hortensia's pianoforte in the beginning of the summer. She thought of her situation with cool rationality.

Despite so, “I must be going mad,” she told herself.

It turned out that aunt Hortensia's clothes chest really was magical.

A man at the inn had promised to give her a lift part of the way to her destination, and so Belle had climbed into another winter sleigh and taken part in small talk with strangers. She tipped her ride with some of the money from her purse, and continued the rest of the way by foot. She had had the sense of buying new winter shoes in Mayshire, and was even wearing them as she climbed up the
hill. When she had found herself sore and tired from the climb through the banks of snow that had risen in the three days of her absence, Hortensia's chest had come alive.

Not only that, it was carrying her all the way up the hillside. She sat on top of the chest, clutching her luggage and a bundle of straw, while the chest glided up, knowing where it was headed. In no time, Belle was at the forbidding iron gates where she had come, until recently, every morning to fetch the newspaper. The mailbox had vanished during her absence.

The gates opened at her touch, and Belle slipped into the stark winter courtyard, feeling like she'd been away for weeks instead of three nights. Hortensia's chest became a dull, normal chest once again, and she had to pull it across the yard to her cottage. To her displeasure but not quite surprise, Belle found the door locked, so she had no choice but to leave her things outside at the stairs and head inside the house. It didn't look promising, for it was dark inside there.

The front door opened, and she slipped inside. The palm tree in the foyer needed watering, she observed, and turned to her left to open the great dark twin doors leading to the great room of curios. She was worried the place might be empty but it was not. She breathed a sigh of relief as she crossed the room and took the straw to the spinning wheel.

It was very late in the morning, but it was still morning, and so she started her normal routines with the heaters and the fireplaces, with breakfast and tea. Without waiting for the water to boil, Belle headed out into the house to look for Rumpelstiltskin. The library was so close nearby, she looked there first, but there were only books there. As she walked about the house, she could feel her cold aches lift, and her runny nose clear itself, and the sensation of as if a blanket of heaviness was lifting off from her.

Belle climbed the stairs up and came to the morning room and its wonderful clever balcony doors that would have let light in had there not been thick curtains keeping it most definitely out. Belle pulled them aside and looked back, she saw the bedroom door was closed, and three empty wine bottles in the room. Nothing that would have knocked out Rumpelstiltskin, she was sure, but she felt sad as she looked at the tokaj bottle labels. Either he'd had company, up here in his personal space, or he'd drank them alone. Belle picked up the bottles and headed back downstairs, imagining Rumpelstiltskin would lived only on cake if he could, for how many sweet things he liked.

With the assumption that the master of the house was sleeping late, Belle made the usual tea tray, but she had no chance to bring it up before he was already making his way downstairs, and not quietly as a cat, but with normal person steps. Belle wondered why he wasn't already taking the opportunity to sneak down like a thief and scare her with a sudden appearance from behind.

When she made her way to the greatroom and the spinning wheel, he was there, sitting, spinning gold out of the fresh brought straw, and barely designing to notice her. Belle left the tray at the end of the long table and took a few steps closer.

“If it suits you, I would like to stay here until May. I won't be cleaning around the house so much any longer, because I'll be working on a paper I'll be writing for my university. In May I will send in my application for my next semester, but before that I'm hoping to study the creatures that live under the hill in the crosslight of behavioural and evolutionary studies. I'll keep out of your way, in the library, or in the cottage. If this is all inconvenient and you wish the cottage for the use of your next housekeeper, then I'll be gone on the next train to Avonlea.”

Rumpelstiltskin glared at her over his shoulder. Perhaps he wasn't so good with deals where he was not an actively negotiating party. “Fine. The key to your cottage-”

“- I found it, thank you.”
Before Belle felt she could leave, she crossed the short distance between them and pressed her hand gently on Rumpelstiltskin's shoulder. He twitched a bit at the contact.

“It's nice to be back,” Belle said, and smiled.

“And why did you come back?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her. “You saw me... make fairy dust.” There were a number of other, unvoiced questions attached to that statement.

Belle sighed. “I thought you didn't need to resort to that. Unlike my aunt. Don't look so surprised, I know what she must do to have magic, but I prefer not to think about it too often.” She withdrew her hand. “I should go. Deal with the luggage and heat my bedroom.” She only got two steps away before she turned. “Hortensia calls it a necessary evil. Like chopping chicken boys' heads off.”

“Interesting. Pragmatic insight,” Rumpelstiltskin replied, returning to his spinning.

“I don't understand, why do they turn to dust when you remove their wings?” Belle asked.

“That's because fairies need to fly. Without their wings, they lose hope, and when they lose hope, they die.” Rumpelstiltskin stopped spinning again, and turned about. A wave of his hand produced a small silver bell on his palm. “For you, if you'll have it?” He asked.

“A bell? Why?” She accepted the curious gift.

“You've lived in that house and don't know?” Rumpelstiltskin gave her a look of slight disbelief. “Every time a bell rings-”

“- a fairy gets its wings,” Belle completed. “I always thought that was just nonsense. Just... fairy tales. Ha.”

“Sometimes there's a bit of truth in them,” Rumpelstiltskin said. “The best lies are always built around grains of truth. That, I believe, is what makes best-selling fiction.”

“I thought you didn't read.” Belle grinned.

“I still get bored sometimes,” Rumpelstiltskin made a curious sound in his throat that made Belle think of a happy cat sigh. She rang her small silver bell once, and then left the room, looking at the bell. He perhaps should have ought to know, that the reason why she had been distressed about the fairies was less to do with the actual fairies, and more to do with the murder in his eyes, which made her feel like there was a knife in her heart.

Chapter End Notes

"Tenderness" is an alternate title or a working title for D.H. Lawrence's "Lady Chatterley's Lover"

"Every time a bell rings a fairy gets its wings" is of course from the play Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie

Pagan Yuletide traditions for all
To Measure Affection

Chapter Summary

Belle and a book wonder how to measure affection

As prepared though as she'd returned to Rumpelstiltskin, with not just new shoes and straw, but with fresh white notepaper and pencils and inks stuffed in her luggage, Belle didn't immediately set out to write her paper on the little trolls under the hill. She knew she had very little to write about them until they all came out of their hibernation, which would be at least another two months, so she'd spent her time making paper snowflakes from old newspapers, which she'd strung around the library and her cottage to give them a bit more festive feeling. Rumpelstiltskin thought her little winter tradition a foolish waste of time, since any Yule Goat most definitely would not come around the house they were in, but despite his acid remarks, Belle had a fair hunch he enjoyed the fuss she was making over the holiday.

After the New Year had been properly received with a bottle of tokaj, and staying up until midnight, when the old year was burnt away. For this purpose, Belle had attempted to make a small goat out of straw, which did not look as elegant as those made by craftsmen, but it didn't have to be. It had burnt swiftly in the big old fireplace of the greatroom.

Belle sat by the desk in the library almost every afternoon as she waited for spring to come and the trolls to come out of their hideout under the hills. Her desk slowly filled with notes, which she tried to keep in organised piles according to the subject matter. She'd thought she'd not have much to write about, but when she'd started on planning the work she'd attempt to accomplish by May, she believed she would have to narrow down her subject. Then she had come up with ten new topics to write about, and had made short lists of what all of such topics might contain. She also read every day, much more than she had before when she'd only had the evenings to herself.

There had been a tension in the house since her return, like there was something both of them were avoiding talking about. Rumpelstiltskin had made himself scarce for the most part since New Year's Eve in any case, he was off and away working on whatever it was that so often demanded his time. Then he would return, and Belle would always be so very glad when he did, and they would have tea together, or dinner, and Belle would bring up something about the kitchen or something she read in the newspaper. They'd go their separate ways, Rumpelstiltskin to his tower when he was in, and Belle into the library and her cottage.

There was enough light still even after dinner, so Belle hadn't withdrawn to her privacy in the cottage. She'd gulped down food in a very unladylike manner, alone as she was, she didn't have to care. She had been in a hurry so she could pin down all the thoughts that had raced through her head while she'd left the desk. Her thoughts on the subject matter at hand were like four separate balls of yarn all come together in one large tangle, so she penned down what she could, grimaced at it, and left the desk soon, displeased with her efforts. She had no elder professor to approach on the matter, and so she decided to trust in the help of Dulcinea Thatcher, the scientist, and the authoress of The Origins of Life (first published under the simple pen-name D.Thatcher.)

It was the very Origins that Belle pulled out of its well-earned place in the shelves and started working on. A very thick book as it was, with lots of annexed illustrations, the tome was not easily
read in bed or in the comfortable reading chair. It had to be placed on the desk, where it claimed half of the surface, and as soon as she had it laid out, Belle went about examining it in the fading evening light.

As the evening grew darker, Belle delved deeper into *The Origins of Life*, turned on the gas lamp, and fetched a cup of tea to read with. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but hoped to find inspiration in these pages that covered vast amounts of subjects, with luck some of them might be what she needed. Thanks to her meticulous browsing, she found a sub-chapter, written into its context almost as an after-thought, regarding the different ways in which Mrs. Thatcher's animal subjects formed bonds. A journal entry from the *Collie's* – Mrs. Thatcher's ship – journey in the arctic.

In the Avialae, it is the swan that forms bonds that are the closest to the contemporary human's idealised vision of a loyal spouse. The *Collie's* journey close to the northern coast of Whiteland took us near Tundra Swans frequently, and I would study them from afar. By chance we happened to see a young couple, of which the other had come by an affliction of the magical kind. How this had happened, in this vast unpopulated tundra, we could not tell. The afflicted swan, turned black in colour, could not fly or swim, and was sinking as soon as it had left land. Soon we were witnesses to a rare event. The afflicted swan's spouse left the nest and the pen (female) came with all haste to the cob (male) to rub its bill against the sinking swan. There was a small explosion of light about the swans, and the cob returned to the surface. After three days of monitoring, it seemed that the swans were behaving normally. The pen had returned to the nest and the cob ate, and at night time protected the nest from predators.

There have been stories since the dawn of time where people under severe arcane afflictions have been saved with a kiss. Some people report this still takes place, but there is rarely any evidence. The romantics call it the True Love's Kiss, but there has never been any evidence that these kisses have not been themselves acts of magic* and many people have in desperation tried to kiss their ailing beloved ones without any results.

We could draw at least two possible hypotheses of the Tundra Swans: that the pen had magic powers, or that certain kinds of gestures of affection have the power of removing harmful spells. Considering that by most contemporary naturalist theory, magic was a wild phenomenon for millennia before the human mastered its use (the theories are not solidly found on science, for as much as there is creditable archaeology, there is myth), it could be fathomed that all species, such as the swan, and the human, would develop ways of surviving wild magic.

Perhaps it might even be that these primal arcane threats were an evolutionary of directing animals and the early human to form familial relations with each other with the best possible matches in regards to the survival of the species and the strength of their progeny. But the phenomenon is difficult, almost impossible to study through the eyes of science, since even if it were possible to compare relative strengths of spells, affection is impossible to measure.

*There are a number of sorcerers who add flair and showmanship to their spell-casting, such as one notorious example residing in the Dimhaut mountain range.

“Affection is impossible to measure,” Belle repeated out loud. She continued reading the book, but found her thoughts to disturbed and tossed off their tracks to be able to follow through even the first paragraph of the following chapter. Her thoughts returned to *Tenderness*, the book she'd bought before Yule and only half-read before putting it down. She knew, of course, of a number of bedtime
stories where the day was saved by kissing, but the way those stories were told, it was usually thanks
to the hero's some particular distinguishing virtue that elevated them so that their kiss might save
lives, or worlds.

An understanding between two people couldn't be entirely based on the goodness of only one of the
people involved. Surely there had to be something more to the idea, but Belle was short of any good
real-life examples of successful marriages. Aunt Hortensia had never been married – Aunt Sylvia
seemed most pleased when she was as far away from her husband as possible. Belle had never
known how happy or unhappy her own mother had been with her father Maurice, and although in
her childhood she had believed that all unions were happy, for they were always so in stories, she
had come to realise that reality was a far cry from pretty fairy tales. Every good lie has a grain of
truth in them, Rumpelstiltskin had once told her.

Belle had known since her teens that she had very little inclination of marrying soon, or marrying at
all. Belle's favourite adventuress, Dulcinea Thatcher, had died in childbirth at the age of 39, after she
had long despaired of finding a suitable husband. A tragedy that she had died a year into her
marriage. Belle closed the book, turned off the lights and stared out into the darkness, whatever
popped into her mind beginning and ending only half-thought, swirling and disappearing, until she
was just sitting there, looking out at the snow that barely shimmered under the light of stars.

She heard a door creak somewhere above her in the house. Her heart thumped faster, and it wasn't
because she was worried there was a burglar or some other uninvited guest in the house, it was
because she thought of Rumpelstiltskin, and how she had found herself missing him again while he
had been gone.

It must have been late. She hadn't paid any attention to the time, and the wall-clock in the library had
stopped during the evening without her noticing. Belle slipped out of the library, out of breath and
her heart in her throat as she made her way to the kitchen to make tea, hoping the familiarity of the
task would make her feel calmer, and the tea soothe her nerves. The fire in the stove had died long
ago, and so she waited, pacing back and forth, while the new fire heated the kettle.

Out of exhaustion, or perhaps absent-mindedness, impatience, or all three, Belle wanted to try and
see if the stove was hot, so she pressed her palm on it. In the next second, she gave the loudest cry of
pain as her whole right hand throbbed and ached. While she was amazed by her own thoughtless
stupidity, Rumpelstiltskin entered the kitchen, a dark scowl on his face, and all his dark powers
gathered by him, making the dimly lit room even darker than it was.

“I'm sorry, I burnt myself with the stove,” Belle assured, gritting back tears as she stared at the hand
she was holding by the wrist. She crossed over to the sink and thanked indoor plumbing for she
didn't know how manieth time as she put the injured palm under a stream of cold water, well aware
that Rumpelstiltskin was staring at her. The darkness retreated.

“No, I was so silly, it's so needless,” Belle replied, feeling hot tears trickle down her cheeks even she
had tried so hard to restrain them. She stood still, so did he, for a moment. Then Rumpelstiltskin
moved a little closer to her, and for a second she thought he'd embrace her waist, but he was just
snaking his hand around her to pick up a linen towel from where it was hanging. Belle felt her
cheeks burn red because she'd anticipated, or wanted really, him to touch her.

Rumpelstiltskin watered the towel in the sink and then calmly wrapped it around her hand. Belle felt
her knees wobble when he touched her, even though it was a gentle, passing, spidery touch. She
leaned against the sink just in case she might trip, and held her throbbing hand inside the towel. Her
tears subsided but she felt rattled.
“You don't look too well,” Rumpelstiltskin said.

“I just feel so silly, hurting myself so thoughtlessly.” Belle looked down at her hand, it was easier to look at than his face. “I won't be able to write in days now.”

Rumpelstiltskin turned about his heels. “Follow me. I'll find some balm or potion for it, if you'll let me.”

“Where are we going?” Belle asked.

“You are going to sit down. Your legs are shaking.” Belle scowled internally that he'd noticed it.

He sat her near the fire, on the sofa where she'd last been at New Year's. The fire lay low in the grate full of mostly glowing orange-red coals, illuminating very little of the room. Belle unwrapped her hand slowly, even though it hurt more than anything she could remember ever having experienced.

Rumpelstiltskin sat by her side soon, perhaps he'd gone somewhere or not, she hadn't noticed, but he had a jar with him full of some sticky mixture that smelt like beeswax and old cheese. Belle held her breath and tried to force her hand still while Rumpelstiltskin coated her angry red palm with the ointment, and then wrapped the towel back around it. It was amazing how soon the mixture began to take effect, for the pain subsided soon, and Belle, in relief, drew a deep long breath.

“I wanted to make us a cup of tea,” Belle mumbled. “But all of a sudden I want nothing hot at all.” She smiled a little, and Rumpelstiltskin returned the smile.

The smile reminded Belle what she'd been so careless for.

“You know, it'll soon be spring. But I feel terrible about leaving,” she said shyly.

“Why is that?” Rumpelstiltskin asked with a small voice that was not very characteristic of him.

“I don't want to leave you alone here,” Belle replied, feeling irrationally hopeful all of a sudden.

“Is that why you came back, before?” Rumpelstiltskin asked her, leaning slightly closer towards her, and he was almost so close again that Belle could smell him. The scent of him had disappeared a long time ago from the shawl she had wrapped herself in autumn. She wanted to hide her face in his neck and inhale his beautiful strangeness. She wondered at herself that she now found Rumpelstiltskin beautiful, but it was so. Not just his angly features, but the whole of him, his voice, the way he walked, the way he spoke, all of it she found appealing and attractive. And none of it might vanish, if this facade of lizard skin and magic was removed.

Belle leaned closer in return, eyes half-lidded as she looked at his lips, and she wondered if they would be cold and scaly to touch. It would take her another heartbeat to find out, she thought, and put her weight on her good left hand, as she leaned closer. Before she could catch his lower lip between hers, he suddenly kissed her first.

It was a rainy spring afternoon in Bluedale when a carriage rolled from the train station to the great Blackwood manor estate. Belle sat inside, wearing a cheerful peach-coloured dress, a fashionable colour in spring Avonlea. It was considered highly bad manners to visit dying people in mourning clothes, and she had taken one look at her simple and austere wardrobe before deciding to get a new dress just before she boarded the train alone to travel to aunt Hortensia's house. The gown had also given Maurice a chance to spoil her, and Belle felt anything that distracted him was good enough to go through.
As joyous as her father had been over their reunion, it had been simply impossible for him to depart from Avonlea and join Belle for this journey. He'd wanted her to have an escort or twenty, and had suggested to call upon Gaston to request his assistance, but Belle had firmly told Maurice that aunt Hortensia had no need of uninvited visitors.

The grey drizzle persisted. Belle showed herself into the house with little fuss, hurrying inside and out of the rain as soon as she managed to get herself out of the carriage. She tossed her coat on a chair and walked straight to Hortensia's bedroom.

“Aunt! I'm here!” Belle called across the house as she approached. When she pushed open the bedroom door and found the bed empty, Belle gasped. By all accounts, aunt Hortensia had been feeling so ill, she'd been bed-bound for months. The bed wasn't made. Had someone stolen Hortensia?

“Oh, my clever Belle,” she heard a squeak and a voice from behind, such a faint sound that was heardly beyond a whisper.

“Aunt Hortensia! Why aren't you in bed!” Belle said as she spun around and leaped at her aunt to give her an awkward hug, wheelchair bound as she was. She wore a thick white cotton nightgown, with a quilt folded over her lap.

“Darling, don't you know that to stay in bed, it's as good as telling death to come in and make itself comfortable,” Hortensia replied with a voice cracking from emotion. She hugged Belle back with bony hands and arms.

Belle pulled herself up and regarded her aunt. The difference between summer and spring was terrifying. Her hair that she had always kept beautiful was now without gloss, hanging dead and dry about her shoulders. Hortensia had lost a lot of weight, and her skin sagged, especially around her cheeks and neck, but also about her arms. She didn't sit up straight and proud, her spine had bent.

“Our Eleanor is in the kitchen making us something to warm you up from your journey,” Aunt Hortensia said, managing a feeble smile for a moment. “Let's go into the study, I want to look at my flowers.”

Despite her failing health, Hortensia obstinately rolled her wheelchair across the floor to the other side of the house where she might see the conservatory. There were no flowers blooming yet outside, but the camellia inside the conservatory was already in bloom. So were exotic lilies Belle could not name, for despite how many times Hortensia mentioned them by their taxonomic titles, there were literally hundreds of different kinds of plants in Hortensia's collection, and all their names sounded too similar. Aunt Hortensia pulled herself to the door, pointed out all the names of the blooming plants, and then turned herself about.

“What a short forever that was. I gathered from your father's telegraph there's not going to be a reckoning of repayment. How extraordinary, I can't recall a single time Rumpelstiltskin has gone back on a deal like this,” said Hortensia. As tired and dying as she looked, there was still a shrewd gleam in her eyes. “Indulge me, tell me how did you manage that.”

“Quite by accident, I assure you,” Belle murmured and turned about to examine the study. Everything was the same as it had been nine or ten months before. She felt like she'd been away for a decade, not less than a year.

“I thought he'd turn you into a toad perhaps, and squish you with the heel of his boot, if you'd have gone and displeased him,” Aunt Hortensia went on.
“I didn't displease him. I think he just realised he preferred to be alone, that's all,” Belle said. She returned to Hortensia. “Are you in a lot of pain? Or medication? Please tell me if there's anything I can do. I could stay and nurse you until I need to go to the university to see if they'll allow me back, despite me vanishing for a year.” Belle knelt at Hortensia’s side and heaved a deep sigh.

“Joseph and Eleanor will manage me well enough,” Hortensia replied. “Your father requires you in Avonlea. You don't know how beside himself he was when you put your name in that contract and ran off.”

“And... how's aunt Sylvia?” Belle asked, suddenly recalling that Sylvia was possibly keenly waiting for Hortensia to die, so she could start a court debacle over the ownership of Blackwood Manor.

Aunt Hortensia seemed surprised. “I should have thought she'd already seen you, come to give you the latest information in your chances of marriageability since you vanished for months.”

Belle shrugged. Another thought popped into her mind then. “By the way, a journalist found out my name from the envelopes, of the letters you sent me to Dimhaut,” Belle said. “was there ever anything in the newspapers about me?”

Aunt Hortensia shook her head. “No. But there's never any news from the Dark Castle, for some reason.”

Belle nodded, absently thinking of the fates of anyone who dared write about the master of that castle.

“So you received the letters then?” Hortensia asked.

“Oh yes, they were wonderful. I read them all dozens of times, they made me happy, even Sylvia's.”

Aunt Hortensia chuckled.

“But do tell me all about your time there. Was it harsh? You look plumper than last summer, so I assume he fed you well enough.”

Belle sat back on the floor, shifting her weight to her rump, difficult though that was in her finery. “Oh you wouldn't believe,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Do I look fat?”

“Aunt Hortensia broke her last word all of a sudden. Belle felt as if all her emotions were displayed naked across her face, and that Hortensia was reading her like an open book. “Good grief, Belle. Are you in trouble? You aren't pregnant, are you?”

Belle covered her mouth with her hands from the shock of it, as she took a convulsive breath. “No!” She cried as soon as she found her voice return to her.

Aunt Hortensia looked a little puzzled, but then she leaned back in her wheelchair and crossed her hands on her lap. “Just the magic of it went sour?”

Belle nodded a little. “Something like that,” she said, and looked somewhere else besides at Aunt Hortensia's all-seeing eyes, feeling the familiar pinch of grief from the past two weeks yet again.

“It's probably best you keep it a secret. And... it'll go away. Give it a good long cry, and the pain will go away.”

Belle dabbed at the tears on her cheeks with the sleeves of her dress. Once she calmed down, she lay
down on the floor on her back, for she couldn't resist the corset that wanted to keep her waist straight and tight any longer. She'd lain on the familiar carpet plenty of times in her childhood, so it was nothing new of her to do in the room. “Did you ever have anyone special, aunt Hortensia?” She asked.

Aunt Hortensia shook her head. “I wanted there to be, several different ones even. But this wheelchair puts off men, the handsome as well as plain ones.” She looked thoughtful. “And most men don't want a witch either.” She smiled briefly.

“But have you ever felt... felt...” Belle searched for a good word for it. She wasn't sure if love was it. She felt more like her heart was on fire, or like her very essence had been chopped in two and she was forever separated from one half of it. Belle had thought love was a wonderful, bubbling feeling. At least that was how fiction related the matter. Not insanity and agony. “...crazed about someone?”

Aunt Hortensia cocked her head as she thought. “I suppose I did, in my late teens. I was mad about a boy, for three days. First time I ever had laid my eyes on a lad and thought anything of them. Then I walked into a barn and saw him there fooling around with a redhead from the village, and that was that.”

Belle thought she almost wished that had happened to her as well. She covered her soggy eyes with her arm and took some breaths.

“I'm sorry, you're so ill, and I've come here for you, and I'm doing nothing good at all.” Belle climbed up from the floor and back to her feet. “I'll go talk to Eleanor and see if I can help her in the kitchen. At least I've had plenty of experience in that department in the past nine months, I can promise you that.” Belle found a smile to give to Hortensia.

“Don't worry. Seeing you again before this cancer eats me alive, it's the best tonic I could have had before I go. Run off to Eleanor, I'll follow you after I've examined the new blooms in the magnolia.” Aunt Hortensia waved her hand at Belle and watched her go, somewhat revived.

Aunt Hortensia pulled open the doors to the conservatory and rattled in. She rolled past the magnolia and towards the latest surviving blooms of the camellia. She looked aside, out through the glass walls of the chill garden, at the drizzle of the grey rain. From the corner of her eye, she saw a slumbering flower fairy nestled in the petals of a low-hanging flower. She caught the creature as swiftly as a hunting bird of prey swooping down at a rodent.

“Excuse me, I've need of you,” she said very politely, and rolled back inside the study with one hand only, however painful and difficult it felt. Stubbornly, one-handed, she got the wheelchair over the inch of a tilt on the ramp between the conservatory and the study, and found herself all out of breath when she returned inside into the warm house. She closed the doors and pulled the curtains over them.

Aunt Hortensia yanked the fairy's wings from its back before it had a chance to realise what was happening. Then there was only fairy dust left on the old woman's palm. She leaned forward and inhaled every speck of the dust she had in her hand. She blinked, shook her head, and feeling slightly rejuvenated, she rolled out of the study.
A Swan, a Blackbird, and a Nightingale

Chapter Summary

Belle returns home to her father. It will be a stellar night at the opera.

Spring weather had turned from rain to beautiful sunshine during the two weeks Belle stayed in the countryside. Headed back home to her father who could hardly wait to hold his darling daughter in his embrace again, Belle was sitting by the window in the open section of the train, listlessly looking out at the landscape. The nearby hedges surrounding the train tracks were full of the earliest spring flowers in bloom, and only gave her the faintest of delight.

The hours that usually felt long aboard the train between the town and countryside whittled away as Belle stared out at nothing. She hadn't brought anything to read with herself, for she had no desire at all to read anything.

Halfway back home, the train stopped in an industrial town. People got off, some people got aboard.

"Is this seat taken?" A shy voice asked. It took Belle a second to realise she was being addressed. She looked up at first, and then realised she ought to have looked a little closer to her own seated eye-level, for a dwarf was addressing her. Belle had never met a dwarf before, although she had seen them of courses. All dwarves were labourers, and usually wore practical and smart clothes, but this one was dressed in a fine tailored grey wool suit, and had a pink carnation on his lapel, and a matching grey bowler hat on his head.

"Oh, sorry," Belle replied as she realised she was staring at him. "No, none of these seats are taken as far as I know. Do sit down, please." Her curiosity piqued, Belle managed a smile for the dwarf.

She watched him take a seat just opposite to her. He looked out the window and waved down at six dwarves standing at the platform, who waved back at him. The train started moving. The waving continued until the platform was left behind, and then the dwarf leaned back in his seat and sighed, looking down at his nervously flexing hands, and sighed again.

"Are you headed for Avonlea?" Belle asked him.

The dwarf looked up. He had such sorrowful eyes, Belle wondered, but he managed a smile. "Yes, I am. I have a meeting there."

"I'm headed there myself. I live there," Belle said. "Are you quite well, if you don't mind me asking? Your breathing is so laborious."

The dwarf took a deep breath. "I suppose I will be well. Thank you for asking." He had a black attaché case which he'd left on the seat next to him, and picked it up now, and held it close to his chest.

"My name is Belle, I study at the Avonlea university," Belle continued, hoping a little talk might ease the dwarf's discomfort.

The dwarf looked at her in the eye again. "My name is Dreamy, I'm a writer."
Belle gasped for breath. “What, really? My word, my goodness, I have your book, I bought it last year!” She laughed in her excitement.

This lighted Dreamy's face now. “Really? My publisher said it sold about two hundred copies, fifty of which were put in libraries.”

Belle tried to tone down her smile. “I suppose poems about mines are not ideal for major audiences.”

Dreamy nodded slowly. “My publisher said the same.” He glanced down at the black case in his hands. “He said I ought to write about love next. It took me a year but I- I managed to get something on paper at last.”

Belle leaned forward and stared at the case. “So, you have an unpublished manuscript right there?”

Dreamy nodded. “I'm delivering it to my publisher tonight.”

Belle nodded with all enthusiasm. “What's it about?”

Dreamy's face went grave. “Unhappy kind of love. I don't know if you'll like it any better than my poems about mines.”

Belle didn't know what to say at first. “Are you afraid your publisher will want you to change the ending then?”

Dreamy shrugged. “We'll see how it goes, miss Belle.”

“I'm so sorry if I've been too forward, mister Dreamy,” Belle replied.

“Just Dreamy, I think that will do fine,” the dwarf poet replied with a warm smile. “I'm glad you talked to me, I thought it would be a long train ride to the city. I usually bring something to read on these journeys, but I've found I have a hard time concentrating on reading lately. My thoughts wander too much.”

“I have the same,” Belle replied, “I adore reading, but it requires all my attention and concentration when I get to it. I had a very trying winter, and I am quite exhausted from it, I become very distracted by gloomy thoughts when I'm all by myself.”

“Then it must be comforting that you're headed home to your family then, where you'll be provided with company I hope,” Dreamy said. He sounded sincere, yet wistful. But of course, he had just left his home and his family to go on this journey, his mission of unfulfilled love and how to present it best.

They discussed the weather in Mid-Marchlands, and the progress of spring for the most part of the journey. When they were more certain of each others' natures, they ventured to speak a little bit of art and literature, and even of politics, but the pleasant conversation was suddenly cut short by their arrival to the last stop of the tracks.

“Will you stay in Avonlea for long? Perhaps you might come and dine at my father's house some night.” Belle reached for her purse and took out his father's calling card. She knew she ought to have printed some of her own a long time ago, but she had no use to such things, since she never went about parties or gala nights where handsome young men might inquire her for such things.

“Thank you, that is a very generous offer,” Dreamy replied, and accepted the card. “I'm afraid I've no cards of my own.”
“That's alright. And besides, I will get a chance to ask for your signature in my copy of your book,” Belle said playfully.

Her father was at the train station waiting for her when she climbed out of the car. Maurice was at the platform, and looked relieved the moment he saw her, and they embraced. When Dreamy approached them, Belle introduced him to her father and vice-versa.

“Father, Dreamy is a writer. I bought his book last year. Would you mind if he visited us some evening while he stays in town.”

“That is, if I won't impose on your hospitality, sir,” Dreamy added.

Maurice looked a bit guarded. Haunted, even, Belle thought. He was wary and scared now of everything that touched Belle's life. He had wanted to hire her a bodyguard, or at least a lady's maid to accompany Belle wherever she went, so she wouldn't be alone one second, preferably ever, but Belle had spoken him out of such things. “Do you think a lady's maid is going to matter one whit if the Dark One comes around to collect me,” Belle had said quite acidly, quite unable to tell her father that she wouldn't have minded much if he did. She would have possibly scolded and screamed at him for a while, for the manner of their departure, but she wouldn't have minded.

Maurice looked at Belle in the eye, eyebrows slightly lifted, silently asking her why did she always have to become acquainted with the oddest sort of people, like the half-autistic Alice who lived in her own dream world, and now a dwarf?

“Of course,” Maurice said, “of course you'll come for dinner, sir,” Maurice assured.

“I better head to work then. Excuse me.” Dreamy lifted his bowler hat and bowed his head to the both of them before heading off, clutching his black attaché case close as he disappeared into the hubbub of the train station.

Maurice hovered near Belle. He carried her suitcase, while she slipped her purse in a shoulder bag, and together they left the platform and headed to the horse and carriage stop, at first in silence.

“How was poor aunt Hortensia?” Maurice asked.

Belle shook her head. “She said the doctors hadn't given her more than until Christmas last year, but she promised she'll go on until Midsummer's Eve. I think we should go there again soon, it was quite dreadful papa. Everything felt so sad and dead there, like the whole house hung under a sheet of gloom.”

“Maybe that's just because you've never been there this early in spring, Belle, her gardens can't have been in bloom. Spring in the countryside is all brown and grey and depressing, that's all.”

“Well there were plenty of flowers in her conservatory, and they didn't cheer the place one bit,” Belle retorted. “Is at least aunt Sylvia going to see her soon?”

“Yes, she plans to go soon, in a week or two. She needs to be present at some charity galas and host a dinner party for the Baron.” Sylvia had taught Maurice to call her husband the Baron, although technically the peerages had been withdrawn. Still, the families refused to drop the titles, and the books of lineages were kept by private institutions, despite the unsubtle recommendations of the government. However, keeping family trees could hardly be made illegal by the parliament, so recommendations of the state council office were just that, recommendations.

“Uncle is no longer a baron, father, he's just a very rich man with a lot of very rich men for friends,” Belle told him, but he didn't listen to her, which was the norm on this subject matter.
“Sylvia wants to see you tomorrow night, so you two can talk about aunt Hortensia, and other things,” Maurice said. “There's a special performance of the White Swan at the opera house tomorrow, and she has a ticket for you.”

“And I expect she will also have one to three prospective husbands at the opera as well?” Belle asked.

“All I ask you is that you show yourself in society, mingle with people. Stars above, you've spent almost a year in terror and solitude, you'll soon hardly know how to behave around people,” Maurice said heatedly, and Belle could hear that a part of this passionate sermon had been concocted by aunt Sylvia.

They reached the carriage. As soon as they were in view, the driver approached them and took the suitcase from Maurice. Belle climbed in without her father's assisting hand, and he followed shortly.

“I will meet and speak with any of aunt Sylvia's friends at the ballet. Even though I don't even care much for ballet, but maybe I'll like the music,” Belle said, looking out at the streets of Avonlea.

“She bought you a dress, and told me she'll send you a maid to help you get dressed,” Maurice continued, “and the maid will come at two o'clock,” Belle looked at Maurice now in surprise, “and she'll do your hair nicely and put your make-up on for you before Sylvia comes to pick you up at half past five.”

“How nice of you two to have organised this entertainment for me,” Belle said, although the delight in her polite gratefulness was cool. “I'll try and make the best of it.”

As Maurice had promised, first Sylvia's maid came to visit them the following day, a little after lunch, bringing the new evening gown with her, along with a treasure trove of lotions and soaps and face paints. The tight-lipped old maid spent the whole afternoon scrubbing Belle, even though Belle herself had found herself to be in perfectly clean. Then agonizing hours were spent over her hair, curling it and piling it up, sticking her head full of pins until the maid was satisfied enough.

The gown was mostly rose-pink, with many burgundy details. With the hand-made lace, beading, pleating and its numerous tiny details, it must have been a considerable investment for aunt Sylvia, and no wonder. Belle had managed to avoid most large gatherings of aunt Sylvia's friends all her adult life so far. She should have felt more interested in this perhaps, but in all honesty Belle couldn't wait until the evening was over and aunt Sylvia retreated to the countryside for the rest of the spring to tend Hortensia. So she slipped into the gown and let the maid fasten the tiny little hooks and belts that hugged the shape of the gown closer to her waist.

The face was done last and then she was ready to descend downstairs where Sylvia was already waiting with Maurice, both seeming very pleased with Belle and themselves.

Sylvia's driver helped both ladies in the carriage and then off they rattled to the richest part of the city.

“Thank you for the ballet ticket,” Belle opened the conversation between them once they were moving. “I fear we may be an hour early at the opera house though, if it is to begin at seven.”

Aunt Sylvia rolled her eyes. “Of course we'll be there early. I intend to introduce you to as many young men as possible before the ballet begins, and I hope at least one of them wants to converse with you over a glass of wine during intermission.”
“And may I ask why the sudden need to introduce me to your friends?” Belle asked dubiously.

“We're worried for you. Who knows what's happened to you in these past months you were gone—" Aunt Sylvia began.

“I know what's happened. I cleaned floors and made tea. I told papa as much,” Belle replied.

“That contract clearly states he has your life for his own as long as you live. But it is me and your father's belief that if you became married soon and perhaps had yourself with child, then perhaps R-your employer will be much more lenient in letting you stay home in Avonlea.”

Belle frowned. “No, he's the Dark One, he does whatever he wants and doesn't care if you or me or anyone is married or with children. It's a rotten plan, aunt, most especially if so it would happen that he did come demanding I return when I'd be a mother, why then I'd be as good as dead to my own children when he took me.”

Aunt Sylvia held her with a fierce gaze. She didn't like to be contradicted. “Well, that is certainly a point of view.” She cocked her head and leaned closer to Belle, grabbing her hand in hers. “But before we take my plan any further at the opera, I must know, did he take any advantage of you? Have you bled since you returned?”

Belle took a deep intake of breath and jumped from their shared seat to the opposite side of the carriage.

“Good grief, aunt! No, and I would rather we never ever discuss this subject matter again!”

“Stop rocking the carriage,” aunt Sylvia replied, but her eagerness to redecorate Belle's life was somewhat subdued.

“Aunt Hortensia said she'll die at Midsummer's Eve,” Belle said, changing the subject entirely. “Will you stay there until then?”

“No, I'll stay the month of May there and return to Avonlea by June, we're going abroad with the Baron.”

Belle bit back her first and second acidic replies. “I'll go see Hortensia in June then. After you're done there.” Done gathering pieces of your inheritance, Belle added silently.

“Try and smile. I know you're tired. You must be, after what you've been through. It'll do you some good to be around real people. Perhaps you'll even meet some of those university people you are so fond of. Make the best of the night, that's all I ask of you.” Sometimes aunt Sylvia had a knack at sounding extremely motherly. Belle always wondered if it was sincere or if it was Sylvia's last resort technique of manipulation. Well, it wasn't like Sylvia didn't care, she had always cared a great deal about her sister's only child.

Belle gnawed her lower lip as she thought, or at least tried to, but aunt Sylvia was immediately snapping her out of it. “Remember your lips are painted,” Sylvia snapped.

Belle rolled her eyes much in the way how Sylvia herself often did.

A number of aunt Sylvia's fantastic friends' well-educated and bred sons had made time to come see the ballet that night, and Belle was present at the opera house before every single one of them. Aunt Sylvia brought them to her one by one, and she smiled politely, exchanged comments about the
weather and the number of people present.

The faces of these young men all melded together in Belle's memory. There was nothing particularly bad or evil about any of them, but it was just that their well-rehearsed stoic appearances, similar outfits and similar haircuts made them all indistinguishable from another.

Then at last, tiny bells chimed all around the opera house, inviting the audience to take their seats before the ballet started. Aunt Sylvia had secured them box seats, and Belle began to feel a little excited as they entered their own little half-private space. Violinists in the string section were still tuning their instruments, and the beautiful room was full of murmurs and the shuffling of people finding their seats. Aunt Sylvia monitored the room with her white opera glasses and paid no heed to Belle's gawking at the gold-trimmed burgundy drapery everywhere, or at the magnificence of the entirely and intricately embroidered midnight blue curtains that hid the stage.

At last, the lights began to dim. The conductor of the orchestra walked into the orchestra pit and rose up to give a bow to the audience, and he was bestowed with the crowd's favour as they gave applause to him. Belle glanced at her aunt's hands to make sure she was clapping the right way.

The curtains started rolling away, revealing the silhouette of a dark forest in mysterious blue light at the back of the stage, while the orchestra played the overture. Belle relaxed, letting her eyes slid half-closed as she concentrated on listening to the music that vibrated throughout the entire room.

Since she was no expert in dancing or ballet, far from it, she watched the ballet unfold, and followed the storyline from the printed little hand programme she had secured earlier on. There was a story, but she couldn't have understood what was going on by the music alone, or the dresses, as she watched dancers playing royal courtiers and princes take the stage one by one.

Then the White Swan appeared on stage, and set Belle's flesh on goosebumps. It was part music, part the dancer's very own ethereal movement, Belle wondered if the woman wasn't an enchantress of some sort, the way she moved on the stage.

The ballet began to pick up the plot without Belle needing to follow the story on the sheet of paper in her hand. The eerie coloured lights on the stage reminded her of the Dark Castle, and the intensity of the music filling the air made her insides quiver. A terrible curse needed to be broken, but an evil power kept the ballet's heroine in thrall.

Belle glanced at aunt Sylvia as the prince and the White Swan danced their love on the stage, wondering what on earth had Sylvia thought, bringing her to see this of all things, but Sylvia was peering at the audience with her opera glasses, not at the ballet. Of course, she couldn't begin to guess what had happened to Belle in the past year when she'd been gone.

The music turned melancholy and then almost violent, and then Belle found she couldn't stop herself from shivering and crying. She held her gloved hands up to her cheeks near her eyes, hoping the rivulets of mascara wouldn't run all the way across her cheeks, and Belle stared at the stage, watching the story of the ballet turn as sour as her heart had.

“Belle, what-” she heard Sylvia hissing suddenly, and then aunt was leaning closer to her, touching her hand and bringing it down from her face.

“I'm sorry, can we please leave?” Belle whispered to her. She could tell her eye make-up was ruined only by looking at the white glove and seeing the black stains there.

“You're shivering. Yes, let's leave,” Sylvia replied. Someone in the next box shushed at them, but Sylvia paid no heed to the neighbours as she assisted Belle out of the box and into the corridor.
outside.

Belle took a deep breath of relief to be out of the darkness, although she could still hear and feel the music of impending doom shaking the entire house with the drums and brass section of the orchestra.

“Here, let me wipe your face a bit,” Sylvia dabbed Belle's cheeks with a kerchief. After she was satisfied, Sylvia escorted Belle downstairs to the foyer and sought a bench for her to sit on.

“Every footman at the opera seems to have vanished from the foyer tonight,” Sylvia said with firm indignation. “I'll go and find our carriage driver. I wouldn't leave you alone otherwise, but you just sit here a moment. If anyone comes, ask them for a glass of water, you look like you could need one.”

Belle hugged herself and nodded thrice at aunt Sylvia, who hastened away out and into the night.

How silly, Belle told herself internally, how very foolish, thoughtless and silly, to let a thing like a ballet upset her so. They had been barely into the second act.

“Oh my dear, did you need a glass of water?” A voice she didn't recognize spoke to her.

Belle looked up and saw a middle-aged woman in the dark garments of the serving staff of the opera house that had sold wine earlier in the evening. She carried a single glass of water on a tray. The tumbler was made of red glass, which Belle thought odd.

“Your aunt sent me,” the woman said kindly. She had the blackest eyes Belle could recall ever having seen. Black hair too. The shapes, the little details throughout her face made her look like she was foreign, from some far-away land. Belle thought of Catalonia, except then her skin would have been more darker, not white.

Belle accepted the glass from the service lady and took a little gulp. “Thank you. I must ask you, if you don't mind me- tweet! Tweet tweet! Trrrrl!” Belle felt the oddest thing! It was as if she had suddenly shrunk. Her voice came out in beautiful sounds, like of a blackbird or a nightingale, but not quite either one of them.

The woman in black grabbed Belle in her hand and, while squeezing her tight in one hand, tied a cord around her ankle with the other. “You are summoned to Whiteland. The stay will be lengthy.” The woman stroked Belle with her hand. Stroke her feathers, to be exact. Belle made noise in panic. “And when the queen is done with you, you'll be a beautiful addition to my collection,” the black woman said with dreamy calmness. Belle tied to fight, but the woman squeezed harder, now with both hands, and carried her away.

“No, I'm sorry, I need to return this bird to its cage as soon as I possibly can.”

“What a very exotic creature, I've never seen the like. So very blue. But please, if you see a young woman in a pink dress, send her back to the foyer.”

“Of course, madam, I shall,” the witch replied, with her strangely languid and sweet voice, like slowly running honey.
Chapter Summary

Regina is up to no good

The Vault of Winter

The steel-bladed scissors which Regina held in her hands had ornate silver handles, full of tiny detailed carvings, but the beauty of them did nothing to the fact that they were more designed for being looked at rather than used, and cutting anything with them always dug the silver-coated metal handles painfully into her skin and flesh. She wouldn't keep practical things on her desk, though, not if that practicality marred their potential for beauty. And beautiful, gorgeous things surrounded her in her dark study one late spring night, where she toiled in the light of three oil lamps and a candelabra.

No matter how unpleasant the chafing and pressing of the scissor handles was now against the base of her thumb, Regina grinned, for she truly and utterly enjoyed her task, enjoyed it so much she hadn't even thought of delegating this to a servant. On her desk, she had spread out a newspaper from Marchland, and she was meticulous about cutting off a large article on page five. Missing woman found dead, body washed ashore. The police believed it was murder and suspected a young man she'd met at the opera earlier that evening, who'd been seen escorting her out of the opera house before intermission. The names and details and even a photograph of the partially composed body covered under tarpaulin were there.

Regina was careful not to tear the thin newspaper as she removed it. Pleased with her work, she folded the article and then slipped it into an envelope, which already had the delivery address on. She would have preferred to bring these news herself, but she didn't have the time just then to scurry about the countryside gloating at Rumpelstiltskin. As any newspaper knew, Regina had more pressing business to attend to, fighting back the tide of royalist insurgents in Whiteland.

Mayday was approaching fast, and she was quite certain that Princess Snow would plan some act of terrorism for it. The celebrations were a perfect time for travelling and hiding all across the countryside without being noticed in all the traffic on the roads. Regina placed the envelope away from her hands and returned her attention back to the map of Whiteland and the neighbouring regions, Marchlands, Heartland, Dimhaut, The Bitter Coast especially. All of which were places where Snow had been seen within the past year, all of them countries with stupid or weak-willed governments which Regina was sure would not dare to cross hers! Yet move around did Snow, unseen, never caught. She didn't appear in mirrors, thanks to some benevolent magic she had attained somehow. Regina had promised herself she would find out which witch had gone out of their way to assist Snow, and would make them suffer.

Rumpelstiltskin, Regina thought, he would know who had the power do such a thing. Regina had suspected Rumpelstiltskin of it, in fact, but that made no sense, since he was on her side, if he was ever on anyone's.

It was a little-known secret to humans, but a well-known one for dwarves, that their tunnels ran through everywhere. Literally, everywhere.

What humans thought of as mere mines, were mines of course, but they didn't stop there. Each hid a
passage to Dwarvendell, the city of dwarves deep inside the earth, which sprawled through great arching cavernous halls of impossible magnitudes, ceilings so high they were lost in the perpetual twilight where Dwarvendell existed. But it was not an entirely lightless existence, for where great mirrors didn’t illuminate the lush gardens closer to the surface, the halls were bright with the twinkling of fairy-lights and glowing of green moss and fungus, which grew everywhere, cultivated by Dwarvendell’s public servants.

Princess Snow had been granted asylum there, and what a to-do she had now, to negotiate another human to share the secret of the existence of the world’s greatest city. The council of the dwarf-kings did not seem happy at all, despite Snow’s passionate explanations and pleas. They were in half a mind of locking up both Snow and the prince she’d dragged down with her. The dwarves had a lot to lose if Regina ever found out they were hiding Snow from her. Not just trade contracts with Whiteland, possibly their lives. The dwarf-kings were in no doubt of the true nature of Whiteland’s democracy and of the intents of her figurehead.

Looking over at the heated political discourse, hidden in the heights of the darkness above was Rumpelstiltskin, perched on a curving crossbeam that connected a pillar to another, one of a thousand thousand pillars in this endless expanse of a room. All reached the ceiling of the cave. The place halfway between high-up and far below, in the criss-crossing of stone pillars and metal-reinforced beams was like being in the centre of an abstract and entirely geometrical world of its own. Certainly there was no place like this in all the world.

He might have watched this event unfold from the comfort of any of his homes, but Snow’s fate teetered on a precipice in the hands of the dwarf-kings now. Better to be near than far. He sat and listened in perfect concentration throughout the audience. There was no guessing by appearances, had any seen them, that he was putting off the rage and misery that made him want to empty every bottle of brandy in all of Dimhaut. His gift of foreseeing gave him reason to assume that there was a week from Saturday when he might indulge himself and drown his feelings and wretchedness.

An invitation – one amongst a hundred – kept tugging at him at the peripheral edge of his magic. Hortensia Blackwood had invited him to visit three times now, but Rumpelstiltskin had no intention of indulging the dying old fool of a crone. She must have turned to magic to keep herself alive this long. He had no interest and no time for her, beyond that fleeting thought. With that, the voice of Hortensia’s magic grew dimmer, until it vanished into the chorus of thousands of little sounds.

By the end of the summer, Hortensia Blackwood was not dead. She was not far off from looking a particularly lively skeleton, but she kept alive, even though every day she grew more fragile and tired, and required more magic to keep herself together. She had all the best newspapers from around the world ordered to her, and read them religiously. Sylvia was paying for them. Hortensia knew that was equally due to this noble act both ensuring Sylvia of her own good nature, as well as securing herself a righteous negotiating point when the battle over the house started, post Hortensia’s mortem.

Sylvia invited herself for a visit in October, and arrived in the afternoon. The weather outside was made of miserable grey rain and brown soil waiting for winter to hide itself. The glorious colours of autumn had come and gone in quick succession that year, rain stealing the glory of crisp bright autumn days.

"You’re death only barely warmed up," Sylvia noted as she tried Hortensia’s hands and forehead.
"Doesn’t your staff bother to keep you warm?"

Hortensia regarded Sylvia with a thin ghost of a smile, as she, her fifty-year-old niece, busied herself about the room, fluffing up pillows, adding wood to the dying fires. Hortensia wondered that Sylvia
did give all the airs one possibly could, and more, and demanded usually that people bend over backwards for her. But she wasn't entirely incapable of doing things herself.

"They have other things to do about the estate than to just take care of an old dying woman,” Hortensia wheezed.

"And then I'll be left alone, of all the women in the family,” Sylvia said. "Of all the family,” she repeated, echoing her own words, and even listened to them.

Without asking even for permission, Sylvia slipped her hands underneath Hortensia's blanket. Hortensia watched Sylvia move her hands about Hortensia's unfeeling legs and feet.

"I'm going to rub some life into these,” Sylvia informed her, and sat down on the bed. She pulled Hortensia's old, wrinkly, saggy, skinny legs and feet up from under the blankets and the ankle-length night-gown, and started rubbing heat into them.

Hortensia imagined it would have felt very nice to feel the warmth spread out from those limbs, as she lay listlessly against her pillows and watched Sylvia at work.

Not for the first time, Hortensia was tempted to tell Sylvia how her mother had died, as the accidental victim of Hortensia's lesson in the price of magic. But what would have been the point of that? Give Sylvia another burden to bear while she went on as the sole Blackwood after Hortensia's passing?

Although Hortensia was not convinced of that. Despite all she'd seen and read in the newspapers, and despite of Sylvia personally identifying the corpse found from the sea half a year ago, Hortensia couldn't shake the feeling that their Belle was alive. She had invited Rumpelstiltskin to visit her to ask him to look for Belle, and when that had failed, she had sent him letters, but the old sorcerer had never replied, never returned. He was gone.

"Why do you bother with those old things?” Hortensia asked Sylvia, to break the quiet.

"So the dead weight doesn't pull you down. Don't want your feet accidentally developing gangrene now, do I? You've enough to work with, fighting cancer.” Sylvia blew her own warm breath on Hortensia's toes and kept rubbing. ”You did this to me and Violet all the time when we had cold feet.”

Hortensia nodded and, leaning back, looked up at the ceiling. During her life, she had nightmares, and phantom pains, often, of her feet being cold. Especially so after the accident. But before too.

"I can't sleep without my wool socks on, myself.” Sylvia said.

"What sort of socks would they be?” Hortensia asked, imagining Sylvia's hard-to-please taste, they would be something special.

"You know what kind, you knitted them yourself four years ago,” Sylvia replied, with a glare. ”They are warm and comfortable. And I hardly need to look fit to receive guests when I'm in bed,” she continued, filling in the questions she heard Hortensia not asking.

"Why is the house so important to you? Why can't they have it?” Hortensia looked down at Sylvia again.

"Isn't it obvious,” Sylvia muttered, ”my whole family is dead soon, and Blackwood Manor is all there's left behind, besides me.”

"It would be here still, even if you didn't own it,” said Hortensia, keeping her voice level and slow
and pleasant.

"It's not the same, aunt," Sylvia said with a sigh, and for a moment Hortensia thought she'd imagined Sylvia in her early twenties again, dreadfully insecure, sitting at the foot of Hortensia's bed, fretting about going to Avonlea for a work interview.

"I'll try and see if I can help you from the netherworld, once I arrive there," Hortensia said with a wink.

"Oh aunt Hortensia, don't be horrid," Sylvia looked up, and the years returned to her face immediately. "Can we speak about something more cheerful. Like the civil war."

Obviously, Sylvia was referring to the internal conflict going on in Heartland. "What's there to talk about? Apart from the fact that it's very unpleasant. Especially so when it's father against son, and so openly too."

Sylvia nodded. She stopped rubbing Hortensia's feet and moved up to her ankles and legs. "Terribly uncivilised. I agree with the Baron, they would have done much better if Prince James had just hired an assassin and King George be done off with swiftly by blade or poison. Really, there is no reason to torment the rest of the society for their family feuds, this is the kind of thing that destroys the people's trust in monarchy. It'll have to end in regicide eventually, or George will escape and rally again. Or the next thing you'll know they'll have democracy, and won't that be horrible. I know it will be."

Hortensia shrugged. "Prince James is engaged to Snow, isn't she the very figurehead of modern monarchy? She and her royalist supporters in Whiteland, who are now helping him wrestle the country from his father."

Sylvia shook her head in defiant disapproval of Prince James, channeling her disgust into more vigour that she put into warming up Hortensia's cold legs. "That princess wasn't so well schooled herself. Her own mother died too soon, and the step-mother is a little upstart with obscure family lineage if there ever was one, I remember what a scandal it was when Leopold married Regina. Fresh blood, fresh blood, as if that alone is merit enough in royal marriage. Everyone knows Leopold married her just because she was a looker. What sort of education can she have had on that island in the Aegean sea, what was it? Cagliostra?"

Hortensia laughed. "You always speak so harshly and criticizingly of others, but how would you fare as a Queen, I wonder?"

Sylvia shook her head fiercely. As always, her upswept and pinned hair was so well in place not a single hair moved from where it was intended to be. "That is not the point, I know my place and I know it very well. I am an excellent wife, and excellent mother, an excellent hostess, and an excellent leader of three charities. All I expect in life is that other people recognize the parts they play, and excel at those. I can very well afford to be critical at others for performing poorly in their parts, just as a tenor can give advice and critique to a soprano, although they cannot change their roles in the opera."

"I think you want a promotion to become the director," Hortensia said, mildly amused.

"Oh, trust me, if I could, I would write the music and the libretto," Sylvia replied with a brief, sly smile. "But one must be modest and remember their place."
In the summer of the following year, Regina had taken herself to the hinterlands of Whiteland with a small expedition. Despite the war raging now at her doorstep, spreading from Heartland like poison and directed straight towards her capital, Regina had decided to seek help in defeating her enemies from resources other than political alliances. The old monarchies would not come to her assistance, and the new and small republics like Marchlands were too weak to fight for her.

The only ally she might have had was Arbonne, but their extremely quarrelsome parliament could not come to a decision over making war. All her spies and sources told her the majority was at least publicly and in drunken back-room politics all for making war at Heartland, and dethroning James, but the vote could not be cast in favour, no matter how Regina plotted and played.

There was a cave in the faraway mountains at the edge of Whiteland, near the Arctic sea. The place was so forbidding and away from civilization, it might as well have been called the End of the World, but it was not. It was the Winter's Vault by its proper name, but no one but her out of the expedition party knew that.

Even at the height of midsummer, the place was freezing cold. Regina, entirely wrapped in white fur, had led the way, melting the ice-barriers in the stone caverns they traversed. Then one path had become two, and two become four. They had come to a freezing labyrinth.

"What are we looking for, madam?" One of her guards asked, as she set them to investigate every nook of the maze, to draw maps and find their prize.

Regina would not share her plan with anyone, for now in any case, so she simply told them to bring her news of anything out of the ordinary. She stayed in base-camp while the knights toiled in the darkness, in the light of torches and lamps, burdened by the furs that kept them warm, and Regina waited, weighing her hastily made plans in the cold and the dark.

She had first read of Winter's Vault as a youngster, not from any regular book of course, but from one she had acquired from Rumpelstiltskin. She had been quite taken by the similar fables as a child as well. The folklore around it had stayed alive all around the lands, and even in countries beyond, throughout centuries. Even millennia, if the history books could be trusted. Folklorists thought of the place and its inhabitant only as a metaphor, but Regina counted on finding more than rhetoric now in this forlorn and icy cave.

Rumpelstiltskin's book had only revealed her long ago that the Vault was somewhere in the cold wastes of Whiteland. Out of personal academic interest, and partially boredom, Regina had sought out the location herself years before, and had been quite proud that she had been able to do so. Then she'd ferreted away this bit of information, hidden it like a squirrel making a cache for winter, waiting for when it might become useful. She had done the similar thing to Rumpelstiltskin's pretty little maid.

Now the only thing giving Regina a pause about enacting her plan was the manner of how she had come by it. When Heartland had officially declared war on her government, and Regina had gone to Rumpelstiltskin to rage and rant about it, he'd mocked her and given her a litany of useless and moronic advice.

"Pray to the North Star? Seek asylum in Lyonesse – they would adore you in Ys. I shot your mother in the head last year, so perhaps you should go and see how she's faring with a big hole just above her eyes and in the back of her head."

"I need a way to win this war, not an escape plan!" Regina had shouted at him. She had been in mind of pulling up the ace in her sleeve, carefully though, the little maid.
"And you came to me because you thought I could gather you an army? Enchant ten thousand empty suits of armour, and make them fight your war, perhaps?"

Regina's face had brightened. "Could you do that!"

"Yes, but I won't. More trouble than help, I assure you. And besides, you are thinking far too directly. What do you need to win this war?" Rumpelstiltskin had asked, walking and speaking circles around her.

"Defeat the Heartland army," Regina had replied, irritated that he made her state the obvious.

"And why did they wait until spring to attack?" Rumpelstiltskin asked her next, his stupid grin in his voice. Regina wanted to bring up the issue of the maid again just to tear that grin off, but she grit her teeth together to keep herself from blurting it out.

"No one's successfully invaded Whiteland in the winter!" Regina yelled back at him, as she twirled around.

"Because..."

"This is a sparsely populated land, the supply lines are long and the winter is harder than in any other country in the Kingdoms," Regina spat the words, and raised her hand up to her forehead. She felt as if she was going to get a headache. This was all the stuff of history lessons. "But it is the eve of summer now, they can march in for another six months before the frost returns!"

"Can they?" Rumpelstiltskin asked her. "I'm sure a clever leader of the people such as yourself can think of something to... amend this matter."

The audience had ended there. Rumpelstiltskin had refused any further help and had promptly left. Regina had been left alone to mull over the significance of his words. It was a good plan, to attack the invaders' supply lines, but the countryside where these lines were lain was riddled with royalist supporters loyal to Snow and James.

Regina had jostled her memories of history next, reading about earlier invasions throughout the centuries. These histories seemed useless to Regina, each victory completely inapplicable to her own dire situation. Then intuition, more than bookish intellect, guided her to read even older texts. There was something hovering at the edge of her memory about winter, and war, and Whiteland.

She found what she was looking for in a compendium of legends and folklore, rather than in any history book. Two warring kingdoms had a quarrel over the fish in the sea, and the harvest and hunt in the forest. When the king of the southern realm had stolen the fairest daughter of the northern realm for his wife, the Queen of the North had summoned winter itself to live in the southern kingdom and stay there until her daughter was returned.

Regina pondered about this, and she sought other old tales about untimely winters. Of which there were more than a few occurrences.

And now she was here, in old stone caverns near the Arctic sea, waiting for someone to bring her tidings. They had to, because otherwise she feared she would return home only to an occupied capital, and a prison cell.

A week after Midsummer, Sylvia was returning from the countryside by train. She had stayed with Hortensia for almost a month, admiring the old woman's strength, while a little puzzled as to why she
so intensely held on to life even though she could barely get out of bed, and had to pee in a pan.
What was so remarkable and worthwhile to a life like that? Sylvia couldn't fathom it. She wondered
if she might shoot herself if she ever got old and decrepit like that.

It started snowing out. Sylvia lifted an eyebrow. A curious thing, but not entirely unheard of. She
wondered if there might be hailing next. Sometimes a little snow in the summer was a prelude to a
good little ice storm. She was glad she was in the train, the thing was built to last, and the glass of the
window was so thick and hard, no hailstorm would break it.

Sylvia's thoughts veered off to Maurice. He had taken to drinking rather heavily. Although
technically nothing kept Maurice a part of Sylvia's life now, since both Violet and Belle were dead,
Sylvia couldn't help but feel for the man's plight. Especially so since in the dead of the night, when
she was entirely alone, and her solitary bedroom was quiet as a tomb, Sylvia blamed herself
exclusively for Belle's death. She had probably introduced Belle to the cretin who had led her out in
the night and slain her. She had given the matter thought, had had a good cry more than three times
now, and had then gone on with life trying not to let the tragedy overwhelm her. It would do no one
good if she went completely off her rails and made herself complicit in a murder she most certainly
had not planned or executed.

But tragedy had overwhelmed Maurice, and had overwhelmed it badly. Maurice had sold his
factories, the very things where Belle had always acted as his voice of conscience, always concerned
with the conditions and working hours of the people there. Now the very same Layton family, who
had tried to crush Maurice and his enterprise, ran the factory, and goodness knew what sort of regime
they ran.

Sylvia was aware that Maurice didn't give the matter any thought at present. He was paralysed by
grief, and spent his time brooding in his home on his well-established pension, or at the graveyard
laying flowers on the grave of his wife and daughter. What might be done about a man in his fifties,
who was no longer interested in the mortal world? Sylvia had no idea, but she hoped she might
someone in her circle of friends who might help. Surely in all of her charities, she might find a grief
counsellor?

There was no hail outside, Sylvia thought. The snow kept on coming instead, coming in a thicker
flurry now. Other passengers around the train were all talking about the snow. How silly, Sylvia
thought, as if talking about it and saying the same thing all over and over again was intelligent
conversation, or changed anything about the fact that it was snowing out.

It was in Avonlea an hour later, when Sylvia watched people stand around in panic and adoration,
while complete traffic chaos was taking over the city, that it occurred to her that something was off,
and she might have to become concerned too.

In less than six months, the situation escalated direly. A widespread famine took over the major cities
and towns. As people wandered across the countrysides in all the kingdoms, they spread disease and
violence. Many migrated as far away from the Kingdoms as they could – hearing stories that if they
might go south enough, there was no snow, and food didn't have to be dug up from frosty fields.
Less than a year later, other stories of the south started – that the hungry wanderers had been made
slaves. Borders were closed down around the Kingdoms, for fear of disease and the social
restlessness caused by the wandering packs of hungry refugees.

Train tracks across the Kingdoms vanished under the ever-building banks of snow. Vampires and
werewolves had started to hunt people out in the open. Lines between kingdoms vanished within the
long year of winter, when paranoid people stashed what little food they had, and made ready to kill
their neighbours should they come looking for trouble.

The last newspaper printed was a special edition of the Marchlands Times. Aunt Hortensia was alone in her mansion, reading it. Curiously, thanks to the tingling of the wild winter magic in the air, she felt a lot better than most people, who were all feeling a lot worse.

Before the sea had started to freeze, Aunt Hortensia had directed Sylvia, Maurice, Joseph, Eleanor and William to buy passage on a ship to the Outer Isles, paltry little places near the Great Rift that separated the Land with Magic from the Land Without Magic. If they had heeded Hortensia's words, she couldn't know, for the postman had stopped delivering her letters many months before.

The newspaper was very thin, and Hortensia had read it a few dozen times over. It had only one article, which was about the great leader summit on Lyonesse, where the weather was slightly moderately more tolerable than anywhere else. All the kings and queens, ministers and presidents had headed for Lyonesse to discuss the problem at hand. It said Regina, previously Prime Minister of Heartland before her step-daughter's reinstitution to power as Queen, had imperative news to everyone.

Hortensia had thought of emptying the conservatory. She had asked Joseph, Eleanor and William to bring inside every single flower from outside, before she had sent them off to safety. There were no less than twelve thousand flower fairies there, by her estimate. She might have done away with them all, but Hortensia was not sure if putting that off might have been better. She suspected she might have to life off magic for a long time – and the weight of Belle's life leaned against her thoughts.

Where was she to be found in all of this?

On the night of the leadership summit, Hortensia fetched twelve fairies and inhaled them all. She wheeled herself about her study. She had filled a basin with water and had set that on the desk. It was time to eavesdrop on the big event.

It took a lot of her energy and concentration, but eventually shadowy images emerged for her from the water. Hortensia squinted and gritted her teeth, willing for a better view. Then the surface of the water started vibrating, mimicking sounds made in a large room in the distant far, far away.

Regina had been brought to the summit in shackles, guarded by a motley group of dwarves and humans. Infuriated, her spine tall and her neck lifted to a regal poise as fit her name, she explained her position and plans to the queens and kings gathered around her.

“I have in my possession a spell that will save anyone who is willing to join me. It will take us to the Land Without Magic, and protect us from any external harm that might come to us from those live there already. This spell will guarantee us all safety, and future!”

Hortensia remained unconvinced. She was having a crick in her back and leaned back in her chair, listening to the water vibrate, giving an odd resonating quality to the voices it tried to mimick.

There was a spell, Hortensia thought, that she knew was similar to what Regina had proposed. It affected time and space. The last time she recalled anyone had used it had been a few years back, when Rumpelstiltskin had had that house built by Whitewhit Lake, which had appeared almost overnight. The trick to that happening was to mess with time - it would appear that the house was built in a day, but in reality a year might have passed inside in its construction. How Regina had come by a way of breaking the Rift though, in an addition to creating this rather challenging curse, that was a mystery to Hortensia.

But the thing about this sort of magic, Hortensia thought, was that it trapped everyone inside it. There was of course the Clause, the How to Breaking of the spell. A death, a drop of blood. Every good
witch worth her salt knew that you never clause the spell to end when the site was complete. Because no construction was ever complete. You clause it with something like, hitting a nail in some particular place; or peeing in the bush behind that rock over there. You always kept the clause simple and plain, otherwise you were on your way of screwing over yourself and anyone who accompanied you.

Hortensia began to think with dawning horror mingled with respect caused by her fascination with the sheer audacity of this plan, that the likelihood that Regina was going to trap all the fools in the Kingdoms in her own private world, that seemed clear as day. There was in fact no doubt about it. Hortensia frowned, thinking that it was almost too clever for Regina. Hortensia had no idea what this Countess-turned-Queen-turned-Prime-Minister-turned-Prisoner was like in person. Hortensia would certainly never had gone out of her way to meet her, and vice-a-versa. By everything Hortensia could read between the lines in the news though, she had come to the conclusion that Regina had more cockiness and confidence than she had mental capabilities when it came to planning.

The spell tired out Hortensia, but she didn't mind. She had heard enough. Weary, the thin wispy hair on her arms standing up, and dark sense of foreboding clouding her thoughts, she wheeled herself around the house.

She had stopped going to bed, because she was afraid that some morning she might not be able to wring herself back into the wheelchair. Hortensia had also stopped sleeping, because she was living on magic, she needed no sleep, no drink, no food. Her hours in the Blackwood Manor, which she could not escape, had been long and strange for months now.

At times, she peeked out between window curtains. She was always expecting someone to come break into the house. A vampire or a werewolf perhaps, to rummage through the stash of the once-great Enchantress. But no one had come so far.

One morning, when it was light out again, Hortensia went into the conservatory to get her breakfast. She always brought the fairies she was about to consume back into the study, because it would not do to upset twelve thousand sleeping flower fairies. There was no knowing what might happen.

She dissected the wings swiftly and inhaled until she might think straight again, and the pain in her lungs vanished.

She wondered if she might not try and find someone to help her find Belle. Hortensia reached for her handkerchief, and she was just about to clean her nose when time stopped.
Crows and Ravens

Chapter Summary

Changing rating to M for disturbing violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mr Jefferson was a hat-maker. He wasn't just any simple your run-of-the-mill hat-makers, not at all. He had appeared somewhat out of nowhere into the world of millinery at the age of 30. Quite soon baronesses, countesses, duchesses, princesses and even a queen or two had appeared in public wearing Mr Jefferson's very distinct, even whimsical, hats. His creations were wonderful pieces, like sculptures rather than sad little over-ornamented small things.

At the height of his career, Mr Jefferson's hats had for two years been in demand for horse-races, outdoor cocktail parties, outdoor symphonies in the parks, and all and any other occasions where etiquette permitted and almost even encouraged the wearing of ostentatious hats. When there had been rumour that Mr Jefferson had spent his time between being a teenager milliner's apprentice and this later height of his career doing sordid criminal work, but this piece of gossip had only increased his popularity. He appeared a mysterious, romantic hero to his clientèle, and he'd smirked and laughed, made jokes and created another one-of-a-kind hat for exorbitant amounts of money.

Not too long ago, as it was how he remembered it, he could tell it was really quite a long time ago, Mr Jefferson had had everything in his life almost well enough. Even if his wife had left him, he'd still had his daughter, his fantastic work, his fabulous reputation, and so much money he knew his daughter Grace would never want for any comfort in her life. Entirely unlike how his own life had started. He'd learned to read at fifteen and had had to work like a slave, until he'd gotten tired of being his old master's whipping boy, had stolen the fool's precious magic, and had ran off into the night to live life as he pleased.

Now nothing was as he pleased, Mr Jefferson thought. It was evening, and there was still a little light out. Jefferson had taken shelter from a biting snow-storm inside an old train-station. The place had been lovingly shut down, the windows covered and all the corners tidied before the train-master had left. As if to go on a holiday, Mr Jefferson wondered. There was a small black iron stove in the corner of the ticket office, but Jefferson was waiting for the night to put the fire in it.

There were... things... lurking in the wilderness. Even this far out of towns and cities, it was better to be cautious. He had a pistol and a dagger, but Jefferson preferred to talk his way out of trouble. Talk, steal, bribe, perhaps in extreme circumstances apply poison very carefully.

He'd been on this journey for over a weeks now. The first two days he'd made his way to Marchlands, to the outskirts of Avonlea by the sea. The city had been eerily empty, and snowy wind had howled on its streets instead of the pavements being crowded by humans and carriages and horses. He shouldn't have wondered, it had been the same everywhere else.

Jefferson had walked north along the memory of the train tracks. He had snow-shoes with him. He supposed he could have just used the hat, the magic one he had stolen from his old master, to take him where he was headed, but whoever had invited him had told him to use magic sparingly. It
perattracted not just the creatures of the night, but also the very heart of the curse that had befallen upon all the Kingdoms. Jefferson knew about that heart, it had been seen by witnesses many times over, since the long winter had begun. A dark shape that brought night with itself even during the day, and froze everything and everyone it touched. And he had seen them! Out there, there were humans and animals who had become frozen statues just from looking at the devilish spirit that plagued the world so remorselessly. The shadow had been addressed by kings and queens, wizards and sorceresses, had tried to be reasoned with, but it made its passing through all the lands in uncaring, deadly silence. Mr Jefferson had definitely no intention of doing anything that might draw the bastard near him.

He was making his way up the rail tracks because he'd received an invitation to visit a house in the Marchlands countryside. The invitation had come through his magic hat, signed Hortensia Blackwood, Enchantress. Well, he had no idea who she was, and he doubted that she wanted to see him about a hat, but he was desperate, and required all the alliances he could get, since all his old contacts had quite literally vanished off the face of the world as he knew it.

Jefferson ought to have been in a constant state of panic and terror, considering his circumstances: All alone in foreign lands, surrounded by snow, ice and unknown terrors of the wilderness, with little hope or promise that he might ever find what he sought, his precious daughter Grace. He wasn’t even certain if he might find food when his bags emptied. All the world had gone so topsy-turvy, but instead of worrying about it, he was starting to take the whole thing in stride: laughing at his fate, and mocking it, cracking dark jokes and talking to himself as he had followed the railway tracks that had seen no train in years.

The snow-storm lasted through the night, and Jefferson barely slept. When it was dark enough, he heated up the lonely ticket office of the rural abandoned village, and huddling close to the iron stove he listened to the wind howling in the forests, and the tree branches scraping each other like skeletal fingers in corpse hands, weaving its palms together anxiously as if they too were waiting for the storm to end.

And end it did. The following day was bright and sunny, which might have caused an issue for someone else attempting an all-day hike across the snows, but that was not a problem to Jefferson who had already solved this problem during his travels. He'd replaced the lenses of a pair of goggles with smoke-darkened glass, and the dark shaded solution protected his eyes splendidly as he made his way through the day-brightened winter landscape. That day was ever so beautiful, and three years ago it would have been the sort of day when nannies and mothers would have taken their children out skating and skiing. The sort of weather when he might have taken Grace out to the skating field himself, he though. A bitter clutch of despair threatened to take over him, but he forced it out with a delirious laugh, before the terror would have made his knees weak and tears fill his eyes.

He had worked for so long and hard to have it all. To make a life for him and his wife... and daughter without them being in danger of being caught by his past mistakes. His whole life, he'd climbed a mountain, and as he'd reached the summit of peace and comfort, he'd been pushed off the side of it. And Jefferson had no intention of forgetting who had done the pushing, no. He grinned, thinking of Regina, and the dark and sinister deeds he planned for her fuelled his steps forwards. With only these thoughts to keep him company, the day was long, quiet and lonely – in other words completely similar to all the other days in recent memory.

At last, at the end of his journey, was a house. All its surroundings were buried in snow that was knee-deep at best, and up to the elbows at worst, making the place no different from any other forlorn, abandoned place left in the world and its handful of survivors.

The large conservatory that was built along one side of the house attracted Jefferson’s attention as first prominent feature. Too bad the glass had broken, or else the place might have served as means
for growing carrots and potatoes even through the endless winter. Perhaps there were no wolves or vampires hunting in these back countries. Perhaps, if he stayed, he could repair the glass house. Perhaps he could still find Grace. Perhaps, perhaps.

Jefferson was most curious with the glass garden, so he avoided the front door and went straight ahead to inspect the conservatory. There had been green plants inside, but they had died, and everything was covered by snow. The tallest specimens had been trees, but he couldn't recognize them. The garden door opened easily. He took notice that the breakage had been recent, for the snow was not thick at all. He also stayed wary in case of glass shards, there must have been a lot of them for most of the ceiling seemed to have fallen in, and he didn't want any large glass piece to cut through his boot and sever his foot. But there were no shards, not that he could tell, under the two inches of snow. Still, he stayed wary, crossing the garden, is eerie a place as any other in the now-doomed world where everything was frozen and lost to a wintery oblivion.

There was a door leading inside to the house. Jefferson took the calling card out and stared at it, amused if anything, by the idea that such civilized things could matter in a world gone quite, quite mad. Preparing himself for his best manners, or if that failed, also for the possibility of having to cheat, steal or threaten for food, he pulled a door open. He had to push aside a thick velvet curtain to enter as well, and once he discovered how deliciously, wonderfully warm inside it was, he made sure to close the door and pull the curtain behind himself carefully.

Jefferson turned around and removed his darkened goggles, which obscured his vision now that he was inside. He took in half of his surroundings, books books and more books, before his eyes met those of his host – the woman must have been the one to have invited him. She sat in a wheelchair on the other side of the room, and Jefferson felt sorry for her. To be alive in a wheelchair in this weather must have been a slow death sentence.

The woman can't have been much older than twenty. She had enormous, long masses of golden hair, part of which she'd embroidered and pinned around the crown of her head, while leaving the rest loose. Even in the dim light, its only source the still and quiet room beyond open doors, Jefferson could make out her green eyes. She wasn't voluptuous, rather she seemed delicate and bony, like a thin porcelain doll.

She didn't seem, inspecting him with her quiet, scrutinizing gaze that ran up and down, and he was uncertain then, suddenly feeling like he'd been trapped. Whoever this woman was, she could do magic. Had he been spirited to this lair to feed the witch that could not walk? She lifted her chin first slightly, before she pulled herself up from the wheelchair, and smiled. She looked like the spitting image of the girl in the painting just behind her, and Jefferson thought, of course, they were the same person.

“How do you do,” the witch-girl said to him pleasantly. It didn't remove Jefferson's suspicions of her, but he made himself look at ease and trusting until all the cards were shown.

“Fine, thank you. You must be... miss? Hortensia Blackwood?” Jefferson asked her, and she widened her smile and curtsied lightly.

“Why yes I am. I'm afraid I have no idea who you might be, sir, I was sending my calling cards out in hopes of finding anyone near enough.” Her eyes glanced at the card.

“Please call me Jefferson,” he replied, bowing, oozing as much charm as he could in the tone of his voice and in the controlled fluid motions of his arms and legs. Body language was the key.

“Are you hungry? I have food. It's not poisoned or cursed, I assure you,” the girl gestured deeper into the house.
“I would love a bite,” Jefferson replied truthfully, and he couldn't prevent a shadow of the real extent of his hunger to mar the enthusiasm in his voice. Why did she declare poisons and curses though? Warily, Jefferson followed the lady to the kitchen. He was treated to hot tea and old, hard bread, but the bread became moist and soft when he kept it in the tea for a while. And besides, with the cheese and butter, he could have eaten pebbles, so he didn't mind.

“It is afternoon tea time,” Hortensia told him. “We will eat soup for dinner, I made it myself, from what I could. It's mostly vegetable, with some salted fish, I'm afraid it won't taste very good, but there's not a lot else left, and we really need to save the bread for our journey,” she prattled. She moved around a lot in the kitchen, touching things, or just pacing around when she waited for the tea to stew, and Jefferson couldn't decipher her. At first he'd thought she was nervous, but he was pretty good at reading other people's body language as well as controlling his own – with enough bluffing anyone could take a common thief on the run for a gentleman out and about on a stroll. Jefferson thought she wasn't nervous, not the way she was very intent about the way she paced about the room, staring at her legs.

“Journey?” Jefferson asked, a little late, lost in thoughts. “I thought I'd rather stay here and rest for a while.”

Hortensia shook her head and stared at him intently. “When the time started again-”

Jefferson's eyes widened. “Did time stop?” He asked.

She looked at him humourlessly. “For a man with a magic hat, you certainly don't seem to know much.”

Jefferson smiled affably. “I've managed anyhow.” He had thought he had had just a really long nightmare, and that he'd gone mad. But the time had stopped?

Hortensia stared him down, placing her hands on her hips and pulling herself up. “When the time started again, after that spell took away most people in the world to the Land Without Magic, I woke up and thought that there's more wild magic about now than there was before this winter started. The winter itself is magical, and it makes the air thick with possibilities. Every day has the potency of Winter Solstice, do you understand what I mean?”

Jefferson shrugged. “I know some spells are more potent at certain times of the day or the year.”

Hortensia nodded. “Yes, everything is more extreme. Magic as well. Including mine. That's why I found you, and why I know who you're looking for,” she said, dead serious.

Jefferson's charming smile died on his lips and he stared back at her.

“You know where Grace is?” He whispered.

“I know how to get there,” the young lady Hortensia replied, very certain of herself for such a young little blonde thing. “I have a friend who's locked up in the same place, and I'd appreciate all the help I can get. They're guarded, you see. By a witch.”

Jefferson nodded. “And since all magic has grown stronger, that includes hers.”

Hortensia nodded twice. “In the winter, all curses and hexes are more powerful, and enchantments of nurture and protection are weak. And I haven't fought another witch in a... long time.”

Jefferson sighed. “Well, what do you think you and I can do between ourselves to overcome this witch you speak of?”
Hortensia left the room for a moment, and returned in a moment with a little pouch. “I have fairy-
dust. It'll undo the enchantments laid upon her victims. I thought you might be able to distract her
with your hat, send her to the moon?”

Jefferson nodded slowly. “So where are they?”

Hortensia hid the fairy-dust in the pockets hidden in the folds of of her long and wide skirts. “I'll
enchant a ball of yarn and it'll find them.”


Hortensia shot a disapproving glare at him. “It's magic. And I'm an Enchantress. The Enchantress, I
was even once called.”

With a swirl of her hand, it popped out of nowhere. She presented him with the yarn and Jefferson's
blood grew cold, for it was unmistakable, where that yarn had come from. He had some himself,
hidden under some floor boards of his very comfortable house. He hadn't thought to bring any along,
because the value of gold had decreased even before the disaster. Food and warmth were infinitely
better things to bargain with now than golden yarn.

“Where did you get that?” Jefferson asked her, trying to sound casual, but he was very certain he
knew the creator of this gold, as sure as he'd been to his castle and stolen for him.

“Does that matter?” Hortensia asked.

“You know, everyone knows, there's not a lot of people who make golden yarn,” Jefferson tried to
laugh, but it got stuck in his throat.

Hortensia poured him more hot tea. “My niece was his housekeeper for a while. She didn't wish to
keep it, so she gave it to me.”

Jefferson lifted an eyebrow. “You have a niece? And how old are you?”

Hortensia put the teapot down with a bang. “I'd rather you don't ask me too many personal
questions.”

“Why not, seems you know all sorts of things about me,” Jefferson said coldly.

Hortensia stopped being so animated and took a seat slowly. “I spoke to a dead person, I don't know
if they lied or told the truth about you.” She tried to sound more polite and candid than before, but
she was still a steam engine in motion in all her animated forwardness.

There was only one dead person he could think of that would have told things about him to this girl.
Jefferson didn't want to discuss the issue further.

“You had plans for our outing?” He asked instead.

She nodded. “We'll eat and rest well tonight, and head out tomorrow to where ever the yarn takes
us.”

“The weather out isn't on our side, we'll get buried alive in that snow,” Jefferson said. He knew well
enough not to trust any gold that had come from Rumpelstiltskin.

Hortensia nodded. “We'll need skis, but I have those. I'm sorry I can't turn into a carriage and horses,
but they're in short supply here, and my magic is better not wasted in creature comforts.”
Interesting, Jefferson thought. He had an abstract idea of how magic worked, when used by witches and sorcerers, and he had a hunch that this Hortensia, Enchantress, or whatever she called herself, had a limit to her own powers. Jefferson also frowned inwardly, at the idea that he'd have to learn how to ski.

But Grace was out there somewhere, in the wide, empty dark and eternal winter.

“I'll be ready before dawn,” he promised.

A few weeks later, Jefferson was alone, without carriage, and without skis. He'd had to resort back to his snow-shoes when his skis had broken. At least there had been a carriage, at some point.

The golden ball of yarn he followed was a bit of a chore. He had to hold on to the end of the yarn and re-wind it to a ball every time he threw it, so he couldn't see much anything except the snow where the ball made its trail, as it heavily sank into the snow (but wouldn't be slowed down) and the tail of the yarn which he spun to a ball, again, again, and again. He had repeated these motions thousands of times, and often he forgot to look around to see where he was going. At least the ball of yarn was clever enough not to lead him down to bottomless pits or off ravines, so he'd felt content to just walk and stare down and a little ahead for days on end now.

If anything, this adventure had fed the growing desire to take out all manners of herbs, which he had packed away at the bottom of his satchel. He wanted to soothe his spirits into oblivion, because he was all manners of afraid. He was in a foreign land where he couldn't read the sign posts, which were all hidden under snow anyway. He was afraid of what might become of his quest if he failed – he had already lost his companion. And he was afraid, maybe most of all, what if he found Grace? If she was dead, how could he live? And if she lived, what sort of liberty was he freeing her into?

The snow squeaked in its peculiar way under his steps, and on he walked. At least it wasn't too cold, unlike a week ago when it had been so harsh, he'd thought he'd freeze to death. The little slip of a girl, Hortensia, had taken it all in stride, but Jefferson thought his body would stop, and he would die. Then Hortensia had finally relented after he had almost collapsed. They'd made a detour through an abandoned farmyard, and searched the premises for a sleigh. She'd tucked him under all the warm blankets she could steal from the house, before she made the sleigh move by itself, with a flick of her fingers.

And they had made such swift, smooth progress, for almost three days, before the Darkness had found them.

Jefferson shivered, and not from cold, when he thought about it. The sunny afternoon had gone dark, not from clouds. The sky itself had turned into a black, starless void. Hortensia had slowed down a little and they'd searched the woods for explanation. When Hortensia had seen it, the answer to this mystery, she'd gasped in wonder, and Jefferson had followed her gaze.

It had moved between the thin birch trees in the direction where they were headed, where the golden ball was rolling. It hadn't been a shape, or a person exactly. It was darkness, its edges blurred into the background. It wasn't simply black, there was colour in there same way a night sky or, rather, the dark surface of water at night had. It had unmistakable depth to it, and its movement gave him an idea that the darkness was heavy, for how slowly it lumbered there in the trees. The general shape and the almost clumsy movement reminded him of a bear, but he would have preferred an angry bear infinitely over this.

In a strange way, there was still the same amount of light in the air as there had been when the sky
had been normal, but colour had vanished entirely. Everything he saw was grey. He looked at Hortensia, who stared at the shape of the heavy darkness in rapt fascination, and he wondered what she saw in it, this Enchantress. She had halted now their progress entirely, and was furiously winding the golden yarn with such haste that Jefferson couldn't see the yarn whipping in the air as she pulled and weaved it.

Jefferson looked back at the darkness waiting for them in the treelines. He'd thought he had been looking straight at it, and that it had been looking straight at them, but he realized he was wrong. The darkness started to turn, and Jefferson wished it hadn't, for it had the shape of a head at the top of its distorted, blurry form, and in the head there were two utterly inhuman eyes, a pair cold and dead things that stared at them. The darkness began to move towards them.

“Why... aren't... we.... moving...?” Jefferson whispered to Hortensia, and as he did so, he wondered why was he speaking with such a low voice.

The air was getting colder.

“We... need... the... yarn...” she replied with equal difficulty.

It seemed the darkness had no need to be speedy, for its prey was lacking in fleetness.

Jefferson shook his head and returned from his memory into the presence. He took comfort in the light of the sun, and in the fact that he had food in his pack, even though it was all hardtack and beef jerky not made of beef. He walked along, wondering if he would spend the rest of his life following the ball of golden yarn, when unexpectedly, the yarn ran into a gate, and stopped rolling.

He looked up, and saw he had come to the gated grounds of a manor which he could see beyond a park full of dead winter trees. The house at the end of the alley of trees was too large and ostentatious perhaps to be a manor, but too small to be a castle or a palace. The outer exteriors were white. He stared at the windows, waiting to see any signs of life in them, and long moments passed. He thought he had waited a minute, but maybe it had been an hour, he didn't know, and dread was coiling in the pit of his stomach at the thought of what trials he would have to endure if it was true, that this was the house of a witch.

If this had been two years ago, he would have presented himself as the finest milliner in the kingdoms, and lied his way inside, backed up by the brazen rush of certainty of how good he was at speaking circles around people. But it was not two years ago, he could count the number of other humans he'd seen recently with two hands, and it was an absolute certainty that the moment he encountered whoever lived here, questions would be asked.

Jefferson suspected he would fare just as poorly with stealth, but at least it gave him the theory of an element of surprise, and that tiny hope was sort-of comforting. So he circled the fence around and around, and found a place where he thought he might cross over. He then got to work with the snow, first he made a snowball between his hands. Then he rolled it about on the ground, and it gained size. He rolled and rolled it until it was so large he could barely move it any longer, with its weight, and he pushed that against the fence. He made a smaller snowball and lifted that on top of the big one, and so he made himself a staircase. An unreliable, soft staircase, but he climbed up carefully and managed to get himself on top of the fence. Then he hopped down on the other side, and landed in a ball of hurt, for it was no easy distance.

From this angle towards the house, from the edges of the unkempt winter park, he could see there was a vast conservatory behind the house, and Jefferson was reminded of the broken one behind Hortensia's home. Hortensia had sat there, in that room just behind the garden, knowing where he might enter, and Jefferson wondered if it would be the same with this witch.
And he wasn't looking for a conservatory, was he? He was looking for a dungeon, where these prisoners were kept.

He recalled he still had the golden yarn. Rumpelstiltskin's yarn, enchanted by the girl who had probably been eaten alive by darkness itself. Jefferson took out the ball and threw it in the air. As always, the yarn took its own course once it landed and headed, unmistakably, towards the large glass hothouse.

“What is it with these ladies and their gardens?” Jefferson muttered to himself and wound the yarn back into a ball as he followed it through the snowy and quiet park, in the warmth of a late afternoon sun.

As he got closer, he began to feel uneasy. He saw maybe two dozen bird cages hanging from the ceiling inside the conservatory. The ones that had occupants stared down at him intently, making him feel uneasy to say the least. He allowed himself in through a narrow door, and the golden yarn continued rolling about on its own accord once it was allowed inside, making a straight line across the tiled floor, until it stopped, dead in its tracks, under one of the bird cages. Jefferson frowned, and he followed the yarn cautiously, and peered inside the cage.

There was a blue bird inside, staring at him intensely, with blue-rimmed, black eyes. A beautiful specimen. Jefferson shook his head, no, not a bird. This would be Hortensia's friend. The cage door was locked, but that was hardly an obstacle to Jefferson. He only needed a metal pin, which he had, he had opened a vast number of locks with it in recent memory, and in a few moments he swung the tiny latch open, and waited with trepidation for the bird to fly out, and fly it did.

It landed on the floor, and then was immediately curious with the golden yarn, while Jefferson dug his chest pockets until he at last found the pouch of fairy-dust, one of the last parting gifts he'd received from Hortensia. He pinched a tiny amount of the colourful, sparkling dust between his fingers and scattered it over the bird, which began to transform...

… and Jefferson could feel himself go red in the face from surprise, watching the exquisitely beautiful, and very naked young woman in front of him. She wasn't at first very conscious of her state of undress, but she then made a little yelp and turned around.

“My clothes were stolen,” she explained, “but you're here to rescue us? Right?”

Jefferson managed to nod, and then realized she wouldn't see him nod. “Yes, yes. My name is Jefferson, I'm here to set you free. Are all these cages full of people?”

“I think so. The woman who keeps us is mad, she calls us her children, and tries to make us breed and lay eggs, it is horrific.”

Jefferson's face went from red to pale.

“Thank heavens she hasn't fared well,” the girl said. She bent her knees and leaned down to pick up the golden yarn from the floor. “Where did you get this?” She asked, but Jefferson wasn't in the mood for explaining. He was taking off his coat for this girl.

“I'll tell you everything, but can we get these people out first?” Jefferson asked, as he handed her his overcoat. She slipped into it, and put the yarn in her pocket.

They took down all the birdcages and Jefferson started opening them one by one. Not every single one had an actual lock, some were merely twisted in place with metal wire, and the girl helped open those. They had about twenty cages open by the time they were done, and all manners of birds, not a
single one of them from an ornithology book, collected around them. Jefferson hoped the dust would be enough for all of them. He had had to use some of it on his way here, and there was not a lot left.

“Children, it's tea time!” A middle-aged woman's voice called at them from across the gardens. Jefferson and the girl spun around, and saw her, the insane woman who had kept them here, carrying a tray laden with cups, all full of seeds. She looked horrified by what she'd discovered.

“Naughty, naughty children. You will all go back to your cages now!” She cried out.

The birds with the darkest plumages took to a sudden flight then. Four of them, with night-blue wings mixed with dark purple and dark shimmering green plumages, they were all quite big and with beaks like crows and ravens.

“There will be no tea for misbehaving children!” The witch screamed at the approaching birds.

They went straight at the women, screeching and cawing. The witch threw the tray to the ground and attempted perhaps to cast a spell of some kind, but one of the birds plucked its beak into her eye, and her screeches of pain filled the conservatory. The witch fell on the ground and tried to shield herself.

Everyone stared in mute, disbelieving horror as the four birds pecked and pecked at her, until she moved no longer.

“Oh, oh no!” the girl at Jefferson's side screamed, and gasped for breath. She seemed unable to tear her eyes off the corpse bleeding on the white marble tiles of the garden, while the dark birds returned to the fold. Jefferson pulled her into a tentative embrace and found he had no words of comfort.

“We should have stopped them,” she said eventually.

“And let her turn us all to birds?” Jefferson asked, pulling back. “What's your name? Are you Hortensia's friend?”

The girl looked up at her, her face quite transformed then. “Are you here with my aunt Hortensia?” She asked, excited.

“Oh... you must be her niece,” Jefferson replied, and found a smile for her. “You need to tell me all about yourself, but first I need to see if there's enough dust for all of these.”

He looked pleadingly at all the smallest birds, and threw the first specks of dust on them. They all transformed into children, and one of them was the most beautiful child in all the world, who instantly called him papa, and threw her arms around his neck, and he held her, and thought he could never let go.

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes our tour of Jorinde and Joringel.
Chapter Summary

Featuring turkish delight and an unusually sympathetic chicken

There was too much to be thought of.

Bewildered, cold, and wearing only a stranger's coat, Belle decided to start with thinking about getting dressed. She did her best to listen to every morsel of conversaton the other prisoners of the bird keeper held between each other and with their saviour, this Mr Jefferson, who had met with Aunt Hortensia, hadn't he? Belle had wanted to ask him about that, but the man was completely taken over by his reunion with his daughter, he could barely hear a word spoken to him.

The people who had killed the Bird Keeper were also very eager to speak with Jefferson. They hadn't all been imprisoned together, but it seemed like they had found a natural mutual bond instantly since the woman had been pecked to death on the cold tiled floor. Her body still lay in the winter garden, in a pool of blood and with parts of her earthly remains plucked out and left scattered about her. Her face was barely recognizable.

The four dark birds who had done the deed had transformed into three women and one man. The women were all as different apart as they could be. An old woman, and a young woman who had claimed to be the grand-daughter to the aforementioned. A beautiful Oriental princess in stunningly bright and colourful garments had been the largest of them all in bird-size, but she was amongst the adults, the smallest in human size. When the fairy-dust had fell upon her, the princess had been revealed to be not much larger than the shape of the great black crow she had inhabited. It was also clear she was not someone to be slighted, with the twin swords she carried at her waist.

The fourth bird was a man who said very little of himself, and kept in the back, listening to everyone. Belle felt uneasy about him especially, for he'd been the one to go to the eyes first. She wanted to believe that the Bird Keeper had imprisoned only innocent people who Regina Whiteland instructed her to make vanish, but perhaps that was a foolish notion. It would be better to stay on her guard.

“I'll go look for clothes,” Belle announced as she departed the cold glass garden. Few people barely acknowledged her, which was as well, she thought. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts for a moment.

The stately house of the Bird Keeper was in shambles. Belle wandered about the house from corridor to corridor, opening each door, looking for something she hoped might point her to the direction of a wardrobe.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” she whispered to herself. “Rumpelstiltskin, Rumpelstiltskin.” If only she could summon Rumpelstiltskin, Belle thought, then everything would and could be better.

The time Belle had spent as a bird had made her memory foggy. Everything felt chopped up, broken apart. She tried to recall something useful. Clothes, she was naked. She needed clothes. And fire. And food. Food – the thought stirred another memory. The Bird Keeper had been worried about there being enough food, she had wanted the birds to lay eggs so she could have more food.
Belle went to a window and stared outside at the vast, endless white of the snowy landscape.

Some gut feeling, rather than solid memory, told her that this had been the state of existence for a rather long time now.

A real, solid memory came to her then, of a time not so long ago (or was it?) when she had crept into Rumpelstiltskin's tower, and stared at a parchment describing the location of some ancient tomb, called the Winter's Cave.

Surely, surely this was not all his design?

Belle felt adrenaline course through her veins as she searched through the rest of the vast corridors in a right state of anger and fright. From the servants rooms, she looked for warmest and most sensible clothes she could find. There was going to be no need for dainty ballgowns, perhaps ever again, and instead she opted for durability and practicality, which were found in the linen and wool left behind by some man who had once upon a time lived in the manor. Belle recalled faintly the details of all the new clothes Aunt Sylvia had given her, all the way down to the pretty undergarments that had squashed her into the latest fashionable silhouette.

Good grief, how would Aunt Sylvia be now? Out there? And her papa! And her cousins, and Aunt Hortensia and the people at Blackwood Manor?

As soon as she was dressed, Belle continued her investigations of the house, to find pen and paper. She scribbled down Rumpelstiltskin's name on three pieces of paper and threw them all in the fire that was going warm in the Bird Keeper's lavish day room. Belle tapped her foot as she waited impatiently, but there was nothing. No reply. Belle closed her eyes, wishing with equal amounts of fondness as well as foreboding and irritation that there be the darkness, and the faint smell of burnt tobacco and Rumpelstiltskin's terrible mocking voice in the room.

“Who are you calling?” A voice at the door questioned her.

Belle twirled around, and saw Jefferson, holding his girl by the hand.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” Belle replied.

“I'm not sure if he's still around.” Jefferson approached the sofa where Belle had left his coat. “He probably took off with Regina. Like most everyone in the world did.”

“My name is Grace,” the little girl introduced herself with gusto, and Belle's heart melted for her instantly.

“How do you do, my name is Belle,” she introduced herself back, and gave the girl a handshake with both her hands. Her little hands felt cold, and Belle frowned a bit, alarmed.

“Grace will need something warmer to wear,” Jefferson said. He draped his coat over Grace, although it was ridiculously too large. The next thing, he was in the Bird Keeper's wardrobe closet, just out of sight, if not earshot.

“Why are you trying to find Rumpelstiltskin?” Grace asked Belle. “Isn't he a monster?”

“I was hoping he would undo... whatever it is that needs undoing,” Belle replied. She didn't feel good. Perhaps it was the fact that she'd eaten seeds for some time now. Some terribly long time now.

“Have you ever met Rumpelstiltskin?” Grace asked. “My papa has,” she added with a whisper.
Belle glanced at the wardrobe. “I was Rumpelstiltskin's housekeeper.”

Grace blinked. “Do monsters have housekeepers?”

Belle nodded. “I expect only the ones that like their houses tidy.”

“You're far too pretty to be a housekeeper, too,” Grace added, and cuddled deeper into the her father's coat. “Our housekeeper was very ugly. She had a wart. I suspected she was a witch, but turns out the sweet-shop lady was the real witch. She died, recently. I... I expect you saw that? We were both there.”

Belle stared at the girl, trying to listen to her and her words. It was hard. She felt enormously exhausted, hungry, and her brain wanted to insist to her that she was really a small bird and not human at all. She thought she could see the same fatiguing disparity between her present state and that of only an hour ago was also plaguing Grace. It was in the turn of their heads, and in the way their eyes moved, trying to mimic something they were no longer, out of habit.

“We'll be fine,” Belle told the girl. She realised Grace had not been doubting the state of their well-being, but that she was assuring herself as much as she was the little girl. “We'll become used to being human again,” Belle continued.

Belle wanted to hug Grace, for being such a calm, smart girl, and to help her feel warm, but she couldn't translate her urge to action before Jefferson returned with clothes he thought he could cut down to size the easiest. Belle was no longer required or desired in the room, and so she left to explore the Bird Keeper's quarters some more. She found the strange woman's bedroom two doors apart then, and Belle's first thought was how odd it seemed to walk into a person's most private quarters so soon after their demise.

The room was fairly tidy. Stockings had been left lying about, and there was an unfinished breakfast tray, which made Belle curious. Why hadn't the food been consumed in the kitchen, where it surely must have been made? Why bring it here? Belle couldn't recall ever having seen another live person in this manor apart from the Bird Keeper, but if there was someone, a maid or a valet, then they must have been the one to bring the tray upstairs? Or had the madame been a slave to habit, and ate breakfast in bed, because she had always done so?

Belle stared at the long-ago toasted bread. There were egg-shells, which meant there were chicken still, somewhere, there had to be? There was at least food for them. She wanted to dig in immediately into that slice of toast, but she couldn't know, was this the last piece of toast in all the house? Surely the little girl trying on new, warmer clothes would need it more than she did.

Belle cleared away everything off the tray that suggested it had already been used. She also gathered some hard biscuits that had been left in a glass container near the window, which smelled of cinnamon, they would probably go nicely down with tea. Tea at least was a commodity that probably hadn't already been run out of in the world of winter. From a drawer, Belle found a tin box that contained turkish delight, and Belle added that to the tray, trying not to imagine the witch lying in the canopy bed right there, in her plum-coloured satin sheets, eating sweets in the light of the colourfully put-together glass lamp, warm and comfortable while she kept prisoners in tiny cages in her garden.

How cruel, to make birds, and not allow them to fly.

As she was returning to Jefferson and his daughter, Belle recalled Grace's tale of the witch posing as a sweet-shop lady. There might have been poison or magic in any of the food and drink they'd find in the house. The piece of toast, and the half a pot of tea gone cold seemed unlikely to be traps, but
what about the sweets? She pocketed them all, and thought she should ask if anyone knew magic, if they could inspect them for her.

“You mentioned my aunt,” Belle said, as she returned to Jefferson and Grace.

“Hortensia? She was attacked by the creature that's brought this winter upon us.” Jefferson took out the golden yarn from the pocket of his coat and extended it to Belle. “The Groke. It's attracted to magic, and she was... compelled to use some.”

“Attacked?” Belle shook her head, disbelieving. “What happened to her?”

Jefferson gave Belle a steady, if sorrowful look. “I didn't turn around to see. I ran.”

Another moment later, Belle was struggling to find all the prisoners of the garden, but all had dispersed around the house by the time she returned to the ground floor. The children didn't have the presence of mind to be doing anything sensible, while the others were all looting the house for food and comfort. As Belle watched the younger and the older adults tucked away or ate what food they found, giving no heed to the children, her blood began to boil, and she marched through the corridors, yelling at everyone there was to be a meeting in the kitchen, of their present circumstances, now.

To her surprise too, everyone made an appearance in the kitchen, no exceptions. The kitchen of an grand manor house was so great too, that it accommodated them all easily. Someone had a built a fire too, perhaps the grandmother, who had seemed like the only person to give some thought to the comfort of the children, and had put some food aside for them.

“People! We need to come up with a plan of action, and help each other to survive!” Belle started. As soon as those words were out though, there was no holding back the tide of opinions of the motley personages.

One young man was already bringing up his opinion that a girl such as Belle herself was, was unsuitable for leading any discussion, and she should sit down and be quiet. The grandmother took out a rolling pin from under her arm and sassed the man, while Jefferson announced he had no interest in joining forces with anyone, that he and Grace would leave to Far Isles as soon as was convenient for them and didn't care if and who followed them. The children created a chaos of prattle, asking for their parents or for food. Other prisoners started to offer ideas about some kind of voting system for leadership-

The beautiful Oriental princess and the dark man in black keeping back had been the only two not to at some point or other to express their opinion or intent. The man remained so, but when the princess had had enough of the noise around her, she jumped, as graceful as a hopping little animal might, on the table in the middle of the room and called for silence with such imperious and uncompromising manner, it was granted to her.

“I am Khutulun, and I came here to your lands, from the great kingdoms of the south to deal with the crisis you have so far been unable to content with!”

“She is Turandot!” Someone whispered in the room, and Khutulun's glare silenced that corner of the room swiftly.

“Yes, I have been called that,” Khutulun admitted. “And then you'll also know, I've bested hundreds of warriors in battle. I have come to do the undoable, and slay the creature that will inevitably, spread an endless winter to all the world.”
“You might have done that two years ago,” the young man who had affronted Belle already said, although he was quite subdued about it.

“I have been here already since when this winter started,” Khutulun replied, with icy patience in her voice. “I presented myself first to this... Regina, whose lands were most fiercely afflicted, and asked for her help in finding the dread creature, the Groke. But that woman had me trapped and poisoned, caged through the foulest kind of treachery. But this won't deter me from my quest, to slay the Groke, and restore the natural order. I require only the barest of assistance, that I be allowed food for my journey, and pointed to the way where the Groke was last seen.”

Khutulun gave a bow. “This is all.” She landed gracefully on the floor once she pounced off the table, and Belle envied the woman’s strength of spirit, grace of a panther, and the oratory skills of the most experienced diplomat.

Despite what had at first appeared as a rousing performance, the order in the kitchen soon deteriorated again after the princess had finished talking. Not knowing quite as much as some of the other prisoners seemed to, Belle picked up some facts: that there was some barely tolerable, but not dreadfully freezing islands near the Great Rift in the west, where most all people who had chosen not to go with Regina to the Land Without Magic now were staying at. The Far Isles. Jefferson had even been there, so it was no mere rumour.

Everyone ended up professing their desire to get to these far-away isles, and in the end it was the grandmother who laid down the rules and regulations of how they would proceed. She left her grand-daughter, a beautiful and tall dark-haired girl by the name of Red, in charge of getting the children ready for long travels through the snow, and to the rest of the crowd, the formidable lady told them, they would either stick with her and do as they were told and stay alive, or get the hell out of her way, and that was the end of it.

Some people vanished off on their own within the coming hours. Jefferson seemed to have come to the realization that it was much better for both himself and his daughter that they travel with the group, and he kept himself busy assisting the grandmother. They had gone through the stable houses of the manor, looking for winter transportation, and had come up with a light-weight sled, as well as skis, and snow-shoes. All of those working under the Granny were given strict instructions on what to do and how to prepare for their next morning take-off.

Belle found herself starting off in the role of an observer for the remainder of the day. Then she assisted in keeping the children preoccupied, while Red cooked them dinner from scraps found in the basement that the strong and able adults had left them before vanishing off into the great winter wild. Belle amused the children with nursery rhymes and riddles, and then with games. Then she assisted fixing broken straps on a dog-sleigh, by going through the possessions of the manors' old housekeepers and valets, in search of a leather-needle and pliers.

But all this came to a halt. Belle went searching, and found, in the grand parlour of the manor, Princess Khutulun sitting on a satin sofa, holding a chicken. The chicken must have laid the breakfast eggs for the dreadful Bird Keeper. Belle had thought the creature already dead and gone with the vanished stragglers, but the chicken was alive and clucking in the royal lap.

“I first wanted to kill it for dinner, but I thought, it might be another prisoner,” Khutulun told Belle, replying to her quiet presence in the room.

“That's very prudent,” Belle said, and took hesitant steps towards the tiny princess. Her blades rested next to her on the sofa, and it appeared she'd been sharpening them earlier, with the tools still laid out. There was a fire going on in the grand fireplace, and the warm orange light was the only thing to light the room in the darkening of the evening.
“And even if she is not a prisoner, she is still a survivor of this house,” Khutulun continued, and stroked the chicken. She set the bird down on the floor and it went about its business, strutting on the dusty silk carpet on the floor.

The air of tired abandonment was everywhere in the house, even in the Bird Keeper’s bedroom. When she had stayed there alone, and probably avoiding using magic, it had become impossible for one woman to keep such a large estate in order alone. Spider webs and dust had piled up everywhere, in abandoned and unused rooms, the massive velvet curtains, the crystal chandeliers, and the soft silk rugs, which had not been cleaned in years by the looks of them. Now there was also chicken poop on one of them. And it didn’t matter at all, for there would be no one left in the house come the earliest light of dawn.

“The creature you're looking for, the Groke is attracted to magic,” Belle told Khutulun. “I can come with you, to help you.”

The small but obviously deadly princess measure Belle with a glance. Belle was sure she was disapproving, but there seemed to be no others to assist the fabled Turandot in her quest.

“How will you help me?” Khutulun asked.

“Can you summon the Groke with magic?” Belle asked.

“No. Can you?”

“There is magic in Rumpelstiltskin's castle in Dimhaut,” Belle suggested. She couldn't be absolutely certain, of course, but she had a fairly strong idea of the Dark One's habits. “I know the castle.”

“It'll be a long walk, with werewolves and vampires lurking all across the abandoned towns and villages.” Khutulun sheathed one of her swords and thrust it to Belle. “You will learn how to use this.”

The grandmother had been the last to go to bed, and was first to be up in the morning. Belle was second to be awake, for she'd woken up in a state of distress, dreaming of Rumpelstiltskin. She'd sought solace in the warmth of the kitchen, and had found the grandmother with piercing eyes there, turning a large ladle in the biggest pot she'd found in the kitchen. There was to be porridge for breakfast. She'd accepted Belle's company with companionable silence.

“I had bad dreams,” Belle told her.

Granny turned around at the stove. “Porridge won't be ready yet, but there's tea in the pot. There's cups over there, you take one, and sit down.”

Belle did as instructed, and she felt a little sad as she poured the tea. It reminded her of Rumpelstiltskin.

“I was Rumpelstiltskin's housekeeper. Regina had me captured because she wanted Rumpelstiltskin's... secrets to hold over him.”
“Silly woman,” Granny commented.

“What were you and your grand-daughter captured for?” Belle asked.

“Aiding princess Snow,” Granny replied. “And I don't regret a minute of it either. You don't look like a housekeeper, if you don't mind me saying. You're of age to be a maid.”

“There was no matter of seniority in the Dark Castle, since I was the only servant,” Belle said. She wondered if there had been some sort of mocking challenge in the older woman's words, or was she simply curious.

“Ah. Then.” Granny added more than just a pinch of salt to the porridge, and stirred it in.

“After you've finished that, can you fetch more firewood? Everyone should have a hot cup of tea before we leave.”

“Yes, of course,” Belle complied. She finished the tea with a swig, and was off on her way to get the wood from the storage, along with a lantern she'd kept close to her since the night had fallen. The flickering little candle flame was barely big enough to light the insides of the lantern, let alone the corridors and storage rooms, but Belle was glad to be given a task, to make herself useful.

In the darkness, she thought of the Dark Castle and Rumpelstiltskin. Nothing particular, just the feel of moving about his houses, doing her chores. On an early morning such as this, she might have found him awake, never having gone to bed, his thoughts preoccupied by his grand plans even as he threw mischievous darts of quips at his housekeeper to try and rattle her nerves.

The end of the world as everyone had known it was raging outside now, and Belle wondered if Rumpelstiltskin had been contemplating on that, an endless winter in all the kingdoms, all the months Belle had stayed there. Had it been on his mind also when he'd leaned in and kissed her on the lips?

And since this morning, Belle would be headed to the Dark Castle now. She ought to have been looking for Aunt Hortensia, or her father, or Sylvia, but instead she found her entire mind preoccupied by one person alone, for better and for worse.

As Belle put dried old birch logs into the carry-basket one at a time, she wondered if there was a special hell for people who loved monsters.

It was the sad truth of it, she reflected. She would have returned to Rumpelstiltskin on her own accord almost as soon as she'd visited home to assure her father she was alright, had it not been for Aunt Hortensia in her deathbed.

At night, she had dreamed of Rumpelstiltskin, and of kissing him, of how good and right and warm he had felt against her. It must have been the memory of when she had fallen through the ice that had returned to her. Then a great force had separated them, Belle had been thrown back and shielded her eyes. When she had opened them again, she'd stood at the edge of the Great Rift, looking over the edge and at the Land Without Magic in the far far distance.

For the horror of what the world had turned into, Belle suspected there would be a good explanation for it. Or hoped, and pleaded, rather than suspected. This was no casual act of mischief. Rumpelstiltskin had wanted Regina to cast that spell which had transported all the millions of people across the Rift. And along they'd all gone, for fear of what might happen in a land of endless winter. Belle thought of the Scorched Earth military strategy, of which she'd read in history books years ago. Destroy the enemy's all other options until there's just one course of action left for them.
“So, we pull the sleighs, so the children don't have to walk?” Jefferson asked in the courtyard of the manor where they had all gathered to. The children had been packed into the two dog sleighs. Grace was holding the chicken wrapped inside a blanket, and she seemed excited and happy. Of her task as taking care of the chicken, or just for being able to leave?

Belle had just finished strapping the skis on her feet. She'd tried them on in the evening, and suspected it was going to be a very long and arduous day ahead of her. The graceful and fearsome Turandot might leave her behind if she didn't keep up! But she, the princess Khutulun, stood by Belle's side, quietly observing the departure of the other party.

“You'll just take care of yourselves, people,” Granny told the adults who'd all strapped themselves with skis and snow-shoes. The food supplies and camping equipment were all evenly distributed amongst them. The dark, sinister man who'd said nothing, was also taking part in the grand-mother-daughter exhibition.

Red was the last to come out of the house, and she looked around nervously. “So, we'll all head to Far Isles, and we'll all be fine, right?”

Granny looked at her. “That's right.”

“People, please stay calm,” the grand-daughter said. Then she turned into a large wolf.

Belle’s hands clenched around the handles of her poles.

“Fascinating,” princess Khutulun commented.

Granny tied the dog-sled reins around Red, while she calmly and patiently addressed the crowd about there being no intention or chance of them being murdered on their journey cross-country, and that they should all feel damn lucky that two werewolves were guarding their lives.

“Two?” The rather silly young man who'd already made a point of being somewhat lazy and irritating, asked.

“Belle, if you'll give me a hand,” Granny said.

Some primal part of Belle's brain screamed about not approaching the wolves. She was envious of the children, who seemed to be delighted, rather than scared.

“Puppy!” A four-year-old chimed, pointing at Red.

“Of course,” Belle assured. She tried to move towards, and then realized how awkward she was on skis. “Oh, better if Mr Jefferson does it, I'm not so sure on my legs with these things.”

Jefferson seemed only a little terrified on his snow-shoes. “Yes. Let me,” he said, with as little enthusiasm as possible.

Granny turned into a wolf as well, and was quickly harnessed to pull a sled full of children, and one chicken.

Soon they all took off. Belle and Khutulun followed their party only a short while, before taking a turn at the fork on the road which would lead them to Dimhaut, and to the Dark Castle, and the terrible Groke that would make all the world consumed by winter.

Once the sun was properly up on this cloudless day, Belle didn't know how to look at the endless snow, and the light glistening on it. And there was only the sketchiest of maps, one they'd made built
on a ton of assumptions about their current whereabouts. It was easier for the other party, who only had to get to the nearest coast and follow the shoreline.

Khutulun seemed to have no qualms about the fact that they had most likely been utterly lost before their journey had even started, but Belle was very much concerned about the fine details of their adventure, when an idea struck her.

Belle stopped, and stuck her poles in the snow as she got her backpack off her shoulders. Khutulun went ahead of her, until she seemed to realize she had no idea of where she was headed, and turned back.

“It's too soon to get tired and thirsty,” the princess announced crossly.

Belle nodded in agreement, but she was fiddling with the contents of her bags, not looking for water. “I know. A thought just occurred to me.” She produced the golden yarn from the bottom of her supplies and brought it close to her lips.

“Take me to the Dark Castle,” she whispered to the yarn, and threw the whole ball on the snow-bank ahead of her.

As Belle held her breath, it seemed as if the yarn was going to sink into the snow and stay there.

“Oh well,” Belle sighed.

Then the ball of yarn became animated and started rolling energetically towards... well, Dark Castle? Belle hoped it were so.

“Useful,” Khutulun stated, and then immediately started followed the magic golden ball of yarn, with Belle in her wake, keeping up much better now, fuelled by dread, dreams, and a burning desire to prove her worst fears wrong, about the character of Rumpelstiltskin.
The Groke

How odd were the long days, following a golden ball as it rolled through the snow, and then the nights in any quiet abandoned house Khutulun and Belle could find as they journeyed towards the mountains. They avoided towns intentionally, since according to Jefferson there were vampires now in them, out in the open and remorseless in their conduct.

The days were long and monotonous. Even the occasional horribleness of encountering strangely frozen animals and people, who seemed as if they were enclosed in ice entirely, became a startlingly mundane routine, if it could be described as so. After passing two dozen such figures, Belle had forgotten to become unnerved by them, only a lingering sadness for their fates remained.

Khutulun spoke only when she absolutely needed to, and at evenings, when they hid in any of the houses they chose to stay in when the hour of the vampire started, Belle found it discomforting to try keep any conversation alive by herself alone with her. It was better for them both that they kept quiet in any case.

Every evening before they went to sleep, Khutulun tried to teach Belle to handle her sword. They also stretched and flexed their muscles, which were sore every evening after all the trekking through the snow. They foraged all the forlorn houses for food, and found that the closer they got to the Dark Castle, the fewer houses and villages there were – but more of them with full pantries and food storages.

One evening they attracted a problem. Perhaps it was because of the smoke coming from the chimney. The afternoon had been cruelly cold, and Belle couldn’t feel her feet or toes at all, and Khutulun had wrapped her up with all the blankets of the abandoned farmstead in a valley they were crossing. Belle sat shivering by the blazing fire, while Khutulun was gone, looking for dinner in the cellar, when a shadow had slipped into the room, and wrapped itself around Belle.

Delirious with a rising fever, Belle had first thought it was Rumpelstiltskin. She had pressed against the shadowy figure in earnest and sighed as it leaned its face to her neck. But the scent of the vampire had been entirely wrong, of death and decay. When he’d bit her, Belle had reached for the poker, and hit the vampire with her feeble strength, but rather effectively, since she’d managed to get the red-hot iron to dent the creature’s neck. Then Khutulun appeared from the cellar below, and beheaded the creature without a word. Soon the princess had dumped the corpse in the outhouse.

“You should fight with a fire-poker,” Khutulun commented, the first words she’d uttered in days, as she pressed a towel to Belle’s neck. “you handle it better than a sword.”

Belle laughed, more out of shock than amusement. “I’ve handled plenty of pokers before,” she muttered.

Poor vampire, Belle thought later on, for vampires would have much more trouble feeding themselves than humans would.

In later years, Belle wondered how she had managed that cold and snowy trek through Heartland to Dimhaut. Even with Khutulun, their chances of success in such abysmal circumstances as in the sparsely lived mountains with few hideouts, and the harshest conditions ought to have killed them. But it was the circumstances, and the clear-headed dedication they both had for it: The world around them was dead for all intents and purposes, and they had no other plans how to go about the next day, except through this hastily concocted plan.
After the vampire attack, Belle's mind wandered with the other party of survivors from the Bird Keeper's nest. Were they too chased by vampires as they made their way west along the coasts? Were the two werewolves and Jefferson enough to protect them? Belle could do nothing more than send prayers to them, which she added to the end of a list: Her father, where ever he may be, along with, Aunt Sylvia and her family; her father's step-sister and her family; all of Mother's lady friends. And perhaps with a little luck, and a prayer, perhaps Aunt Hortensia had escaped the Groke, even if Jefferson swore she had been captured and slain by this unspeakable darkness, the very thing Khutulun and Belle were now hunting.

Belle's condition, weakened by the vampire's bite, forced them to stay still at the farmstead for another day and night, before Khutulun decided they should continue on to the next house they might find. She was afraid the vampire she had killed might have had friends which would know where to come looking.

More worn than ever before and ever afterwards that Belle could remember, the next day in the snow was miserable. They found an abandoned roadside inn, the kind of house they'd avoided since they believed such easily found establishments would also be worst hiding places, but they were in the mountains far away from everything. Belle dragged herself off her skis and left Khutulun to deal with them and the poles, while she put herself through the effort of finding the inn's kitchen, set on getting a fire going on in the stove for tea.

There was space between the roof and the great stove of the inn, with crude brick steps leading up. A lumpy old mattress and a rough wool blanket were left on top. Belle climbed up and then lay on the mattress, and pulled the icy cold blanket over her. The roughness of it stung her hands. When the stove started warming up, and sleep started to claim her, she imagined herself in silk satin sheets in the best hotel of Arbonne.

Khutulun woke her up, fed her with something warm and soupy. Belle nodded off as soon as the princess stopped propping her up, and slept again, completely senseless, until she returned to her senses once her bladder declared it refused to go on a minute longer, full as it was. Belle woke up to a room that was almost dark, except for a hint of red embers glowing behind the iron scuttle, drawing long and faint shadows in the room. Afraid to leave the room, Belle found a bucket in the kitchen in which she did her business. Realising she was very hungry again, she found more of the soup-like substance Khutulun had left on the stove. Belle helped herself some of it, fearful of calling out for Khutulun for her permission. She didn't want to make any noise in the night.

The stone-faced princess was very good at rough life. It was in all she did and what she knew. She looked and behaved like someone who lived on the road. Belle finished eating within a minute, found a glass of water, and then returned back up to bed. She'd imagined of travel herself for so long, but she'd never imagined it to be anything like this had been so far. The journeys of her fantasies had always involved trains, ferries, and a fairly steady suggestion of dinner always being available, and bed sheets never icy cold when she turned herself in for the night.

Now she was living the life of a scavenger and rarely bothering to remove her stolen workman's clothes. What would Aunt Sylvia make of that, Belle wondered, smirking at the darkness.

She was remotely warm and comfortable and truly so for the first time in days. Belle hoped rather than knew that her fever had passed, but she had stopped sweating uncomfortably, and there was no more sway to the floor when she made the effort to be vertical. But she was tired, which meant she was unable to stop herself when her thoughts automatically turned to Rumpelstiltskin. Belle recalled the accident when she'd fell into the icy lake, had that really been years ago now? And he'd warmed her, and taken care of her, his mask of casual scorn and malicious spitefulness completely shattered across those days, and for most days after.
Belle thought of the kiss they'd shared, and how soft and shy it had been, but still something about it had felt as though her insides had been shaken up and rearranged. She'd been surprised by how tender the kiss was, she'd expected... well, she had no idea what she'd expected, but people spoke of such things like intimacy outside of marriage was comparable to assault and battery. It had always left her wondering what the wonder of it was within marriage. She didn't really know anyone who was married, except Aunt Sylvia, and she was so rarely within the presence of her husband The Baron, Belle sometimes forgot her aunt was married at all.

Maybe it was the obsession, what society was worried about. Belle couldn't get through a day without thinking about Rumpelstiltskin, and this was as much comforting as it was tormenting. Sometimes imagining him curled up next to her, like he had once, keeping her warm, helped Belle fall asleep in the chilly night. At day, she looked at the destroyed landscapes, and at the statuesque victims of the Groke they sometimes met, half-buried in snow, and she felt cold dread that made her want to throw up her breakfast.

But it was dark and night now, so Belle thought of sweet and warm things, until she fell asleep.

The next day was a biting cold one, with completely blue sky and sun shining on them as they came to a village. Normally they would have avoided such a large settlement, for their fear of the creatures that had taken over the snowy world, but the roads had grown narrow, and the forests around them thicker and harder to cross. The village they came to had were far more inns than a normal little village ought to have had, especially in the middle of the mountains. The village also had quite a few cottages that looked like workshops, when most the places they'd come by were strictly in the business of farms.

Belle's curiosity won over Khutulun's purposeful need to make progress this time, and so Khutulun kept watch as Belle broke into one of the locked workshops. What she saw made her understand instantly where they were, and how far the Dark Castle was. With the prospect of their endless-seeming journey finally coming to an end, at least for a moment, she couldn't contain a joyful squeal, which made Khutulun burst in fast, her swords raised and ready to kill whoever had attacked Belle, but instead she found Belle standing in the middle of the room, admiring the shelves upon shelves full of lacquered wood carvings and plaques. There were even postcards.

“This is...” Khutulun searched for words.

“... a tourist resort,” Belle completed her. She pulled her woolly mittens off and pocketed them, in favour of brushing years-old dust from a detailed carving made in the shape of the Dark Castle.

Khutulun shook her head and left the workshop to stand vigilant outside again. Belle glanced around at the room at the nonsensical little items once more, and followed Khutulun out.

“There are so many inns here because so many people must have toured the place. Journalists and writers and... bored people with too much money who wished to see the Dark Castle,” Belle explained to Khutulun, who replied nothing, as usual. “I could see the chimney smoke from here, from the tower, and the kitchen window, we'll be there before nightfall, I should think,” Belle explained with enthusiasm.

She felt so invigorated, she made better progress on her skis than Khutulun, through the eerily quiet forest, and the twisting and bending road covered under inches upon inches of snow. Then, after the last bend, they saw the gates of the Dark Castle.

How unusual it was to approach the castle from this way, Belle thought, and in amidst all the snow.
At first she thought the visual oddity she perceived about the castle was related to her own memory being faulty, but as they got closer, Belle saw the Dark Castle had been left protected by some magic of its own. The gates, as well as the outer walls of the castle beyond were covered in thorny vines that Belle swore had never been there before.

Khutulun approached the wall first, and she attacked the dead, brown vines with her swords, but it seemed as though the rose vines had then become alive, for they grabbed her, and the thorns snatched to Khutulun’s clothes, and scratched the skin on her face. The princess betrayed a guttural groan of dismay, having been surprised, and started backing off, hacking fiercely at the vines that threatened to hold her and drag her back.

“Princess, look!” Belle said, pointing little ways off at the wall, where a partially decomposed corpse hung halfway through the wall, as if dragged up by the vines. Shivering, and not just because it was cold, Belle looked away from the corpse, and at the iron gates, beyond which lay the Dark Castle. It might have been in the moon now, Belle thought, for all the good it did to them.

It occurred to Belle that Rumpelstiltskin would not have left a spell to protect his castle unless he had the intention of returning home. In Belle’s past experiences, tampering with his spells of protection had always earned his full attention, such as when she had tried to send a letter through the fireplace to Aunt Hortensia, and when she’d taken a walk across the frozen lake at Whitewhit Lake.

So, careful as she could be, Belle removed her mittens and extended her arm towards the thorny vines, with the intention of letting them bleed her.

“What are you doing, are you gone mad?” Khutulun asked Belle, but did nothing to stop her.

“I’m hoping we’ll get an audience,” Belle replied, and stepped forward, hoping she wouldn’t be too badly scratched, and that she might still pull away before the vines tangled around her.

But as Belle approached, the vines bowed out and gave way to her. The dead rose that surrounded the gate came briefly to life, green and red and glorious with colour, as it disentangled from around the iron bars and freed the creaking gate, which parted for Belle, and the roses bloomed with deep dark red hues, striking against the white snow.

“Do you have magic?” Khutulun asked suspiciously.

Belle turned about, shaking her head. “No. Maybe the castle believes I’m still a resident. But now all we need to do is go inside and find something magical and I’m sure...” She could feel goosebumps on her skin then. First Belle thought the sky was becoming overcast, but there had been no clouds at all in the sky during the day. She glanced up and saw the blue sky vanish little by little, gradually changing into a starless, black void.

A cold gust of wind blew from the road that led into the forest. Belle glanced at Khutulun, before noticing movement on the road, and at first she thought it was a black bear, lumbering slowly towards them.

“Princess,” Belle whispered, and her words came out with vapour. The air was getting colder.

All the colour in the world seemed to have bled out when the sky had turned black. The red roses that had made Belle’s heart skip a beat inexplicably were now a dull shade of grey.

“Stay back,” Khutulun said, and started to move. Belle hid in the shadow of the gates, watching the princess move as though time was slowing down to half-speed. Belle felt herself too become heavy and slow.
Khutulun picked a stone from underneath the snow and threw it at the approaching shape of darkness. Khutulun had called it the Groke. For centuries amongst Khutulun's people, it had been a legend, a monster to scare children with, of the dangers of night, and of the ever-returning winter. Listening to Khutulun's very short tales during their travels together, Belle had recalled allusions of such a monster from her own nursery tales, of hidden suns and summers.

The nursery tale had come to life and was not-that-fast approaching them along the road that led to the Dark Castle. Belle felt the cold emanating from the creature becoming ever more intense as it approached, and all her senses begged her to turn around and make a run for the castle, hide and pray, but she would not let Khutulun fight this monster alone. Not that she had any idea how she could help her. Belle had presumed they would arrive at the castle, make some kind of a plan, and improvise from that.

The stone Khutulun had thrown at the Groke might as well have hit the sea, for all it cared about the force of impact it made. Cold and determined, the Groke approached, and Belle could almost see Khutulun's brain trying to come up with a strategy, while her teeth chattered.

"To the castle," Khutulun said, and spurted out across the courtyard first, slow as she was. Belle followed her immediately, and once her back was turned to the Groke, she tried not to think of the monster that was lurking just behind her.

The Groke moved very slowly, just as Belle and Khutulun did. Belle chanced a glance behind her shoulder and saw the blooms of the roses by the gate died and fell to the ground as the Groke stepped through, gaining distance between them. Belle thought, as she forced herself to move even though she was so cold she couldn't really feel her limbs, how comical the whole situation would have looked from somewhere far away. The slowest chase ever given.

She felt hurt and tired by the time a small eternity had passed which was all the time it took her to get to the main doors of the castle. Khutulun had gotten there first but the doors hadn't opened to her. Belle practically crashed her body against the oak doors and demanded entrance with a silent prayer, and the doors obeyed her.

Belle could hear the Groke growling behind them. She wondered if the Groke could get through the magic portal that led to the far-away villa by the lake in Marchlands. She also wondered if the door was still in place. Belle took a swift turn to her right and to the very sparse remains of Rumpelstiltskin's room of curios, a place as abandoned as any other they'd seen along the way, but the door was still in place, and Belle cried out in delight.

"Princess, through here!" Belle called for Khutulun as she yanked the door open, but discovered then that the princess was no longer next to her. Khutulun had run off in some other direction. The Groke was now in the room with Belle. Just the two of them, the Groke coming down the length of the room, staring at Belle with inhuman eyes whose gaze she couldn't read.

Belle thought she was backing towards the door of the portal, but in fact she wasn't. She felt as though she was frozen into her spot, and a small whimper was all she could manage then.

Something pierced through the darkness of the Groke's body, the swirling, deep nothingness of it. Belle at first thought it was some kind of a tooth, something that perhaps the monster was about to use in order to eat her, but at a closer look, Belle realized that it was Khutulun's sword that had gone through the monster.

The Groke growled, and started to turn around slowly. It looked like only its head turned around, giving Belle a terrible urge to throw up. She saw Khutulun, deadly pale, staggering backwards and collapsing as she hit the table. Then, by some stroke of chance, or perhaps of fate, Belle's hand found
a lump in her coat pocket. It was the paper inside which the Bird Keeper's turkish delight was wrapped in. Belle hadn't dared try any, for fear it might turn her into a bird.

Whether or not it was ordinary or cursed turkish delight didn't matter so much now, as they needed a direction.

“Dear Groke!” Belle called out. She would have preferred to have sounded defiant and self-assured, instead of barely being able to breathe, but she worked with what she could. “Would you like to try a turkish delight?” Belle threw the pile of sweets at the other end of the long table, away from Khutulun. “I'm... I'm afraid that they might possibly be poisoned, by a witch, but I'm very sure that you will be able to do horrible things to us even as a bird, I think.” Belle laughed a bit. She hadn't been able to be even so stealthy as to not give in the secret of the sweets to the monster that would no doubt kill the two of them soon. “In any case, I'm sure the sweets taste much nicer than two women would.”

The Groke seemed very interested in the delights, and moved at them faster than she'd reached for anything else before. Belle slowly made it to Khutulun, who was icy blue now, and had either passed out, or died. Cold tears ran down Belle's cheeks and she sat down on the floor, hugging Khutulun's cold body closer to herself.

“Dear Groke, I don't want to die, and I don't want anyone else to die either,” Belle pleaded, closing her eyes. She felt exhausted. She ought to have run through the passageway to the other house, and run, and run. That would have been the clever and sensible thing to do. “Why must you torment us all so?” Belle kept her eyes closed, imagining summer skies and forests, and flowers. Books by the roomful at the university library, with its painted fresco dome and clear glass skylights. If she was to die, then she preferred the experience to have at least something pleasant attached to it.

Belle heard the Groke growl, and move. When it spoke, the words were not sounds, rather they were half-whispered thoughts that formed in her mind.

*I was locked away*, the Groke said, *for a very long time.* The sorrow in the abstract speech was more potent than any of the words, and Belle opened her eyes slowly, to look at the monster in the half-dark room.

“People tried to talk to you before, didn't they?” Belle asked.

*But you're the first to listen*, the Groke replied, rather philosophically, and sighed.

“Are you going to kill me?”

The Groke seemed to hesitate. *No*, it said eventually. Or rather, *she* said, Belle realized, with growing fascination.

“Millions of people have suffered because of this long winter,” Belle said.

*I have suffered too!* The Groke replied.

There was silence in the room, while Belle thought. What to reply to such an exclamation! The millennia-old creature with tremendous power had the same sense of justice a misused child of six might have had.

“And do you feel better about yourself now?” Belle asked, trying her hardest not to incur the Groke's wrath. She hoped there was no sarcasm or misplaced malice in her intonation. She was fairly sure the Groke was good at picking up things such as that.
The Groke blinked. Its inhuman eyes blinked. Then it dragged itself away. It left the room, circling the other side of the table from where Belle and Khutulun were on the floor, and it left the Dark Castle, munching on the turkish delight which did not turn it into a bird at all. Not that Belle had truly wished that had happened. She wanted to poison no one, not even the monster that had as good as destroyed the world.

Colours seemed to bleed back into the world, slowly and gently. Belle saw them through her eyes which were swimming in more held-back tears. She hugged Khutulun and let the tears escape. “Princess Khutulun, the Groke is gone. Please return now, please? Can you hear me at all?”

Belle thought she saw an eyelid move briefly, and that gave her such cause for joy, she could barely contain herself as she prattled more encouraging nonsense to the Princess, to keep her awake. Belle looked around at the room, wondering how long would she dare to abandon Khutulun while she built a fire.

The sad fact was that four-hundred-year-old castles were not built to be warm and cosy, but the villa at the end of the short magical tunnel instead was. Belle decided to croon at Khutulun, persuade her to try and move herself with Belle's help to her feet, and to get her to the villa and its wonderful masonry heaters and its walls insulated with technology more modern than tapestries and straw.

Khutulun could not manage herself to her feet, she could barely manage to open her eyes. Belle had to drag her across the floor to the passageway, and down to the other side, into another cold, abandoned house and its dark staircase.

The place felt so familiar, it was like coming home, much more so than the Dark Castle had been. Even in pitch black darkness, Belle knew where she was going, and so she continued to drag Khutulun very gracelessly into Rumpelstiltskin's morning room, where there was both a small open fireplace as well as a masonry heater near a sofa. As soon as Belle had Khutulun lying on the upholstered cushions, she was looking for matches in their usual place, and for firewood in the basket nearby.

Everything was almost as precisely as she'd left it, and seeing that tiny flickering flame of light come out from the end of the first match she lit, it was the most beautiful, comforting thing Belle could recall having seen in the longest time. She stared at it for a moment longer than was necessary, before putting it to the kindling wrapped between the birch logs in the fireplace.

Then Belle set to work on the heater at the other end of the room. She could still hear her heart thumping in her throat, for how much excitement she'd just gone through, but she was now in the belief that she would get through the rest of the evening fine. She was determined to go find a ton of the warmest, softest blankets for Khutulun, and then wrap herself around the poor princess who'd made such a brave effort at trying to protect Belle for the Groke, so foolishly brave she'd almost died herself.

Both their backpacks, and one of Khutulun's sword had been left behind in the Dark Castle. Belle thought she might have the courage to return to them after the night had passed. She'd had to remove Khutulun's weapon belt in order to get her comfortably laid on the sofa, and now taking less chances than before, she wrapped that around her own waist before she slunk back into the pitch-black servant corridors that led her down into the kitchen and further down into the cellars.

Belle picked an oil lantern on the way, and then proceeded to look up every bit of edible food she could scavenge from the pantry and the root cellar. She was starting to feel so hungry, she thought she wouldn't have minded some old mouldy cheese again at all. She even found mould-less cheese, some biscuits that seemed to have frozen, and some rose-hip jam she herself had made. And in the wine cellar, she couldn't believe her eyes, she found one last single bottle of Tokaj. She thought she
should make sure to share it with Khutulun to celebrate the fact that they were still alive, if the princess was to ever wake up.

Belle returned to the slowly warming upstairs with her treasure trove. She made a second run downstairs to get the tea kettle, filled with water that perhaps may have stood still for two years, but she didn't care, she wanted hot tea in her insides. A third run was to Rumpelstiltskin's room, from where she brought all the blankets to wrap herself and Khutulun into, although she still kept herself awake and about, waiting for her water to boil so she could have something to drink with her cheese, biscuits and jam.

She tried to drizzle some warm tea past Khutulun's lips, but ended up making a mess instead. Belle wiped the royal lips and face and neck, and focused on her own tea instead, still hearing her heart thumping in her head. She was beginning to cave in to full exhaustion, even though her mind was raging with questions of how to proceed from here? What to do? Where to go? Was Khutulun going to recover, and if she did, would she go on another quest to find the Groke and slay her? Belle glanced at the sleeping princess as she made ready to get out of her thickest outdoor clothing in order to feel at least partially comfortable while sleeping on the narrow sofa. At least they were both small and thin. Now if only they'd both sleep like logs, maybe Belle would not wake up on the floor with a bump on the head.

As last precautions before bed, Belle set a screen in front of the fire, so no sparks would escape the fireplace and on top of their quilts and blankets as they slept. She realised she had to pee, but had no intention of leaving the room for another adventure in the dark, and so she went to the en-suite bathroom by the master bedroom. She wondered if that was a bad idea, if plumbing there earlier had been some feat of magic. Oh well.

Belle returned into the master bedroom and lingered there for a moment, thinking of Rumpelstiltskin. She wished the room smelled more like its old inhabitant, but instead it had always retained the clean scents of pine soap and cutflowers and freshness of a room frequently aired. She moved the curtains aside a bit and glanced outside at the night. The moon was out, and there was snow everywhere, as long as she could see, but no firelights, or any other lights for that matter, could be seen from this little window on top of a house on top of a hill.

Belle thought she heard footsteps then. In the staircase, coming from the greatroom.

And she truly didn't think she was hearing them, she heard them. She turned about slowly, and crept to the door of the morning room. She pulled out the sword from its sheath as quietly as she could, and prepared herself to interrogate this intruder, whoever it was, the Groke or not.

Belle could hardly see anything except a dark shadow come up and take a turn to approach the sleeping Khutulun by the fireside. The faint orange glow of the half-dead fire revealed more of the owner of the footsteps, and of the dark silhouette.

There, in Rumpelstiltskin's morning room, wearing a cap of the Marchlands university student union, was a stranger, a handsome man, with a pipe dangling from between his lips, and a very worrisome glance just above them, directed at Khutulun. He didn't look dangerous though, so Belle lowered the sword, just a little.

The stranger saw her then, and measured her with his gaze. Belle felt rather silly about the sword, for how kind and normal the stranger seemed, but she had to remind herself of the vampire bite on her neck, and of the wolves and other creatures that wanted nothing so bad as to find more food in this eternal winter.

The stranger removed his pipe from his mouth and lifted his hat at Belle. “Good evening. I don't
suppose you brought any coffee?”

Belle looked at the cap. Instead of the traditional white, the crown of the cap seemed to be some shade of blue or green. There was no such thing as blue university caps. But the lyre and the laurels were all there. Belle wished she’d brought her cap now.

“Hmm? Oh, no coffee, I’m afraid,” Belle replied, at length. “But if I may please inquire, what is your name?”

The stranger grinned briefly. “I’m Kingfisher. You must be Reader?”
The still-unconscious oriental princess was settled on the sofa, her head in Belle's lap. Belle waited, anxious for this mysterious Kingfisher to return. He had announced he would be back shortly, and returned down the staircase the way he'd come from. Belle had sheathed Khutulun's sword, but didn't keep it far away from her.

There were different steps in the staircase, but now it sounded something like a small dog climbing up, rather than a grown man. Belle frowned, squeezing her hand lightly on the hilt of the sword. She saw the second stranger in the faint light of the fireplace and recognized the short and furry shape of the musktroll Mumbler, who lived in the hill under the house. It greeted her with a wave of its tail and a smile. The ribbon from Belle's hair was still wrapped in a bow around Mumbler's tail.

Belle would have sprung from her place instantly to greet the creature properly, but she was holding Khutulun and didn't want to dislodge her. She settled for shaking hands with the troll's hairy paw.

“Reader! The weather's been dreadful since you left,” the troll said. “Who is your friend?”

“Mumbler, this is Khutulun,” Belle replied, hoping she had the pronunciation right, although it didn't matter. Mumbler and the clan of trolls would give the princess some other name in any case. “She isn't well, since she stabbed a Groke in the back.”

“The Groke,” Mumbler corrected Belle with surprising and sudden clarity. Belle glanced at the troll, but it said nothing else.

“The Groke,” Belle echoed. “She's very cold. Would you sit here, next to Khutulun with me, and try to warm her up?”

The troll did as Belle requested and took the place at Khutulun's feet. “I ought to be hibernating with the others, since it is winter after all,” said Mumbler, “but I've been asleep for two years and it's become very dull. How have you been?”

“I was a bird,” Belle replied, and felt that was all she wanted to reveal of the subject just then.

“I heard you in the staircase, when you came in,” said Mumbler, “I hope the Dark One isn't going to come and kill us all, but it was very cold in the cave after the first year, and that's why we broke into the house through the kitchen door. We thought either we'd die of bad colds, or being stomped on by him, but we'd live a little longer if we broke into the house,” said Mumbler.

Belle nodded slowly, listening to the troll talk. “You speak a lot more than you did when we first met.”

Mumbler grinned shyly. “It's Kingfisher. It's nice having someone to talk with. Or talk to. He doesn't talk much. But he's been teaching me how to read, and I am already in G in the Dictionary.”

Belle nodded slowly again. She would have been amused and delighted by all this, if she didn't feel so terribly and utterly tired. She had just distracted something akin to the Goddess of Winter with a handful of marmalade, and dragged an oriental princess through a magic portal, and that was only the last hour of her life.

“I'll be able to read other books after I'm done with the dictionary. It's what occupies most of the day for me. But everyone else are asleep in the big room downstairs, waiting for spring. Except me, and Fisher.”
“How did he get into this house?” Belle asked.

“He crawled through the tunnel under the hill.”

“There's another entrance to your cave?” Belle mused. “How about that.”

The Kingfisher returned up the stairs just then, carrying bags and pots, and other things. “I've scavenged that village down the hill for all it's worth for food and tea. Sadly they are very poor folk, when it comes to coffee. We'll have to do with tea.”

“I'm so glad you're not the Dark One, you see, I thought it was him, when I heard the noise,” said Mumbler.

“And Mumbler asked me to go upstairs to face Rumpelstiltskin alone!” the Kingfisher added, and laughed heartily. He removed the screen from in front of the fire and put some more wood to the embers to one side, while putting a kettle to warm up on the embers on the other. “I thought, if I have to die, then certainly dying while meeting Rumpelstiltskin would at least be an interesting way to go.”

“What are you heating that water for?” Belle asked, hearing her own voice sound slow and drowsy. She tried to sit up straighter to be a little more present.

“I have some tea that I hope will help your friend there.” He produced a small tin can that had at some point contained peppermints, the paint had almost faded away. “I picked these flowers from the highest mountaintops in the kingdoms with my own hands. They're invigorating.” Kingfisher glanced at Belle. “I think you'd do well to try some too.”

“Perhaps. Why do you climb mountains? Are you some kind of a geologist? Or perhaps you study geographic surveying?”

Kingfisher shook his head. “I'm what they call an adventurer. The police says I'm a vagabond. I guess it amounts to the same thing.”

“You have a student cap,” Belle said quietly, “although I've never seen it quite that colour.”

“That's because I painted it with the colours of spring! Turned out the university wasn't really for me. They are very dull old minds there, sitting still waiting for dust to gather on their brains, and when it does, they mistake it for wisdom.” Kingfisher laughed.

When the tea was ready and stewed, Belle and Kingfisher both helped some down Khutulun's mouth. Perhaps there was some kind of magic in it, for she began to look a little less pale and dead, and her breath became stronger and steadier, instead of the barely visible one she'd had before. Khutulun still didn't return to consciousness, but her situation seemed far more hopeful now.

“Do you mind if I play something?” Kingfisher asked.

“Play?” Belle asked, confused. She tried to stifle a yawn, but it came out anyway.

“Mm,” Kingfisher put a guitar in his lap. Belle stared at him as began to pluck chords. The chords turned into a slow, pleasant song, that made Belle think of a warm wind playing in the trees, and of waves crashing to a beach on a summer's day.

For a little while there was nothing but the immediate sense of warmth, safety and comfort. Belle's eyes began to give up on trying to stay awake. The simple melody chased her into her dreams. She couldn't remember them the morning after, and that was probably for the best.
By morning Kingfisher had vanished from the morning room. Belle had slept uncomfortably and her neck ached as she moved to try and wake up Khutulun. The princess almost snored, but would not wake up. She had colour on her cheeks, and seemed otherwise fine, so Belle didn't feel too awful about leaving the princess alone while she did her morning business and trekked downstairs to get an idea of the sleeping colony of trolls in the grand room – there they were, twenty hibernating trolls in a half-circle by the fireplace, all of them with blankets Belle suspected were velvet curtains from other rooms. Avoiding to wake them up, she pattered out of the room on her toes and inspected other familiar rooms in pale winter daylight.

The library hadn't changed a lot, but there was one thing there that wasn't as she'd left it. Biting her lip, Belle went to the tall backed chair where she'd sat on dozens of evenings near the fire, reading, or talking to Rumpelstiltskin.

When she'd packed to leave again the second time, she hadn't had the space for the golden ball gown Aunt Hortensia had given her for her birthday. She'd left it in the cottage, but now it was here, in the library, folded across the seat as if it were saving a place for her.

Belle almost cried, but laughed instead when she noticed that on top of the golden gown was a book, Aunt Sylvia's Guidebook to the Young Ladies. Belle had wanted to bring it home with her, but she'd misplaced it somewhere, probably in the kitchen or the pantry, and her second time leaving had been so frantic and hurried she hadn't had the time to look for it.

Belle gasped for breath for a little bit, from the unexpected wave of emotion. She hesitated a bit before picking up the guidebook first. Despite some of the book's medieval opinions, it had been one of the most valuable companions to her during her stay with Rumpelstiltskin, so she had already decided the book would continue travelling with her where ever she would be headed next, where ever that was.

As for the gown. Belle went to the desk and wrote a note. I'll come back for this sometime later – Belle, it said. She laid the note on the chair, just in case Rumpelstiltskin returned. With the Guidebook in hand, Belle left the library and went to the kitchen to find breakfast.

Kingfisher in his teal-blue cap was there, cooking breakfast. Belle saw him for the first time in proper lighting, and Kingfisher did look like a vagabond. All his clothes were mended with patches and well-worn. This Kingfisher probably could have had plenty of chances to steal clothes for himself as well as food, Belle reflected, suddenly too aware of the fact that she was still dressed in men's clothes a few sizes too big for her, with the pants rolled up and the waist tucked as close as possible with the shortest leather belt she had found at the time.

“Hello there. There's tea in the pot. I'm making french toast. Is your friend awake yet?”

Belle shook her head. “She's snoring, but wouldn't wake up. Thank you for giving her medicine, mister Kingfisher.”

“I hope you don't mind me intruding. Or I don't know, should you mind yourself intruding? I came to see my friends here, but I found a great big house on top of their hill. Who gave permission to put such a thing here?”

Belle shrugged. “It was bought? I don't know the name of who from.”

Kingfisher looked annoyed for a moment. “Yes, but how can they, some person who has probably never set foot on this peninsula in their life, sell away my friends' home?”
Belle bit her lip. “I'm not sure anyone was aware of them living under the hill. And their cave is still there, isn't it?”

Kingfisher was frying slices of bread in butter and something that might have at some point been milk or cream, before it had frozen. Though Belle was so hungry, she wasn't feeling too squeamish about what she was about to put in her belly.

“That's not the point, the point is, some people believe they have the right to draw invisible lines all across the land and say ‘this is mine now’ regardless of all the trees and birds and trolls that may live there. It's the same sort of nonsense as why I was imprisoned in Dimhaut for travelling without a passport. I ask you, why does a person need a passport to walk where they want? Birds don't have passports, and you don't see silly border patrol people fine them for it.” Kingfisher gave a deep sigh and put the toast on a plate and handed it to Belle. He frowned and seemed pained for a moment. “I'm sorry for spouting all this. It's been a while since I last talked to a human. I may have lost the skill.”

Belle laughed tentatively. “Me too, actually. Well, I have been with Khutulun, but she doesn't really speak that much.” She held the toast plate and looked down at it appreciatively. “Thank you. A lot.”

They had toast and tea, while Belle told Kingfisher very broadly of her time as Rumpelstiltskin's housekeeper, and Kingfisher told her of how he'd left the university of Avalon on his first year, deciding to become an adventurer instead. He'd given away everything he couldn't carry, and had set forth out into the world to live by his wits and to travel on foot. All the things he owned were packed in a bag.

“Usually when winter comes, I go south, I walk all the way to the Emerald Sea and back, but when this weather set in, I wasn't really sure of what to do,” Kingfisher explained. “I thought I should return here.”

“But don't you have any family?” Belle wondered.

“No, they've practically disowned me, after I gave away my money to fund amusement parks, and observatoriums,” Kingfisher shrugged. “Most people think I'm insane. But these trolls don't, they're my friends. They have next to nothing, and are much happier for it.”

Belle sipped her tea, marvelling at Kingfisher's story, and secretly envying him for how he had just one day decided to go out for an adventure and never return. It had taken far more to get Belle herself jolted away and out of her ordinary life.

“How do you get by when you travel? What do you eat?”

Kingfisher munched on his toast before answering. “I've learned to fish really well. There's lots of roots and leaves and berries you can eat, if you know which ones. Mushrooms are a bit trickier, though. Sometimes I play songs with my guitar in exchange for food.”

“But isn't it terribly frightening, not knowing what and when you're going to eat next?”

Kingfisher nodded, with a secretive smile. “It wouldn't be much of an adventure if it was safe.” He looked around. “But this is where I've been stuck for the longest time since I can remember. It's a fairly nice looking house too.”

Belle nodded. “Same architect as who designed the railway station of Avonlea. I think he did that just before he was committed to an asylum.”

Kingfisher had nothing to say to that, so he didn't. He drank his tea and ate his toast. “Today I'll be
going out with Mumbler to find some pine needles. The trolls need to eat soon. Are you coming with?”

Belle thanked for the offer but declined. “I better stay and sit with Khutulun.”

Kingfisher offered to do the dishes before setting off. As Belle was about to head off, he interrupted her.

“I found some of your notes on the trolls, which I believe you left here? They had a name on them, Belle?”

Belle nodded. She had left some useless drafts she'd thought not to use in the desk in the library.

“Yes, that's my actual name, even though Mumbler calls me Reader. And I don't think your name is Kingfisher, either.”

He nodded. “We can let that be a mystery. But I wanted to ask you, are you intending on publishing your writings?”

“Yes, I thought, for the university.”

“Can I ask you not to? Please?” He pleaded.

Belle blinked. “What for?”

“How would you feel if someone wrote a thesis about you going about your daily life, and had it printed and bound for just anyone to see?” Kingfisher asked.

Belle couldn't find words to reply with. She nodded feebly. “You know, I don't think any university is going to be doing any printing any time soon.” She almost got out of the room. “It was a rubbish paper anyway,” she added, and left to go upstairs and check on Khutulun and to try feed her.

The lovely princess was asleep with both her sword next to her – the other one must was still left behind on the floor of the Dark Castle. Belle tried to rouse Khutulun from her sleep again, but to no avail. Belle thought that something about their encounter with the Groke had affected her deeper than just her body. Perhaps her soul itself had frozen, and needed another kind of magic to thaw. Belle couldn't know, she could only run around circles with her guesses, and wish some happy accident would help her find a solution for helping Khutulun. Or perhaps not an accident after all, for wasn't the laboratory of the Dark Castle but a few steps away?

After making sure again that Khutulun was alive and doing the best she could under the circumstances, Belle went to the back corridors of the house and climbed up to the door that led to the Dark Castle. She was worried the Groke might still be there, waiting, but since she hadn't come after Belle and Khutulun through the passageway, then perhaps she had reasonable enough hope of running back alive if the castle remained occupied.

It would have been better to go with company, Belle reflected, but she had a very strong wish to be alone. So she crept softly and soundlessly as she could through the passage between two lands, and into the Dark Castle.

There was pale light in the room, creaking in through the slightly, partially drawn curtains. Belle saw Khutulun's sword on the floor where it had clattered the night before. She collected that first of all, and then peered at her surroundings again. All was quiet. Only thin layers of dust, and the pointed lack of Rumpelstiltskin's collection of magical items were what made the difference between how she'd last seen the room before leaving Rumpelstiltskin.
Belle moved slowly through the rooms, corridors and staircases. The coast was clear. No stragglers had been able to break into the castle through the rose-guarded walls, it seemed, and Belle's climb up was undisturbed. On her way she wondered what she could do in the tower, how would she recognize something that could help Khutulun – perhaps if there was fairy dust?

But the tower was empty. Quite cleaned out. All the instruments Rumpelstiltskin had used to brew his poisons and potions had vanished, and Belle had to climb down the steps in defeat.

As the long legs of her trousers swept across the dusty stairs and floors, Belle began to feel very self-conscious with the fact that the last time she'd properly cleaned herself had been some years ago, the day before she'd went to the opera. She didn't care to wear the oversized clothes either any more for much longer, certainly not if she managed to have a bath, even if a cold one. Then it occurred to her that Rumpelstiltskin's clothes might fit her better. They were closer to size, even though he was taller than her. Still, she wouldn't drown in his clothes, she surmised.

Instead of returning straight to the house by the lake, Belle made a detour into Rumpelstiltskin's bedroom and wardrobe, where thankfully only half of the clothes seemed to have vanished. What was left was the out-of-date things that were hopelessly out of fashion, and the leathery scaly things he wore whenever Rumpelstiltskin wanted to make an especially intimidating impression with his clients. Belle picked herself a few things, such as a red silk shirt and an equally red scarf. After a little hesitation, she decided to add a waistcoat to her pile of things – after all, she'd need layers upon layers to wear.

An hour later Belle had finished scrubbing herself with tepid water in the basement of the villa. She'd washed her hair and braided it, dried herself completely, and then put on the silks and wools she'd gathered from Rumpelstiltskin's closets. Because there were no mirrors in the house, she couldn't tell what she looked like exactly, but the clothes fit her a bit better than the previous set she'd worn. Belle wondered if she'd ever be in a position to be able to return those to their rightful owner, as she packed the soiled, coarse things away.

Belle inspected the assorted edible things that had been stashed into the pantry, and set to making some kind of a meal for herself, Kingfisher, and hopefully for Khutulun. There was a root stew of sorts cooking in the pot in the kitchen by the time Mumbler and Kingfisher returned with their armfuls of pine needles.

"Do they taste good?" Belle asked Mumbler.

"I prefer pancakes, but these are fine." Mumbler went about its way to distribute the needles to the half-wake trolls in the great room. Belle stood at the door, watching the family of trolls eat their snacks obediently, asking if it was spring yet, and when Mumbler informed them it wasn't, all the trolls turned themselves back in and continued sleeping.

When Mumbler returned to the kitchen, Belle interrupted it. She took a seat on a kitchen chair and leaned forward to be on level with the troll.

"I need to apologize to you, Mumbler," Belle said.

"Oh? I'm not sure you do," the troll replied.

"I have, a little, in the process of scientific approach," Belle thought a little about how to put it, "considered you in an uncivilised manner, a pet, and myself somehow above you, because I come from a world with universities and suffragettes and steam engines."

Mumbler seemed a bit confused. "But you have been very kind to me..."
“And at times, condescending,” Belle admitted. “Maybe Fisher is right, you should be left alone. I
didn't think it through when I started writing about you. You don't deserve to be studied in that
manner. If there's anything you want to tell humans about yourselves, I hope you'll do so in your
own time and manner.”

Mumbler smiled dreamily. “I was.”

Belle nodded solemnly. “I'm glad to hear. Do you want to tell me more about pancakes?”

“Fisher made some, and we had them with your rose hip jam. They were ever so good. We don't
have any eggs, and Fisher can't make more of them without eggs, so I'm afraid you won't get any.”

“I'll have to do with stew.”

Kingfisher entered the kitchen. “Your permission to enter the wine cellar, lady Reader? I would look
for something suitable to drink with dinner.”

Belle felt worried for a moment, recalling how jealously Rumpelstiltskin treasured some of his wines.
But his appearance would be a good thing, even in a rage, Belle figured.

“Please, nothing too strong,” Belle asked. “I'd like us to not loose our heads.”

“I'll leave all the clear bottles untouched then,” Kingfisher replied and hopped downstairs. He
returned shortly with a bottle of wine from Lyonesse and another bottle of Avalonian cider. Once
Belle had checked up on Khutulun, who remained asleep and unwaking, Kingfisher, Belle and
Mumbler shared dinner in the kitchen, speaking of fond summer memories each one had, while
outside the light gradually vanished and another dark night started.

In candle light, Kingfisher made dessert out of jam and thawed cream, while Mumbler asked Belle
questions about some words in the dictionary which remained inexplicable despite their explanations,
and Belle answered all best she could. After the two bottles had been emptied, they were all feeling
very merry despite all the darkness outside, and then Kingfisher retrieved his guitar and played them
a song Belle realised she knew words to. She sang along best she could, muddling over the lyrics she
didn't quite remember, and then they sang it second time around, with Mumbler joining in.

“Wait, I need to get something from the cellar,” Belle told them, and ran downstairs to get the last of
the Tokaj. It was as good a time as any to break it out. She returned to the kitchen in fairly high
spirits, but just then all the lights grew dim, and what little colour there was in the world was fading
away. Despite the fire going on in the kitchen, the room was suddenly cold.

“The Groke is here,” Mumbler said, its glance darting from Kingfisher to Belle and back.

Belle glanced at the Tokaj in her hands. She went to the cupboard for a new wine glass. “I'll go,” she
said firmly, grabbed the bottle opener, and left the kitchen without another word. She could hear,
after a moment of stunned silence, Mumbler and Kingfisher follow her to the foyer.

Belle stepped out into the winter night and there, not many steps away from her, stood the Groke in
the courtyard, gazing back up at Belle.

“I brought you some wine,” Belle told her. She sat down in front of the door and put the corkscrew
to the bottle. “You must be cold and alone out here. Maybe the wine will warm you up a little,” Belle
said, her teeth chattering.

… Thank you, the Groke said.
“Can I get you anything else?” Belle asked, after she'd poured the Groke a glass of Tokaj. It was as she remembered, liquid gold, sweetest wine she'd ever tasted, as she licked a stray droplet of it from her fingers.

*I don't know*, the Groke replied.

“This is the last bottle of Tokaj that I know of,” Belle said. “Don't drink it too fast. Enjoy it.” Belle set the glass on the ground between them, and the black shape of the Groke reached down for it with an abstract hand, and lifted the glass to the shape of her lips. Now that she was really looking at her, with a little less panicky fear thundering in her head, Belle thought the Groke looked as if a child's drawing had come to life.

*Why aren't you afraid?* The Groke asked.

“I am afraid,” Belle said, “but more than I am afraid, I want to try help you.”

*No one can help me. This is how I am. No one loves me. Everything I touch turns into ice. People only want me to die, or to lock me away.*

Belle felt truly sad for the Groke then. “Maybe you could tell me something about yourself...”

At midnight, the Groke left. That was when Fisher and Mumbler were finally able to open the front door, because they had been unable to move until then. The light of the moon, and the hues of colours of the world returned. Belle was just about to step in and there was mild confusion about doorways, doors, people accidentally getting hit by them, and with the fact that Belle was still alive and not a frozen statue.

“What happened?” Mumbler asked.

Belle shivered, looking around for something, anything, to wear over the dark suit she was wearing, but there were no cloaks or coats in the foyer. “I need warm,” she said, teeth chattering. Kingfisher and Mumbler escorted her back into the kitchen, where Kingfisher stoked the fire in the stove and made her a cup of tea.

“I just had a talk with her, that's all,” Belle managed to say, shivering and shaking as she was. “I think she's a bit depressed.”

“Oh?” Kingfisher said. “That's what this is about? That is... dreadfully sad. Is she coming back? Should I have made her dessert?”

Belle shrugged. “I don't know. She said she'll think about it.”

“Perhaps, next time she comes, we could build a fire out in the yard, and bring the table out, so we can have dinner with her, and Fisher can play her the guitar,” Mumbler suggested.

“I could make some ice lanterns. I think I saw a bucket somewhere,” Kingfisher mused, and went about the task immediately, leaving the kitchen.

“Mumbler, maybe you shouldn't get so excited,” Belle said, “The Groke is dangerous.”

“Life is dangerous, Reader. From the moment you are born, you're in danger of dying,” Mumbler replied.
Once she could feel her limbs properly again, Belle wished Mumbler a good night, blew out the candles in the lanterns around the kitchen except one which she took upstairs with her. First thing, Belle inspected how Khutulun was, and to her surprise, the princess was awake, although exhausted. She had a slight fever on her forehead, but she could speak.

“She's gone,” Khutulun asked, speaking as plainly as ever.

“She's gone,” Belle said soothingly. She went back and forth the stairs, getting Khutulun warm food and more of Kingfisher's rare tea. Once the princess had had her fill, she fell asleep on the sofa again. Belle thought she couldn't stand another ill-slept night on the sofa, so she took a blanket and went to Rumpelstiltskin's bedroom.

Belle hadn't given it much notice the first time she'd been in the room, but now as she was looking for a place to set her lantern, she noticed there was a book by the bed. Curious, Belle picked it up and held it closer so she could see the title. To her surprise, it was *Tenderness*, the romance which the peculiar book store keeper had persuaded her to buy, and which Belle had thought nonsensical the last time she'd laid eyes on the book. Since then, she had become to change her opinion about true love's kisses.

Even though it was late, even though a moment ago she'd felt as though she could fall asleep and never want to wake up again, she had a guess sleep would not come soon. It was disturbing, but also exciting, imagining Rumpelstiltskin to have been here, in this bed. Belle sat down and closed her eyes for a bit, feeling dizzy with feeling. She disrobed the outer layers of her clothing and burrowed under the blanket. The shirt she wore smelled of Rumpelstiltskin, and so did the pillow, now that she had half her face full of it. For a long while, sleep didn't come to her. Belle tossed and turned, her heart full of aching and longing.

Belle knew she couldn't stay there and sit by idly, waiting for spring. First thing in the morning, she'd had to devise a plan to go on and find Rumpelstiltskin.
Tenderness

Chapter Summary

Explorations.

Chapter Notes

I really really needed to do this and I've limited time so I had to do it really quick and dirty and I know it might be suffering a lot for it, but I thought better done and finished, than not done at all.

The early spring rains loomed over the villa, hiding the sun. Almost as soon as Belle was gone, he already missed her. The luxurious villa with its many modern enhancements compared to the castle he'd preoccupied for so long began to feel haunted, if such a thing could be said. Could a place be haunted with the lack of someone's presence? It was like the villa had lost its heart, like the Countess Cagliostra had when she had plucked her own out of her chest and hidden it, she had transformed into a empty, cold, hollow person, blacker than a winter's night.

There were still little specks of light, the little things Belle had left behind when she'd hastily packed her bags and couldn't fit all of her belongings. The golden gown of her great-aunt along with its great expanse of petticoats was one of such things, and Rumplestiltskin looked back to the first moment of setting his eyes upon Belle. She'd looked wary, but not frightened by him. There was not going to be another chance of seeing her wearing the gown now, the way he'd hurt and shouted at her.

Since he no longer had a reason to stay in the villa – it had been more of a matter of pleasing Belle with such things as running water, and keeping her safe from the cold draughts of winter in a cheese-holed castle in Dimhaut – Rumplestiltskin had decided to leave soon enough, after his deals with Regina were over. In the dimness of daylight blocked by curtains, he settled Belle's things in the library, he'd always intended the room entirely for her use. He draped the golden gown on Belle's favourite chair, lest it crease more than it already had, crushed at the bottom of Belle's luggage.

He wanted to send the gown to her, but felt it was better if their lives never touched each other again. The sweet, innocent and terribly naive Belle was an unfortunate temptation that threatened him from finding his son, and after three hundred years he wouldn't risk anything to accomplish that goal. And of course, there was nothing about Rumplestiltskin that could make Belle happy. Trying to put aside the question of when had he become concerned about what made Belle happy, Rumplestiltskin busied his hands, going through the rest of Belle's things.

While tidying up this unfortunate loose end, Rumplestiltskin found a book that had been set aside from all the other ones Belle had been reading in the half-year she'd spent with him. It was tossed aside, forgotten under other things. It hadn't come with Belle upon her first arrival, and it wasn't a book from the library. When Rumplestiltskin picked up the book, two red-gold maple leaves fell out from between the pages. This piqued his curiosity, for it was so unlike Belle to misplace or forget a
Tenderness, the cover paper said. Rumplestiltskin's memory sought at strands, of a scandal involving the writer. It had been in one of Belle's newspapers that she'd devoured so eagerly.

Later in the evening, waiting for seconds to pass and to come closer to his success, Rumplestiltskin became tired between the monotony of waiting, and the avoiding of thoughts relating to his recently previous housekeeper. With a flick of his wrist, he had Belle's book in his hand, and started to read. As the title suggested, he soon found out it was a love story. The protagonist was an upper class woman, and her lover a lowly gardener. Soon Rumplestiltskin assumed the great differences in the characters' circumstances was what had drawn Belle to the book in the first place.

The well-intending, down-looking ignorantly charitable way of how the girl sometimes spoke of social class politics had sometimes set Rumplestiltskin on edge as much as it had amused him. Belle was undoubtedly very clever and well-read, and very intelligent, but she lacked first-hand knowledge of many of the things she liked to study and talk about. It was a little odd, hearing someone so smart sound simultaneously so... stupid.

The word felt hurtful to him as soon as he'd thought of it. Of course someone with rich aunts and well-off, respectable parents wouldn't know anything about poverty or misery, no matter how much of a social justice warrior she might have been. He didn't wish her to experience any of that. And now she wouldn't have to, with her family's affairs back in order, thanks to him. Belle would do whatever she fancied, with whoever she fancied, either in this world, or in the one without magic, and they'd both be better off for it.

And so, as he read, Rumplestiltskin found his thoughts frequently meandering page by page, back to Belle.

An hour passed. The lady of the novel saved her love, a gardener, with a kiss. Rumplestiltskin felt discomfort and understood then why the novel had been left behind. Curiosity, and the glass of wine he'd had before had the better of him, and wanting to know what happened next, he continued reading, page after page.

When the lady visited the gardener's cottage and removed her clothes in his bed, Rumplestiltskin first assumed that this was more likely the reason why Belle had left the book behind, and secondly, he now recalled the reason why the writer had been in court in the first place. The morality of his writings had been questioned by a court in Arbonne, and the publishing house had also been under threat of closure.

Books certainly had changed in their nature so very thoroughly in the past three hundred years, Rumplestiltskin thought. He put the book aside, took his pipe out, and went to the balcony for a smoke. It was a miserable, wet, rainy spring night, and the drizzle made the landscape grey and uninviting to even look at.

Rumplestiltskin thought about the first books he'd acquired. They'd been only of information. Nobody in their right minds (in other words, of all the people in the world only the obscenely rich) would waste such an amount of time and craftsmanship as it had taken, to create a book, just to write fiction. Now there were giant machines spewing out... obviously all sorts of things. And that was a tiny fraction of things that were changing, had been changing in the world. The fact that there always something changing in these kingdoms, that in itself was at least a constant. And so it was as well with the greed and desperation of humans. As long as that remained, he could work his way through one step at a time, one step after another, closer to the Land Without Magic.

Rumplestiltskin slept more out of habit and as a way to pass time, for a chance to be comfortable in a
state of undress, rather than out of any need for rest. After he was done with his pipe, he returned indoors and made himself ready for sleep.

When he closed his eyes, dreamless sleep wouldn't come. Instead, his imagination returned to the characters of Belle's novel. Rumplestiltskin thought back to the way how Belle had leaned against him, all shyness and hesitance, almost shaking. Her lips had been so, so soft.

But that hadn't mattered. Especially after he learned she'd kissed him with the intention of turning him into a man again, with the magic of sweet, pure, innocent and naïve love.

Now he had to wonder at that intention. What if Belle wasn't quite as innocuous as he thought? Had reading this story, with its some parallels, inspired her to come back to him and kiss him? Had she been reading the book in her bed, only a few hundred steps from him? Had she been thinking of him, reading it?

He slowly began to feel weak and heady, and it wasn't because of the wine.

Tired, more tired than she could recall having ever been, yet still unable to sleep, Belle lit the lantern on the bedside table. Tenderness was there, conveniently close. She had stopped reading it halfway through, just after they'd kissed. It took her only a few moments to find the place where she'd stopped reading. While not able to remember every exact name and detail, Belle recalled the principal topics of the plot, as well as the situations of the main characters. It didn't take her long before she found her bearings and could get on with it.

There was more kissing soon, after the lady saved her lover from his curse. Much more intense kissing. It was described in more detail than Belle had thought a novel was able to convey. She felt her lips tingle. Without not really thinking about it, her imagination was turning the gardener of modest means into a green-skinned man with cat-eyes. Belle closed her eyes for a moment, imagining and then licking more moisture onto her own lips. Drowsily, she opened her eyes again and sought the part of the page where her mind had wandered off.

The fine lady of the manor left her house. She walked away into the forest alone, on a cold, windy day of autumn. Before she reached the gardener's cottage, it had started to rain, and she let herself, wet through as she was. The gardener was in a state of distress, surprised by her visit, and hoping she wouldn't catch her death in her clothes.

"Then let me stay the night with you, my clothes will be all dry by morning," she replied, and promptly began to take her clothes off without further talking about the subject. She handed her clothes, one item at a time, to him, and he put them on the clothesline for her, nervously glancing at her, the more skin she showed, until she was sitting naked in the middle of his bed, on the coarse lambswool blanket. The cold made her nipples hard, and she wasn't ashamed of it, or of her naked thighs, or the growth of hair at the top of them. She just sat there, smiling happily at him, until she wasn't so much doing that as she was smirking expectantly, beckoning him to come closer.

"You'll catch your death," he repeated, and huddled the coarse wool blanket close to her, lifted it to protect her from the chill air of the cottage. There was no giant, roaring open fireplace to keep them warm, no ornate and majestic masonry heater. There was just the stove and the oven, and a little gardener's fireplace, with red brickwork, and rationed wood for its heating.

"Then help keep me warm," she said, and caught his hands in her own, to pull them underneath the folds of the blanket.
As his hands roamed his mistress's skin, sharing heat with the goose-bumped skin, the gardener thought, and thought deeply, knowing it was only going to end in tears. They were from two worlds, he knew. Hers wouldn't accept him, his had no place for her. They were like the Fairy of Sunlight and the Midnight Troll of the fairy tales. The fairy would die in darkness, and the troll turn into stone by daylight. All moments they could share would be in the brief twilight of dusk and dawn. Perhaps this was one of those moments, the gardener thought, and leaned in to kiss his mistress's nipples, and to elicit a breathy moan out of her.

Belle pressed the book against her chest and became aware of the fact that she was breathing heavier than normal. She wasn't feeling so tired any longer, either. She bit her lip, and then moved her book aside for a bit. She gently nudged her breast through the dress shirt she was wearing, with her palm, and was alarmed by how sensitive she felt, and how hard her nipple was.

Rumplestiltskin closed his eyes to the darkness as he lay in bed, recalling the steps of the mutual seduction of the characters in Belle's book. Maybe she'd lain in the darkness, in her bed, going through those same steps?

Across the centuries, he'd seen women in many circumstances, sometimes naked, often he'd been summoned into the middle of such situations. He could imagine an approximation of what Belle looked like underneath all her high-collared blouses and long knee-length skirts. He could also imagine her lying on her back on the bed right next to her, naked under a thin sheet. If he'd cared to, he would have created an illusion of her even, but that idea felt wrong.

He could imagine leaning down to kiss her breasts, like the gardener had in the novel. He could simultaneously imagine Belle's own hands there, working herself to excitement. He could hardly imagine Belle's face lost to passion, or her eyes grown large and dark. She was always so... damn kind and neat, sweet and patient. He remembered the nervous shudder that had passed through Belle's body when she'd leaned against him, and the way she'd held her breath before the kiss. Perhaps she was as demure and gentle with herself? He could imagine Belle with her eyes closed, holding her breath, seeking sensation with soft and gentle touches and squeezes. He wondered how she might have kept that held breath inside still, if it had been his hand instead, and then his lips and teeth, playing with her nipples.

Except of course she wouldn't have appreciated that, Rumplestiltskin reminded himself, and opened his eyes to the darkness, to stare at the ceiling.

Belle had to find out what happened next. She kept one palm on her breast, partially to level her own breath as she continued reading – of how the gardener kissed her, and how their tongues met in the kiss, of how his two strong hands, rough and calloused from the work they'd done, fell on her breasts and held them, touched them.

Belle thought of Rumplestiltskin's hands. She'd playfully held his hand on a few occasions, when distracting him from work, to direct his attention to his tea tray.

Her more practical side reminded her of the horrors the world was even now enduring, most likely thanks to him, and Belle's hand which was palming her breast stilled. She glanced at the window, hidden underneath the curtains, outside of which the on-going winter remained.

Withdrawing from her thoughts of pleasure, Belle set a bookmark between the pages and resolved to try and sleep again. She tossed and turned under the blanket, very well aware that everything she
was touching smelled of Rumplestiltskin. There was also the matter of an urgent, needy feeling
between her legs, and the delicate sensitivity and heaviness that had overtaken her breasts, which
were quite overwhelming her, little by little.

So, she thought, if she were to continue... who would it hurt, and who would know? Aside from
herself. Would there be something wrong with her, something irrevocably wrong, after going down
this strange path in the dark?

Belle, while feeling moisture pooling between her legs, lay there, looking at the ceiling for a while,
thinking.

She deeply cared about Rumplestiltskin.

He'd thrown her out for kissing him.

And then she'd returned to his houses, where the doors bloomed into roses, opening for her, and her
gown waited for her in his library.

Rumplestiltskin had caused something very awful to happen.

But why, though? Was it for his own selfish benefit?

A cynical train of thought assured that most, if not all people in the world were deeply selfish. Proof
of this was available in factories and sweatshops not long ago, when people laboured under the most
insidious circumstances.

But she was not prone to listening to her cynical, guarded thoughts as often as she was to considering
her bright optimistic tendencies. They told her that, no matter what terror had been wrought, it had
been for a reason. A good reason.

And what was a good reason, for an immortal sorcerer then? She couldn't know, but before knowing
it, she couldn't judge him for it. And without being able to judge him, Belle reasoned, there was no
harm in a little exploration of her own feelings, and of the peculiar side effects of them.

Belle struck the matches a second time that night, and re-lit the lantern, in order to go back to
reading. While she sat up, she opened the dress shirt wide open, before returning under the sheets
and blankets, her eyes ready to devour everything this book had to tell her.

Rumplestiltskin remembered how it had felt for a brief second, to feel human, mortal and weak, after
Belle had kissed him. And she had wanted to kiss him, he knew, even if he was telling himself now
she hadn't. He'd piled the flimsy lie on top of the truth time and time again, that Belle had only kissed
him to steal his magic, to turn him weak.

In the middle of the night, in the darkness, with no one around, it was hard to not acknowledge that it
had been a true love's kiss, and it would have worked, if he'd let it. That sweet, darling creature had
wanted to love him, for whatever reason.

And he'd began to understand how much he truly needed that love.

Some of that love he'd now started to feel more hands-on than other aspects. As his grotesque
monster's hand slipped down his cursed body, Rumplestiltskin wondered if Belle would mind, were
she to know he was doing this, thinking of her.
He'd seen over and over again, and felt it personally, that to most people fucking was ultimately a selfish endeavour. It was especially considered a nasty, filthy habit if done outside of marriage, since there was always the chance of a child being conceived. And people who fucked without concern for any repercussions, well, their children didn't grow up to have such happy lives, now did they?

But he couldn't think so shallowly of Belle. He couldn't imagine Belle like that. He couldn't imagine any other purpose for touching Belle than to give her joy, pure pleasure. But the idea of her quick wit and easy smiles turning into moans and sighs at his touch, that was making him hard now.

Belle read the end of the chapter over a few things, questioning the things she'd just read. The language had turned ever more flowery, into metaphors about roses and tulips, and she had trouble grasping what it all meant. All she knew was that she had a deep ache, a terrible longing in her body now. Her breath had grown quick and short.

Well then, there were approximately three things she thought she could do now, she thought, almost giggling. Either she could give it up and try to rest again. Or she could get out of bed and go wake up Khutulun and ask her for help, in case she knew anything. Or she could try resolve the matter herself.

Belle dipped her hand south. She was fairly well aware of the other functions and purposes of the region in general, and had at times been sometimes curious or calmly ignored when this sort of thing, this excitement, had happened to her before, that she'd come to such a state that she'd made herself wet. It felt embarrassing at first, even.

She drew out the area with the tip of her finger. She knew the urethra, of course, and down from there was the vagina. She was aware that this was where, technically, babies came from, according to the general medicine she'd studied at the university. Therefore, it was logical that this was where the, ahem, the male's penis entered (so this was the tulip?)

The clinical medical terms reminded Belle of the joy she'd felt over being present in introductory medical studies lecture, with the wavering of the professor's voice, so scandalised he'd been with the presence of a woman at a place where female body parts were so openly and plainly spoken of! Belle wanted to laugh out loud at the memory, just as she'd laughed then.

Once she began to imagine herself back in the lecture halls and libraries of the university in Avonlea, Belle began to relax considerably. She imagined she was at a lecture, but instead of being seated down and front, she was up and in the back, making notes on her own body instead of with pencil to note sheets.

From there, her imagination caught a life of its own. Whimsically, she sneaked out of the lecture hall, to meet the fantastic Rumplestiltskin outside in the frescoed corridors and their granite floors. He'd grab her hand and together they went through the closest door, which inexplicably enough, took them to the library, to the highest level of it, where you had to climb the twisting metal cages of the narrowest staircase in the world to get to, and there, between the shelves, he pressed her against the spines of the books and kissed her, like the gardener had kissed his mistress in *Tenderness*. And she pulled him close to her, and kissed him back.

As soon as she'd want to get rid of her corsets and petticoats, another door opened, and he'd lead her through it, to this room, this pleasant room in the middle of a quiet forest. Since she was already naked, she skipped the undressing in her imagination very swiftly, and instead returned to the part where he kissed her breasts.
Rumplestiltskin wanted to hear her sighs of want just as much as as her cries at the peak of satisfaction,

and Belle was suddenly amazed, alarmed, and stunned, by what the tips of her fingers could do to herself. She almost made a noise in the suddenness of it, but remembered that Khutulun was asleep in the next room, and would come running in at anything hinting towards Grokes or vampires, and how awkward it would be to explain this to her?

She wondered, as her fingers searched for the place again, skimming up and down, how would it feel, had she someone else's hand there instead? And she hadn't even started on the so-called tulip yet.

Rumplestiltskin was very well aware that many, if not most women, preferred to lock up their cunts, not just because of the danger of having unwanted children, but because of the kind of inventory he'd sold to quite a few clients, women were not so easily pleased by cocks as men might flatter it might be. While he kept his hand busy, instead of wishing it were Belle's palm, or some other part, he'd still rather concentrate on pleasuring her. He wasn't sure if burying his cock in her was the way to go about it, even in the book the gardener had preferred to employ his fingers first.

It was almost an incomprehensibly unthinkable fantasy, to imagine Belle panting and gasping, naked and flushed underneath him, or over him, where ever she preferred to be, but the more he thought about it, the less he had trouble imagining it, of Belle holding her breath as she came closer and closer,

and she was holding her breath, amazed by all the things she was feeling, and she could hardly put words to them. She felt as though she had stood at a tiny lake, ankle-deep in the water, but the lake had sneakily grown bigger and vaster, until it had become a sea, an ocean even. And the waters were coming and going, each wave stronger than the last one, and one, she thought, might be so strong it might take her with itself.

But when that wave of pleasure and joy came, it was not like a wave at all, but now rather like she saw she had been a ball of twine, which had ultimately become entirely and utterly unravelled. How odd, she thought, holding in her sighs and gasps, while her whole body rocked, how delightful.

I wonder why this is not in Aunt Sylvia's Guidebook for the Young Ladies, Belle pondered, her parting lips then finally yielding one, long-suppressed sigh.

Rumplestiltskin came to his ending. He lay in the bed, for long minutes, hating himself, for wanting to ruin Belle's life again, for allowing his thoughts to be veered away from his quest of the centuries. Mostly he hated himself though because he was so used to it, and it had been fairly shocking to spend a moment not doing so.

For one strange, ghostly second, he was alarmed. His stolen gift of foreseeing alerted him to the presence of another person in the bed, right by his side, but it was a sensation that lasted barely less than half a second, a soft touch, and then it was gone.
A trip to a spa

Although the idea of staying in the lovely villa and waiting for the end of winter was tempting – everyone else in the house had decided to do that, apart from the princess Khutulun who was still only partially conscious and as such couldn't make great big decisions – Belle felt restless and worried. Her heart sent her persistent messages throughout the days and nights, that somewhere out there was not only her family, but also Rumplestiltskin, and they all needed her, and that she needed to be with him. If the frozen world could be healed by the happy accident of her finding Rumplestiltskin and managing to talk some sense into him, fine, but that wasn't the topmost reason why she couldn't find sleep at night when she lay in his bed and thought about him.

On a few sunny, bright days, Belle took the opportunity to go outside for adventures in the abandoned houses across the lake, and in the nearest village. She scavenged things she thought would make her next journey easier. Somehow, she would need to get to the Far Isles, the archipelago near the Edge of the World, where most of the people who'd survived the long and magical winter had fled to. That was where Jefferson had led all the people he had saved from Regina's unusual prison along with Belle and Khutulun. Besides, the Edge of the World was in plain sight of The Land Without Magic, where she was most definitely headed next. And for that journey, she would need everything: provisions, gear, and carefully considered courses of action.

Belle had the understanding that one would need a ship to cross the sea to the Far Isles, since the winter hadn't frozen over the entire ocean. She thought about this on the seventh day since her arrival to the villa, as she pored over maps she'd laid out in the library over the desk where she'd written poorly formed essays and treatises many years ago, before she'd gotten kicked out, went to the opera, been transformed into a bird, fed only with seeds for a few years, and then spent weeks walking through snow.

Unseeing, Belle, stared at the map, thinking about everything that had happened between then and now, and shook her head as if to shake all the memories of her misadventures away from distracting her. She stared unhappily at the sea between herself and the continents and the Far Isles. It was risky enough to travel on land from house to house, hoping to find shelter every night before nightfall, when the dark creatures came out of their lairs. If she decided to travel over and across the frozen seas, she'd have less of a chance to find houses, than along the main roads. When the frozen sea ended, she'd have to find a very large boat somewhere, which would carry days' worth of food, as well as blankets and kindling. And how would she get all those to a boat, which she didn't have, across frozen seas? And if she got that far, she'd have to master sailing with it, which would be quite a great deal different than a tiny rowboat by a calm lake on her aunt's estate on a clear blue-sky day in high summer.

Belle's sigh of desperation was disrupted by the slender oriental princess entering the room. The hinge of the library door squeaked, and Belle thought with irritation, how it should not, and how she ought to oil the thing before she left, but there were no proper tools in the whole household for doing ordinary things. Certainly, if one needed a beaker, a pestle, or a crystal ball, there were some of those lying about in all of the rooms above. But goodness help you, if you needed a hammer, or a chisel, or
nails.

Khutulun entered. At last the princess was up and about on her own, after a long spell of fever and nightmares between broken periods of half-dazed wakefulness. Belle removed her somewhat irrational irritation towards Rumplestiltskin's haphazard ideas of housekeeping from the top of her mind. “Oh, you seem much better,” Belle said. “Your highness,” she added, as an afterthought, recalling it was a princess she was speaking to. She didn't get up from her chair, only turned around in it.

Her highness was for once, not wearing her fearsome warrior outfit. Khutulun had only an artfully wrapped and bound bed sheet to cover her, and she seemed slightly cross, if also a little fuzzy from recently waking up. Her short cropped black hair was a greasy little crow's nest, sticking out in every direction. “I am awake. And I'm going to bathe.”

Belle nodded slowly. “Of course, your highness.”

“What are you doing?” Khutulun asked, her voice as serious and her manner as frank as it had ever been, but Belle knew not to take offence for the curtness of the princess's behaviour. Dragging the edge of her sheet behind her, Khutulun approached the desk and peered over Belle's shoulder at her plans: Her sketches of the map with ideas of routes, and at the inventory list she'd made, with ideas of how much she needed to eat every day.

“I need to get to the Far Isles,” Belle replied, and removed a separate parchment that was obscuring the islands in question on the big map at the bottom of her pile of papers. “Here.”

Khutulun nodded.

“Jefferson hoped to find a ship along the coast,” Khutulun said casually. Belle inhaled sharply in her excitement, when Khutulun laid a finger on a coastal town, which didn't seem as far as the moon, which was how she'd felt about her quest so far. While inhaling, she got a clear idea why Khutulun had announced her need to bathe – Belle coughed, but did so as politely as she could. The northern coast of Arbonne was within all reasonable distance.

“There are ships running up and down here, often, looking for people trying to find passage to the Far Isles. Most of them are helpful, but some look to take advantage of people in trouble,” Khutulun said matter-of-factly.

“Jefferson told you this?” Belle asked in wonder. She'd recalled having tried to talk to the man in all the chaos amidst their leaving, but the hatter had avoided her perfectly well for the most part.

“No, but I overheard his plans. The two werewolves made sure to know every detail of what he knows. They didn't trust him. Especially not the old one. And when are we leaving?”

Belle raised her eyebrows. “You'd come with me?”

Khutulun left the desk. “You saved my life. I have to make sure we're even. You'll also need to explain me, why we are headed to the Far Isles.” The princess marched out of the room with the regal air of a trained sword master dressed in a toga made of a bed sheet. Belle sat in her chair, staring at the door after Khutulun was gone, uncertain with what she ought to tell the princess. Too often, Belle thought she wasn't herself at all aware of all her motives for wanting to find Rumplestiltskin so badly.

She turned her head slightly, and her eyes happened on the golden dress resting on the grand wingback chair near the fireplace, where Rumplestiltskin had so carefully laid it.
There was not going to be any way around it, Belle thought. She’d go out there in the snow and ice, and the edge of the world, and she would find Rumplestiltskin.

Two weeks later in Arbonne, Belle and Khutulun ran out of luck. They realised they were not the only two people in the world trekking out in the miserable endless winter. Other people like them had also travelled towards the coast, looking for a ship to take them to the Far Isles and a moderately milder climate, and these other people had gone from house to house much like Belle and Khutulun, ransacking each for supplies.

For five days, the ladies had had to ration their meagre supplies, and make long detours in hopes of finding country houses and cottages with kitchens that might have anything even remotely edible. They headed towards the coast with half-empty stomachs and such dour spirits, Belle began to doubt the possibility of any success in their enterprise. She didn't dare to voice out her misgivings to Khutulun, who'd directly told Belle that this kind of thinking would lead them both to their deaths and Khutulun had no intention of dying. Then the princess had found an abandoned farm cottage and had plowed her way inside and broken inside with such fierceness, Belle had thought the princess quite angry. So that was the end of Belle confiding in Khutulun. Instead, she kept her fears inside herself, ignoring them during the short daylight hours, and taking them out at night when she couldn't sleep, and staring them helplessly in the face.

But, eventually, as if against all odds, they found the coast. And that wasn't all they ran into. There was a seaside spa resort at the end of the road they took. It was quite a lot of out of the way from the main roads, and Khutulun and Belle wouldn't have found it if they hadn't gone about in such a meandering route to get to the coast.

The wind was harsh out there by the coast, and on the day of their arrival, it had blown the snow off the welcoming sign at the gated entrance. The black iron gate hung half-open, and wouldn't budge in any direction, half-buried in the snow as it was.

“Do you know, what does it say?” Khutulun asked, pointing at the sign.

“Bienvenue a la Rosaraie,” Belle read out loud. Of course she read Arbonnaise. It was her father's first language, and it was what he muttered to himself when he sometimes spoke to himself, sitting and working at his desk. They sometimes conversed in Arbonnaise entirely, although that had always been fairly seldom. She had to climb up a snow bank to remove more snow off the sign. “Welcome to the Rose Garden... Spa and Sanatorium.”

Khutulun wrinkled her nose, frowning. “What does that mean?”

Belle climbed back down. “It's a hospital, for people with long-term sickness.”

This seemed to make the fearless princess wary. “Disease. Do you think it'll be safe?”

Belle couldn't come up with a sensible reply. Nightfall was soon imminent, and the temperatures would drop significantly. There might be werewolves and vampires inside the sanatorium. There didn't really to be choice about the matter, they'd go inside or die of exposure outdoors. Belle slipped past the gate wordlessly, so tired that she didn't care that all her limbs hurt from the day's trekking, or that cold wind coming from the north was biting her face so bad she couldn't feel her skin.

Khutulun followed her. It occurred to Belle that the fearless princess seemed fearful, or at least wary of at least one thing: disease. Belle made no comment about it, but she wondered if it was due to her having lost someone to illness, or perhaps it was a warrior's fear of not being able to die on the field.
of glory with a blade in her hand, if some malady took her to bed. And Khutulun had been particularly cross during her week in bed at the villa, Belle mused.

In silence, they climbed a gently sloping hill up a tree avenue towards a large mansion in the light of the falling sun. The sky was purple, except in the horizon where it was pale yellow. Sunlight peeked through from between the highest branches of the tallest trees of the western woodlands, but there was no warmth to its touch.

When they got further up the hill, Belle looked north, at the coast, and her heart lurched when she saw the sea. The water near the shore was a frozen sheet, but further away, her eyes could just about make out waves of the great western sea, and waves meant that a ship could sail to the Far Isles. In the blink of that moment, she thought she might fell the trees of the avenue, make planks out of them and build a ship, if that was what it would take.

Khutulun marched past her to the house. After a moment of staring out at sea, Belle returned to the world of the sensible, and hurried after the princess. Khutulun broke the front door, which had been locked. They had to move enough snow from out of the way to get the door open, and they weren't aiming for too much perfectionism in this endeavour: just enough of a crack to let them both in was all they needed.

They had avoided large mansions during their journeys so far, because they were just the sort of place that would attract a witch or a vampire. The last time they had been to such a large and lovely house had been the strange bird lady's estate, which had become a derelict shack during the years of the winter.

The foyer of the spa was far neater in comparison. Everything was very neat and tidy, in fact, even if layers of dust covered all the surfaces. The place had been left in such a condition that it seemed the owner fully intended to return sooner or later. Belle closed the door behind her as best as she could, even if the lock wouldn't keep it closed any longer. She went to the reception area, found a tall silver candlestick from the table, and returned to the front door and slipped the stick through the door handles to keep the front door closed.

The wind was picking up outside, and Belle hoped it would erase all their footprints. She relieved herself of the backpack she'd carried across the weeks and laid it over a sofa which had been draped under a white dust sheet. All the furniture had been hidden under dust sheets. Khutulun followed Belle's example, and then went about the room, staring at the hundred or so small portraits and landscape paintings of the sea hung on all the walls of the waiting area. There seemed to be fifty pictures of different little old ladies wearing black dresses with a white lace collar tucked tightly under their chins, and fifty slightly different artistic impressions of a sandy beach. Belle didn't bother giving the pictures more of her attention.

They needed light soon, for the sunlight was dying outside. Belle found matches and candles inside the desk of the receptionist and took a less imposing holder for them. “Let's see if we can find the kitchen,” Belle whispered.

They crept in the faint blue-grey light of the evening made brighter by the tiny light of the single candle in Belle's hand, down corridors, past airy and pleasant salons and dining halls. An instinct about the layouts of this kind of house, and how far a kitchen would be from a dining room, led Belle almost straight to the kitchen. The transitions from grand palatial spaces to humble service rooms were always muted and downplayed, so much so that the kitchen door might as well have been invisible to the regular visitor of this kind of house. It was the same type of interior design in the narrow back corridors of the villa which the insane architect had bartered to Rumplestiltskin.

Belle also noticed that they were leaving footprints on the dusty, dark wood floors. That was a good
sign indeed. There was no one else in the house with them.

They found the kitchen marvellously stocked. The relief they both felt seemed almost tangible as it washed over them. Both left out a breath they hadn't realised they'd been holding, and as they noticed how in unison their mutual sighing was, it gave way to joyous laughter. Not that there was anything funny about their situation. The laugh was more of a shared expression of their gladness of how happy they both were, to be still alive.

It took a while, but eventually their laughter died gradually. Belle couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed and smiled, not until she really thought about it, and remembered it had been with Rumplestiltskin, in his house. He'd teased her in the library.

Belle sighed deeply and looked around, suddenly wanting to be alone.

“Do you mind if I take a look around?” She asked, feeling very weary with the weight of her heart. “There might be a large medicine cabinet, perhaps containing something useful...” she muttered.

“I'll get started on dinner,” Khutulun replied, neither approving or reproaching Belle's plan. She simply did what she did, and probably expected Belle to do something constructive and useful with herself in return. The princess went to a basket of wood and inspected which ones she'd slip in the stove.

“I'll be back soon,” Belle announced.

“What is soon?” Khutulun asked.

Belle thought of a time of church bells, pocket watches, and grand clock towers in the city of Avonlea. All so very ordinary things, which seemed to have no place at all in the time-stopped world of the long winter.

“Maybe by the time you're done with the food,” Belle replied, after her thoughtful pause.

She found the medicine cabinet, or rather, a medicine closet, beyond two locked doors at the other end of the grand house. By now, Belle had become far less squeamish about breaking things, and the locks didn't hold her back. Leaving behind a wake of broken glass and wood, she found her way to the closet. She had no idea if they needed anything in particular for their adventures, but looking didn't hurt (except the doors.)

The closet was pitch black without any windows inside, and Belle retrieved another candle into the room from the office she'd entered through. She stepped about the room carefully, reading labels and picking things she thought might be even remotely useful, to carry them outside into the office where it was just a little less dark than in the windowless closet.

Doing her final round, Belle's eyes chanced upon a little safe, which had been painted the same colour as the wood around it, a very inoffensive pale beige. It was on a low shelf, at knee height, and locked. Belle carried the safe outside into the office, and wondered what could be inside it. Certainly, there had been enough morphine in the closet to lull an entire city into fever dreams. Belle shook the safe very gently, and heard a glass vial hit the edge of the container inside.

The safe needed a key to be opened. She bit her lower lip thoughtfully, and looked around. Then she went through all the desks and containers inside the medicine cabinet office, until she found a small key in the back of a drawer, in a jar full of tiny sea shells. The key was just the right size, and so she tried it with the safe. And was rewarded.

She opened the door carefully, and felt the whole thing was extremely ominous when she saw the
unearthly light coming from inside the safe. Purplish light. It struck a chord of familiarity in her suddenly, and without fear or hesitation, she put her hand inside and pulled out a clear glass vial of fairy dust, which emanated faint purple light in the barely lit room.

“You might become useful,” Belle said, feeling a little defeated, resorting to the same nasty tricks she'd seen her great-aunt and Rumplestiltskin get up to, but leaving the dust inside the safe would make no sense either. Who knew what was out there.

As if something outside had read her mind, Belle felt rather than saw, a shadow move past the window of the office. There was a howl outside, a raw, beastly sound. In a second, the shadow moved past the window again, and this time Belle saw red-glowing eyes, and heard the beast snarl. Belle clutched the vial in her hands, holding it against her breast, as she watched the stunned fascination of a rabbit trying to stay still at the large, hairy creature beyond the window, out in the night. The red eyes were looking straight at her, into her eyes, from beyond the window glass. The thin window glass...

Belle broke into a run out of the room, as the beast outside yowled. Sensing nothing, seeing nothing else from beyond that point, hearing nothing, Belle ran in the dim corridors, past the spa treatment rooms and the beautiful, elegant salons with their hundreds of dust sheet covered furniture. Khutulun, Khutulun, swords, she thought, springing forth with the fire under her tail.

They were surrounded inside the house. The beast wasn't breaking any of the windows, perhaps it didn't realise that it could do so. But no matter which room they were in, the beast was outside, staring in.

Khutulun wanted to go outside and kill the beast there, straightforward and simple, but Belle thought the plan silly. It was colder outside than in, and the beast definitely had all the advantage outside.

“Then what, we stay awake all night, hiding, and wait for the monster to go away?” Khutulun asked, impatient anger lacing all her words. “And stop sleeping?”

“Maybe we can take turns resting,” Belle suggested meekly.

Hours passed as they sat inside in the dark, quiet and calm and meek, while they listened to the great hairy monster growl and bark outside. Eventually, the monster stopped making its noise, and all was peaceful again at last.

“Rest, Belle,” Khutulun whispered. “I'll keep watch.”

Belle was so tired, she didn't need to debate the point further. They chose a room which looked like the kind where little ladies took their morning tea in. It had the fewest windows. She made a bed on a sofa by the wall, out of dust sheets, and then she closed her eyes.

When Belle woke up again, it was still dark. Khutulun was sitting on the floor beside her, leaning close, and telling Belle to wake up.

“You're very clever,” Khutulun said, half-laughing, when Belle blinked her eyes open.

“For sleeping?” Belle asked groggily. “It's your turn now to rest, do you want to stay here on this sofa?”

Khutulun grinned. She seemed pale. “That is fine.”
Suspiciously eyeing the princess, Belle sprang up to her feet and saw that Khutulun's studded leather trouser was torn, and she was bleeding on the floor.

Oh no, not again, was Belle's first thought.

“You went outside,” Belle said quietly. “To kill the beast.” She helped Khutulun the partially immobile on the sofa, to lie down.

“You cannot get to the sea, if the beast lies there between us and it,” Khutulun replied calmly, even though she was sweating a little, and wincing with the pain from her leg injury.

Belle promised to be back soon, and headed to the medicine office, where she found all the painkillers and clean bandages she needed for the princess.

After wrapping up Khutulun's leg and drugging the princess, Belle went to see the front door, expecting to find that Khutulun had locked it with the same method Belle had, with the candlestick.

To her horror, she found the door ajar. She could make out large paw prints which led inside.

Belle turned around slowly, and glanced back, into the reception area, where all the fifty or so little old ladies looked down at her from the wall. The harsh coastal wind blew inside through the door, and made the dust sheets in the room sway a bit, in an eerie manner. The silver candlestick she'd used to shut the door properly was lying on the ground.

Trying to remain calm, she took the candlestick and closed the door, in case there were more surprise visitors headed their way.

She heard a noise upstairs then, the creaking of old floorboards. Belle's heart started thumping so loud, she couldn't hear anything except the thunder of them. Her knees felt weak, but she remained standing, listening to her heart racing, expecting the monster to descend down the grand staircase in the middle of the room.

Nothing happened.

In retrospect, Belle thought it must have been some kind of madness that led her to go upstairs instead of returning to Khutulun's side, but she grabbed the poker from the fireplace in the reception hall, and with slow, unsteady steps, took to the carpeted grand staircase.

Moon came out then, from behind the clouds, and its faint, silvery light pooled in through the windows covered with their fine lace curtains. Belle let out a scared little squeak when the light burst out and across the top of the stairs, and she had to stay still for a moment, listening to her heart pounding away.

It felt like perhaps hours, until she moved again. With carefully considered short steps, she made her way upstairs. At the top of the staircase, the corridor branched to two wings. Belle picked the one more lit by moonlight, and walked along, so slowly, so very slowly, putting her tongue between her teeth to stop them from chattering.

The doors to the rooms were closed. Guest rooms. Except one, at the end of the corridor. That was where she headed.

As she walked, Belle reasoned with herself. She had been close to dying often enough in the past near two months. She was certainly close to dying at all moments, and that had never changed. She wouldn't get to the ship, or the Far Isles, if she didn't overcome this obstacle, this close proximity to death, and really, in effect, her circumstances hadn't changed at all, with the appearance of this
monster. Just the mode of her expiration date from life would change, but not the danger, or her situation.

Her slow steps took her eventually to the end of the corridor, to the door of the room that remained open.

Inside, she saw, first of all, a bed. Her first instinct was to think that the woman occupying it was dead, and had been so for years. But dead people, she thought, were not quite as pretty as this one was.

The certainty of death was also in the room, with its red eyes and long black hairy coat, standing at the end of the bed. It turned its head and growled at Belle. Belle expected the monster to lunge at her, but instead, it moved itself between her and the still-life girl lying in the bed in her deathly sleep.

“Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to disturb,” was Belle's first reaction to the strangely intimate gesture. She lowered the iron poker, which she hadn't even raised any higher than her knee at any point.

This seemed to calm down the beast a little, for its hackles were less raised. It sat down, and stared at Belle.

“You bit my friend,” Belle stated, in fear. “Are you going to bite me too?” There was no reaction, until she repeated the phrase again, except this time in Arbonnaise language.

The beast shook its head slowly.

Belle's eyes fluttered, as she realised the monster understood her.

She recalled another creature, from years far far beyond, in her childhood. A lion, turned into a man, in her great aunt Hortensia's garden.

“Are you cursed, by any chance?” Belle asked.

The monster nodded solemnly.

“I think I could help you with that...” Belle moved very slowly, reaching down to place the fire-poker on the carpet without making a sound. She then reached for the inside breast pocket of Rumplestiltskin's jacket, the very place where she had stored the fairy dust vial found from the medicine storage.

“... this is fairy dust. I think, if I sprinkle this on you, you might turn into a human again,” Belle said, marvelling how steady her voice sounded now.

The monster lay low on the ground, but eyed her warily with its big red eyes. Belle approached cautiously, expecting to be eaten as soon as she got close to the monster, but it stayed very still, moving only its watchful eyes.

Belle spread the dust very swiftly over and across the black fur coat, and took a quick step back. The monster was engulfed in purple smoke, and emerged from it, not as a large wolf-like creature, but as a very unshaved, haunted looking man, whose first notice of attention was not for Belle, but for the girl in the bed.

“Aurora!” The man shouted, and leaned down to kiss the sleeping girl.

Familiar looking magic, that of the True Love, spread into the room. The blast of it was not only an explosion of light, but there was a warmth to it also, one that went down to the insides of Belle’s
bones, when it hit her.

Belle woke up the next time late in the afternoon of the next daylight in one of the Rose Garden Spa and Sanatorium guest rooms. She and Khutulun were treated with tea and some kind of biscuits by the happy couple, out of which half had bitten Khutulun in self defense when the oriental princess had jumped on him out of the blue during the night.

Thanks to the pain killers, Khutulun remained mostly out of order for the day.

The cursed man turned out to be none other than the regal grandchild of the long-ago dethroned king of Arbonne, and as such, a prince by blood, and the girl, Aurora, a princess, being a grand-daughter of the very same dethroned king. She was also Prince Philip’s fourth cousin removed, and apparently princess Aurora's cursing had been an anti-royalist plot to prevent Philip and Aurora's from having children that might threat the stability of the democracy in Arbonne.

Belle listened to the regal couple’s story with polite interest, although she felt a bit overwhelmed that she was now in an entourage of no less than three people of royalty. What where the chances of that?

There was only so little daylight left, and Belle was yearning to take a look at the sea, so when the tea was done, she donned all her warm-wear and headed out to the frozen beach. She'd brought a walking stick from inside the house and proceeded to walk on the ice by pounding the stick just ahead of her with great force against the ice. Belle wanted to see how far she would get.

The sea was there, ahead of her, in the distance, its dark-grey waves calling her towards the Far Isles and closer to Rumplestiltskin. When she got as far as she could go, she stood there for a while, eyeing the distant waves, and plotting her next move. She might need some kind of a call signal for a ship, but the trouble with those was that it would alert every vampire and werewolf in the country to her presence.

Eventually, she turned her back to the sea again, and was already headed towards the shore, when she thought she heard something. A strange cling-clang sound. A heavy brass bell?

Puzzled, Belle turned around again, and saw there was a ship out there. A ship, out there, in the horizon.

The amount of screaming and hand-waving she did tired her out soon. She was thinking of going to have to run back into the manor to get some bedsheets and make a flag to wave around with them, when she saw the ship was not going to head past. It was anchoring itself out there, in the far far sea.

Long, exciting minutes passed, and Belle kept waving her arms to the ship eagerly. The Far Isle rescue crew was there! They'd all get passage to a safe harbour, like she hoped Jefferson's party had.

Not minding the cold, harsh wind blowing from the sea, Belle stood on the ice, waving with her arms until she was out of strength. She saw a boat come around from the other side of the ship, a rowboat with a crew, and they were approaching her. Tears streamed down her cheeks. She wouldn't die in this endless winter, she would get to the Edge of the World, and she would find Rumplestiltskin, and she knew this with great and absolute certainty in her heart.

She'd screamed her throat hoarse and waved her arms numb by the time the rescue boat reached the shore. People with friendly smiles climbed out of the boat unto the uncertain ice, and approached her with their large, wide, relieved smiles.

“Oh, how do you do! Are you in need of rescue to Far Isles!” A handsome man asked Belle, and
Belle nodded fiercely, not trusting her voice to speak out.

“Yes,” she finally managed to croak. “I’ve friends in the house, who also need help, please, let us all go inside from this wind. There’s food and medicine there also, and my bags…” Belle looked down and saw the handsome man had, unfortunately, lost a hand. It was replaced with a hook. A little ominous, Belle thought.

“My dear darling,” a middle-aged woman said sweetly, and reached her hands towards Belle. Belle felt her spine go rigid, out of instinct. Something in her memory told her, she had met this woman earlier, at some point in time. Belle's wide grin faded a little, as the woman wrapped her into her arms and pulled her against her bosom into a hug. Then the stranger woman took a step back. “There was a mister Jefferson we met in Far Isles, and he said that there might be two ladies in need of rescue about here soon. Are you them? Belle, traveling with princess Khutulun?”

Belle nodded a little certainly. “Yes, that is us, but we've also other friends in the house, I hope you've room for them.” Belle took a step back from the woman, feeling like she was crowding her, but she couldn't get away, because the handsome man was blocking her path just behind her.

“And you are Rumplestiltskin's housekeeper?” He asked.

“I'm... not,” Belle replied.

“She's lying,” the woman said, and laughed. “Don't worry, I can make her talk.”

There was magic in the air, and Belle's consciousness began to shift from awake to very much not awake.

“What about the others, Cora?” Belle heard the man ask.

“Who cares,” the woman, Cora, replied, “this is the one we need, to find out Rumplestiltskin's secrets. Let's take her back to the ship and leave these waters.”

“After you, countess,” the man said, and then there was nothing else.
The Fairy Queen

Belle woke to sensations of physical agony, and of the floor underneath her trying to slip away while she determinedly intended to keep herself on top of the squeaky wooden boards. Her hands were tied up above her head, her wrists together. She woke up, feeling the worst pain she could remember having, stabbing and piercing through her shoulders, shoulderblades, upper back and neck. While she'd been unconscious, her body had hung limp, which had strained her shoulders. Her wrists were tied so tightly, her hands felt numb from the lack of circulation in them.

First of all, Belle took care to try and stand straight up, even though the floor kept on bouncing up and down for some reason. When the pain around her shoulders eased, even if it was only slightly, she took the opportunity to look around her and really take in her surroundings. She was in a metal cage in a place she had to assume was the cargo hold of a ship. There was only the faintest of light coming into the hold. It was either very overcast outside, or night was almost upon them. Belle could see barrels and crates beyond her metal crate, all tied in place with ropes. Everything else stood still when a wave hit, except Belle, whose legs wanted to run off with the rhythm of the waves, back and forth.

After two miserable attempts to shake herself free from her bonds, Belle thought another course of action might be to her advantage.

“Hello! Can anyone hear me?!” She called. Belle doubted that anyone who'd decided to hang her up like this would suddenly feel inclined to let her loose, but there was no harm asking. She also needed to know what was the reason for this abduction. Maybe her life depended upon it.

There were footsteps which sounded like heavy boots in the decks above her. A hatch opened above, nearby. A narrow ladder was shoved down the hatch, and a stranger reached down to release the rope binding her wrists to the ceiling above.

She was instructed to climb up slowly, and so Belle did. Once she got up on the equally dim-lit deck above her, she was pushed about narrow corridors, until they reached the stately quarters which couldn't have belonged to anyone except the captain of the ship.

The hook-handed man was there, and he greeted Belle with a leer when she arrived.

“Thank you lads,” the hook-handed man announced to the sailors who'd shown her in, “we won't be needing your help with her just now, so get busy seeing us through this storm.” As if to remind them all of the weather, the ship's floor started slipping away again as a particularly big wave caught them. No one else seemed troubled by it, except Belle, who had to take a step to keep herself standing.

“Right you are boss,” one of them, a nervous, short man with a red cap on his head said. They all shuffled out of the room in a straight line.

“We?” Belle asked, when the cabin door closed.

A velvet drape partitioning the captain's quarters moved as the middle aged woman Belle remembered from the beach stepped out into the small, but warm light of the oil lamps illuminating the cabin so late at nightfall. The oil lamps dipped back and forth with the waves.

Belle looked elsewhere around at her, hoping to find some kind of a weapon she could pick up without notice and conceal somehow, but the room was sparse and utilitarian with its furnishing. There were no handy daggers, dinner steak knives, or even letter openers strewn about the walls.
The middle aged woman had thin lips, a thin and severe face from which intelligent, striking eyes stared at Belle. The woman had a fur stole, which must have been wonderfully warm. Even wearing Rumplestiltskin's best wool and silk clothes, Belle was chilly all over for the lack of exercise she'd suffered while being stuffed in the cargo hold. The ship nor the captain's cabin weren't much warmer than the outside.

“I'd prefer to sit down,” the woman said, turning her piercing eyes to regard the hook-handed man. She was so pale, and underneath the layers of warm fur and velvet she wore, it seemed to Belle she was equally discomforted by the ship being rocked by the rough weather. The woman wore a lot of powder over her face, which hid some of the hints of green on her, but not all.

“Of course, madam,” the hook-handed man said charingly, winking at her. “Take the seat by my desk.” He had no trouble keeping on his feet. Belle assumed he must have been the captain.

“Who are you and for what reason have you tied me up and taken me aboard this ship?” Belle asked, defiant, but resolved not to raise her voice and shout at the strangers.

“Madam, I am captain Killian Jones! But you may have heard of me by another name. I also go by as,” he raised his hook, the charming smile on his lips twisting slightly into a threatening, grin, “Hook.”

Belle stared at the captain blankly, and turned her gaze to look at the fur-clad woman who had made herself comfortable on the captain's chair, which was nailed to the floor, like all the other furniture in the room must have been. Belle adjusted her feet as a wave passed.

The woman reached somewhere underneath her warm cloaks and withdrew a vial which gave a greenish glow, a tell-tale sign that whatever it contained was magical. “Have her drink this,” she said plainly, and extended her arm regally towards Hook, who accepted the tiny glass bottle with his hand that still had all the fingers attached – and then Hook approached Belle, who was backing up towards the nearest wall, hoping she might with some blind luck stumbled out of the room through a door or maybe a window, a porthole... anything.

The captain pinned Belle between himself and the wall. “Hold still love,” he purred, his manner of addressing Belle so intimate that its forwardness disgusted her.

“Don't let her spit it out. Making another one would be extremely tedious. I would be so very annoyed, and then I'd just have to take out my vexation on her.” The woman glanced at Belle, expressing no emotion at all. “Won't I, little girl?”

The disgusting liquid was forced into her mouth, and the captain held his palm over Belle's face with brute force, so she couldn't breathe through her nose or mouth, not until the captain and the strange woman were both satisfied she'd drunk the potion.

Belle felt queasy and sluggish. When Hook stepped back and left Belle with nothing else to lean to except the wall, she melted down on the floor that kept on being rocked by the waves going up and down. She thought she might retch soon, but something began to take a hold of her, and soon Belle felt very, so very, calm.

There was no worry or fear. The reality of being seated on the floor of a ship's cabin seemed to her as if it were a deceptive illusion. Belle saw herself sitting on the green grass of high summer in her great aunt Hortensia's outdoor garden, with a picnic basket and a book near at hand. The pale woman in furs vanished, and in her stead Belle saw aunt Hortensia herself, sitting in her wheelchair out on the patio, by the ironwork garden table, where all the afternoon tea things were laid.
Aunt Sylvia's awful friend's son was there too, mister Gaston Leroux. Belle regarded him with apprehension.

“Last I saw you, you were a cat. I'm glad you've gotten better,” Belle told him, and turned her face to look at aunt Hortensia eagerly. “I'm so glad you could help mister Gaston not eat his mother. Did you pour fairy dust on him?”

Aunt Hortensia smiled at her warmly, and Belle felt safe, and content that her aunt was feeling better again. It took a moment before she replied, weighing her words longer than she ought to have. “Of course I did, my darling,” said Aunt Hortensia.

Belle looked around at the garden. There were late-blooming lilacs, tiger lilies, hydrangeas, sweet peas and roses all around her, in a not-at-all subtle palette of exploding colours. It was so lovely to see so many colours, and not just that, but to feel the afternoon sun on a summer's day, so warm and comforting on her skin, which had tolerated... snow... and ice...? For so long? Belle shook her head in confusion, and batted her eyes.

“You must tell me, Belle, how was Rumplestiltskin, when you were visiting him?” Aunt Hortensia asked.

Belle blushed, embarrassed. “You know. I already told you all about it.”

“I would like to hear it again, if you don't mind.”

Gaston looked impatient. “Did you find out where he keeps his dagger?”

Belle shook her head sluggishly. “I don't understand what you mean. What dagger? Aunt Hortensia, what does sir Gaston need a dagger for? Sir, did my aunt Sylvia send you here to visit me?”

They both stared at Belle for a moment.

“Gaston,” Aunt Hortensia said, slow and calculating, “Would you please excuse my... niece... and myself. We need to speak privately.”

“But of course,” Gaston replied promptly.

Belle watched the tall, dark young man make his way down the paved garden path and inside the house. Once he was out of sight, Aunt Hortensia fixed her attention once again on Belle.

“We need the Dark One's dagger, Belle,” Aunt Hortensia said, “can you remember having seen it, while you stayed with him?”

Belle's head lolled a bit. She was so tired, she had difficult keeping her posture straight. “There were kitchen knives in the kitchen. I think she had a small blade, made with black steel, which he crushed herbs with, in his tower,” Belle reminisced.

“No, that wouldn't be it,” Aunt Hortensia said sceptically. “He must have taken it with himself, in any case... Was there anything he specifically told you to avoid? Perhaps a box, or a crate?”

Belle shook her head, her mouth felt like she'd just eaten a half a pot of honey, and the stickiness of it made it difficult to open her mouth. Yes, honey, in the tea. Obviously. Golden honey, like the colour of the Tokaj wine. Belle shook her head again.

“In any case, I need you to tell me everything about your time with him. In as much detail as possible, my pet,” Aunt Hortensia said, pleadingly.
“But why? I already... told you... about the things, that happened,” Belle reminded her. “I’d rather not talk about that again, if you don’t mind.”

“Was he very cruel, during your stay?”

“I already told you, he turned out to be... sweet. And kind. Well, up until the end. He grabbed me and hurt me, and yelled at me.” Belle sighed and looked at the flowers. “I suppose that was my fault really, I tried to take away his magic. I hadn't realised I was doing that, though. I just wanted him to be human.”

Belle glanced briefly at Aunt Hortensia, who was leaning forward with such an intense expression of anticipation, she barely seemed herself.

“And how would you have managed that?” Aunt Hortensia asked, her voice low.

Belle shrugged. “Why do you want to hear it again. I would rather not talk about it. And it would have worked too, if he'd have let it...”

“What would have?” Aunt Hortensia's voice dropped down so low and quiet, Belle barely heard her.

“True Love's Kiss,” Belle said nonchalantly.

There was a silence. A gentle breeze played with the flowers in the garden, making the petals move, scattering the lilac petals about in the wind.

“You love him,” Aunt Hortensia stated, plainly and obviously. Belle saw no need to affirm that, since half her waking hours that fact brought her nothing but misery. “And more importantly... he loves you,” Aunt Hortensia said thoughtfully, coolly.

Belle bit her lower lip, mulling over those words. “But not enough,” she said.

Aunt Hortensia rose from her wheelchair, upsetting and astonishing Belle to the point of wordless shock. She walked across the grass and leaned down to touch Belle's face with her gloved hand, to lift her chin up slightly and to look at her in the eyes. But they were definitely not her Aunt Hortensia's eyes, that Belle saw.

“Eventually, we shall need to look into this... how much he really does care about you, little pet,” the woman with the white fur said. “We've no use of you just now, but just you wait, until this ship finds a way to the Land Without Magic.” She smiled, all impeccably white teeth exposed. “Then you will see your Rumplestiltskin again. For however short a time that may be...”

The lady dropped Belle's jaw, and she found herself back in the present, sitting on the floorboards of a rocking ship, alone with the strange woman in the ship's cabin.

“Who are you!” Belle demanded her, outraged by the violation of her thoughts and secrets.

The woman kept smiling. “Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you,” she said with slow, carefully measured tones, “just your master. Or is it lover?”

“But, why are you doing this!”

“Because, my silly girl, that's the only way I can possess all his powers and become the Dark One,” she explained, as if to a little girl. “But you don't need to worry about any of that. All you need to do is sleep, and wait, until I need you.”
“No, wait.” Belle said, but it was no use. She was gone before she could finish her sentence.

Belle was kept asleep for so long, she eventually had no idea of how long she had spent time aboard the ship – the Jolly Roger – by the time they made port at the Outer Isles. Belle recalled having heard the place had avoided the fate of being overrun by the eternal winter, but when she managed to get a glimpse of the miserable, damp, weather-beaten village put together, consisting more of ships rather than actual houses on land, Belle saw that these islands were no paradise or safe harbour from the circumstances of the world’s situation at large.

Through her stupor and captivity, Belle managed to keep vigil and wait for someone kind and helpful-looking to walk close enough past the tiny window that was her eye to the world. At the first opportunity of such a stranger going past, Belle broke the window with her fists, and cried for help. Not five minutes later, she discovered she’d asked help from one of Hook’s crew-members. She received a severe slapping across the face, twice, before being relocated to an even smaller cage on a lower deck, with no window. Later in the day, the lady in white fur stopped by to remove the shards of glass from her palms, and to heal her with magic.

“I wouldn't want anything too disturbing to happen to you... not just yet, in any case,” she commented, and put Belle back to sleep.

A long period of time followed, where Belle thought she was awake only for the mechanic task of eating, relieving herself in the crude little bucket they had given her for the task, and then sleeping. She suspected they put a sleeping potion in her food, and once tried not eating the gruel they gave her, but the woman in white furs came down to visit her. She cast a spell on Belle, one which made her feel as if her skull was being shattered from a pressure building on the inside. Gradually, the pain as well as the perception of pressure, grew, until such a point as Belle promised, sobbing, she would eat the food brought down to her from then on.

The food was brought in her cage while she slept, and the buckets were emptied at longer intervals. Days, probably weeks, passed, and Belle was in such a state of disoriented nausea that eventually she could barely keep on her feet any longer, during the brief periods when she awake.

At some point, she heard, through enforced sleep, the white lady visit her, and comment that the captive needed a walk on the decks, and a bath. When Belle awoke, she was given the option of obliging the lady’s wishes the easy way – or she’d have her bath on the deck, with all the crew watching her. Belle followed along with feigned calm and did precisely as she was told, while not saying a word. She didn't try to steal any daggers or cutlasses, or break a bottle to get a jagged-edged piece of glass with her down into her cage in the darkness. The hawk-eyed woman kept watch over her impassively while Belle took a short tour of the deck, and then returned soon within the confines of the ship for a lukewarm bath.

Aware of how the woman was watching her naked body, Belle turned her back and bathed quickly, efficiently. Her clothes – and Rumplestiltskin's clothes – felt fresh as if laundered the day before, when she put them back on. Even though deep down, Belle was seething with indignation and fury, she almost thanked her captress for providing her with this comfort.

Then Belle was returned to her cage, and the same routines continued for a few days.

On the third day, or rather, the night, Belle woke up to the sensation of cold, salty air chilling the part of her skin which was exposed. It had already been fairly cool in the cage she’d spent her days in, but it was downright freezing with the wind blowing straight into her now. She struggled from her stupor dreams to wakefulness, and saw, to her amazement, that one side of her metal cage was gone. So
was a part of the ship's hull. It didn't look like anyone had cut it with a saw, but rather, as if parts of it had simply vanished.

Belle was about to yelp in surprise, but recalled the rest of the particulars of her current affairs just in time to hold her tongue and her lungs.

The waves hitting the side of the ship was by then a familiar sound to her, but it sounded different coming from the outside. More wet. Belle peered over the edge of the deck, and saw the water was not far at all, in fact she thought that a good wave coming from the ocean might have blown right into her cell and taken her with it. There were no big waves coming from the ocean, not into the calm port surrounded by wave-breakers. By the light of the moon, she saw the breakers in the distance, a continuous line between and behind the ships that had anchored there for who knew how long.

“Sshh...” someone shushed at her. Belle turned her head sharply, to look alongside the length of the ship's hull. Down there, to her right, in the darkness, was a row boat, angling to get closer to the hole where Belle sat kneeling, perched at the edge. There was a young woman there, but that was all Belle could make out of her.

When the row boat was just underneath, the woman beckoned Belle to jump down. Belle wondered whether this was such a good idea, but the alternative of drugged stupors in a cage for an undetermined length of time was not becoming to her. She chose to jump.

There was a definite sound, as she hit the bottom of the boat, which she was certain would raise some kind of alarm on the deck of the Jolly Roger. Some night-time guard must have heard it. Belle wrapped herself into a ball, waiting for a bell to clang, a whistle to whistle, or a sea man's voice to call out her escape. Instead, a rough, itchy wool blanket was drawn over her, and the girl on the boat took them away, with long, slow pulls of the oars. She barely made any sound with the oars, in fact. Belle heard the occasional pitter-patter of water droplets falling from the ends of the oars into the ocean, and the wind blowing across the ship-village, making metal buckles and parts, attached to ropes and sails, softly clanging against wood.

The boat ride seemed to take forever, but when it was over, the young woman pulled the itchy blanket away, uncovering Belle entirely. “Follow me,” the stranger said said, with a pleasant voice. Belle could swear she had never heard that voice, yet it was also oddly familiar. “I've acquired a small shack up here... it's no manor, but what can you do, when real-estate is as scarce as it is!” Her voice was all lightness and pleasantness. Belle followed uncertainly, not quite being able to trust another stranger again so willingly, as she had, on the beach of Arbonne where they had captured her.

They were climbing up soggy makeshift stairs on a cliffside in the middle of the night, when Belle decided she'd had enough with the mystery. “I'm sorry, but I'm not going anywhere with you until you tell me who you are, and what you want with me.”

The young woman stopped dead in her tracks and turned about. “We should go inside, we need better lighting, if you want to recognise me.”

“I've never met you in my life!” Belle retorted, although the voice did sound familiar, so very, very familiar.

“Belle, please come with me, it's not safe out here,” she said, pleading. “If they find out you've escaped, the witch will be turning every house and ship upside down in order to find you. And she has this town in the palm of her hand. We're lucky to not have been noticed yet.”

“No,” Belle said insistently, and dug her heels in. She had to do that anyway, to stay still on the
The woman pulled her hair away from underneath the hood where she'd hidden it. It was long and pale. In the moonlight, it didn't look blonde, but that was probably what it was. She threw her hood back, and arranged her hair a little bit. It coiled about just as she wished it to, with no mirror or pins or heating irons to assist her. The stranger was dressed in practical and sensible working clothes, but this changed with a swirl of her fingers, and next she was wearing a beautiful dress, which Belle could recognise.

“Aunt Hortensia!” Belle exclaimed, while still trying to keep her voice down as much as possible.

“Excellent. Follow me.”

The illusion of the dress vanished, and the very young great aunt's worksmans clothes returned.

The village was a maze of bridges, planks, and stairs, built on rocky, barren islands. Aunt Hortensia moved through it with purpose. It seemed to Belle they were detouring around the perimetre of the village, and favouring shadows, avoiding being seen.

They spoke nothing, not until they vanished into a shadowy alley, where they descended underneath a house built of wooden planks that looked like flotsam and leftovers from another building project. There they climbed a ladder into a room which was not very high, there was just enough room to sit up. The room was in fact, full of barrels and kegs and chests but there, hidden amongst the storage, was a little haven of lamp-light and bedding, and food.

“It's not much, but it's safe and secret,” Hortensia said in hushed tones. “I'm afraid I've no guest room at this time, but we can share, if you want to sleep.”

“I've slept... weeks, I think,” Belle replied, still wary of the woman who was supposedly her aunt.

“Then, we can do this instead!” Hortensia announced, and pulled Belle into a familial embrace. “Oh, you're alive! Belle, you're alive! We all thought you had died, been murdered...”

When Belle didn't respond to this Aunt Hortensia's affections, the young aunt withdrew herself a little solemnly. “Do you doubt it's me?” She asked quietly.

“The... witch, she made herself think I was talking to you... but it was her... or are you her?” Belle shook her head, confused.

Young Aunt Hortensia looked a little perplexed herself. “How did she know who I am? Or how I look?”

Belle shrugged, taking a step back, to keep her distance.

“Well, with magic, there's always some way...” Aunt Hortensia muttered.

“What do you want?” Belle asked.

The woman shook her head and grinned. “What do I want? I want you! To be safe and sound. Oh, but if only I could be there when Sylvia and your father see you.” Her smile grew weak. “Your poor father. I thought he might die of heartbreak, when they found your body from the sea. Except, of course, it wasn't. How dreadful. Are you hungry? I have some smoked fish here. Or thirsty? The water tastes terrible, but if you add some tea, you can almost drink it.”

Belle sat down and shook her head slowly. “I'm fine.” She thought for a moment. “Do you think, I'll
get to see father? Where is he?"

The young supposed Aunt Hortensia poured water from a tight canister into a small kettle, and lit an oil lamp underneath it. "He's in the Land Without Magic, I suppose, like everyone else, who chose to go along with Queen Regina. What a lot of rot."

Belle stared at the water pot glumly, recalling having seen Regina visiting Rumplestiltskin.

"And time stopped here, for some reason. It might be your father's already dead, my dove. Or a very, very old man."

"Thirty years," Belle muttered, not remembering where she'd heard that.

"So they say," said the strange young Hortensia.

"Why aren't you... dead," Belle asked, still staring at the kettle, not sure she wished to hear her answer.

"I've been living on borrowed time," Hortensia replied lightly.

"Stolen time," Belle corrected. "From your fairies?"

Hortensia smiled pleasantly. Belle recognised the expression, even though it wasn't on the face of the 80-year-old woman she knew, or thought she'd known, so well. Her great aunt was displeased, it meant, and was handling it by taking some imaginary moral high ground.

"Would you rather be aboard that ship still? Or in the bird cage?" Hortensia returned Belle's question with a question.

"How many fairies did you kill?" Belle asked.

"As many as I needed to," her aunt replied simply, and remorselessly. "Shall we go into a discussion of how many eggs you have eaten across your lifetime next?"

Belle frowned. "Fairies are not chickens."

"And yet they live lives as brief, pointless and fulfilling as that of your average egg-laying hen," Hortensia declared. With that turn of phrase, Belle was certain she was conversing with her great aunt. She heaved a sigh of relief and frustration.

Belle suddenly thought of the centuries of Rumplestiltskin's existence, and wondered, did he see everyone like that? Was she, Belle, as inconsequential and brief, passing thing as a chicken or a fairy, in the greater scheme of things?

"How long will you stay like this, aunt?" Belle asked.

"I don't know," Hortensia replied. "Not much to go, I expect. Not much to go, I expect. I'll soon turn back into an old woman dying of cancer, and I'll be unable to get out of here. But I expect the very moment the spell ends, I'll die anyway, so you should just open that hatch in the corner and roll my body down into the sea," she announced, so casually.

Belle said nothing. She felt a number of things. She felt terrible for the no doubt scores of fairies her great aunt must have slaughtered in order to make this happen. Belle felt like she wanted to retch, because the last traces of the sleeping draught she'd been given earlier in the day was still somewhere inside her, making her feel uncomfortable and unsteady. She wanted to hug her great aunt, who had
come to rescue her, twice now, but the strange young woman before her was not her aunt. Belle felt. She was a vain, coquettish thing who had once been her aunt. Or she was someone her aunt had once been. Belle wasn't certain. She wanted to slap herself to make her thinking clearer. She wasn't tired, but she felt in need of rest anyway. Or of clear air, and food that wasn't poisoned.

“Maybe I'll try the fish,” Belle muttered.

“Good good,” her aunt replied jovially, and made herself busy serving Belle the promised herring. She made polite small talk in the manner of a lady receiving guests at her grand manner, and for a short while, Belle leaned against a crate, and with half-lidded eyes imagined she were back home at Blackwood Manor, that it was summer, and that everything was normal, that her father had never invited Rumplestiltskin to the house, that they had never made a deal. The Groke had never entered their world and brought on the winter. Regina hadn't transported every willing person along with her to the Land Without Magic where she could lord over them.

There was cold fish, warm tea which tasted strange, and dubious cheese for their midnight snack. Aunt Hortensia spoke about Blackwood Manor, and of the repairs the greenhouse would need after “all of this” was sorted out. She spoke of the last time she'd seen Aunt Sylvia, before she'd fled Marchlands with Maurice, and of the last phone call Hortensia had had with Belle's father, about the funeral for Belle.

“Think of how happy he'll be to see you,” Hortensia said, eyes gleaming with tears she was withholding.

“We still need to find a way to get there,” Belle reminded her.

“I've not been entirely useless these past months,” Hortensia announced imperiously, “besides looking for you, I have been digging to the bottom of things. I've spoken with some unsavoury characters about the rift between the worlds and what has caused it. It's quite marvellous what one can get about to doing, when one has absolutely nothing left to lose, absolutely brilliant in fact.”

Belle's heartbeat quickened, recalling the photographs from the End of the World she'd seen in the papers so very long time ago.

“And?” Belle asked carefully, when Hortensia didn't continue.

“I found out who created the Rift!” Hortensia replied, pleased like a cat who'd spilled cream on the table. “I imagine we should be able to summon her. Or rather, specifically, you.”

“Me?” Belle asked, with not entirely unprejudiced incredulity.

“She can be summoned by those with pure heart and intent,” Hortensia said.

Belle nodded slowly. She didn't want to ask aunt Hortensia if she had tried to summon this creature, whatever it was. If aunt Hortensia was incapable of this summoning, Belle didn't want to know why.

“Can we summon her now?” Belle asked.

“We can try. We'll need to go outside though, we'll need to see the sky. You'll need a cloak or a hat or a hood, to disguise yourself better. Let me go through my things...”

They climbed down to the empty base of the house, underneath the storage they'd occupied, and made their way to the alley of their entrance. Aunt Hortensia and Belle made their way to where ever it was Aunt Hortensia decided was best for this endeavour.
“We must be careful not to be seen,” Aunt Hortensia reminded Belle. “You especially.”

To this end, they found a dark little bay on the islets. Walking around on the slippery gangways in the dead of night was no easy task, but they managed, being careful.

Aunt Hortensia seemed a bit out of breath when they arrived at her chosen location, but she waved off Belle's concern with a turn of her hand.

Hortensia pointed north at the blue star above the polar region. “Look up there. Speak out 'Reul Ghorm', Belle.”

Belle glanced at her aunt with some disbelief. “Is that it?”

Hortensia shrugged. “We shall see.”

“Reul Ghorm,” Belle said, trying to imagine she sounded convincing and mysterious. When nothing happened, she stopped staring at the sky and looked at her aunt instead. “Do you think I pronounced it right? How is it written, perhaps if you wrote it down, I could try other pronouncements.”

“There's no need for that,” an indignant, slightly otherworldly voice said. “My stay won't be long.”

Before them was a very large fairy, but a fairy nonetheless. She was about the size of a human, yet she sported wings, which kept moving very fast, keeping the fairy airborne. She had a glow about herself, a blue light which came from within.

“The Dark One's beloved, and a murderer of fairies,” the creature said with unbridled disgust. “What do you want?”

Aunt Hortensia chose, or happened to, at that moment, suddenly grab herself around her mid, and then collapse on the ground in a state of shock, clearly displayed on her face.

“Aunt Hortensia! What did you do to her?” Belle practically screamed at the fairy.

“I am not doing anything, she is dying of her malady.”

“What, right now?” Belle demanded the blue fairy, who seemed rather disinterested. She probably had good cause too, but Belle thought it was still cruel, all the same.

“If you want something of me, you should ask soon, before I go. I won't be returning to you anytime soon,” the fairy said dryly.

“Did you create the great Rift between the worlds?” Belle asked, her mind racing.

“I did,” the fairy replied sharply.

“Why?”

The fairy didn't seem pleased with this question.

“I meant to trap the Dark One on the other side of it, so he couldn't leave the Land Without Magic.”

Belle shuddered, imagining how angry such a plan would make Rumplestiltskin.

“But he needed to get across anyhow, and you prevented him from doing that, for three hundred years, even though you wanted him across in the first place,” Belle continued. “Otherwise you simply would have rejoined the worlds?”
The fairy looked extremely displeased by Belle's further questions. “Things were brought to my attention, since after I created the rift. There seemed to be a… a chance that he might bring magic with him, to the Land Without Magic. And this can not be allowed.”

Belle frowned. “Why not?”

The fairy looked furious. “Who do you think you are, mortal, questioning my actions! I've done the best I could!” She took a step towards Belle. Belle took a step back.

“Please, calm down, I only need to know, how do I get to the Land Without Magic, I have to find Rumplestiltskin.”

The fairy was thoughtful for a long while, and flew about in a circle, mulling over her thoughts, before she readdressed Belle.

“Do you know why the Land Without Magic is a Land Without Magic?” the fairy asked, her tone as condescending as that of an older woman talking to a little girl not of her acquaintance.

“I really haven't the faintest idea.”

“Because if there were magic in that land, they would be able to reawaken the monster that was buried there,” the fairy said, spitting her words, “and you must trust me, the horror underneath that island is far, far worse than the Groke unleashed here.”

Belle shuddered. “Surely not, is Rumplestiltskin gone there to awaken some terrible creature upon the world?”

“No, the Dark One is there looking for... someone. But if he manages to bring magic into that land, he as good as destroys the world! Because someone else will take that opportunity!”

Belle shook her head, disbelieving. “None of this makes any sense! Who are you, and who gave you the power to tear apart worlds?”

“I am the North Star, the guardian of truth, courage, and innocence!”

Belle pursed her lips and shook her head a bit, recalling what aunt Hortensia had said about fairies and chickens.

Speaking of aunt Hortensia, she had fallen on the ground, but was now getting up slowly, having regained perhaps her strength. Belle felt relieved to see her rise up again.

“Oh my goodness,” Belle sighed, and extended her arms at her aunt, but Hortensia pushed her aside coldly. In fact, she felt cold all over, for the duration of the brief exchange of touch they shared.

“Blue,” Hortensia said, but she didn't sound like Hortensia at all.

“What... what are you?” The guardian of truth, courage and innocence demanded of Hortensia. Belle approached her aunt again, warily.

“Blue. You think you are so mighty and righteous and good,” Hortensia's lips spoke with venomous intent, but Belle doubted it was her aunt that was speaking. “always queening over us,” she continued, “thinking you know best,” Hortensia took a lithe step forwards, at the blue fairy queen who was keeping her distance, “when in reality you know nothing.”

“You are not Hortensia Blackwood,” the Blue fairy said, not comprehending what was happening.
Belle felt her heart jump up into her throat. If this wasn’t Hortensia, then who was it?

Hortensia’s pupils enlarged, growing so big that they eclipsed first the iris, then the whites of the eyes.

“I am your thousand faithful servants, Blue,” Hortensia said mockingly. She pulled a wand out of thin air, and blasted a lightning at the fairy queen, who evaded, just barely.

“Oh my goodness! Hortensia, the white witch will find us instantly if you don’t stop waving that wand about!” Belle screamed.

“That is not your aunt!” The fairy queen shouted, as she pulled out her wand. “She’s dead!”

Hortensia, or the thousand fairies that had possessed her earthly remains, lunged themselves at the blue fairy queen physically, and dragged her down to the ground, gleefully grasping at one of her wings and tearing at it.

“We are going to tear off your wings and inhale every speck of dust we’ll squeeze out of you,” the army of fairy ghosts chattered, through Hortensia’s lips.

Belle stood by, wondering why the fairy queen wasn’t fighting back. She had a wand and everything, and could, for example, create grand rifts between continents, at will! But now the stupid creature merely lay in shock on the ground, horror written over her face, as the ghoulish Hortensia and her fairies promised murder upon her. So ridiculously helpless was Reul Ghorm, in the face of her servants’ judgement. And this blue fairy was likely the only person able to help Belle receive passage across the sea and the worlds.

Belle took a rock from the shore, and smashed it in the back of her Aunt Hortensia’s skull. There was the most terrible crack, a sound she thought she would never forget. Thankfully, the long, flowing blonde curls of hair hid the most of the mess. Belle struck the skull again, when Hortensia sought to turn around, and claw at her. And a third time, to make sure she stayed put.

Belle shivered as she let the rock drop from her hands.

The Blue Fairy climbed back on her feet from under her aunt’s body.

“I suppose I won’t be able to summon you again, ever,” Belle muttered.

“Thank you for your help though,” the Blue Fairy replied, and hopped back on her feet as if nothing had happened to her at all. “But I hope you understand, I can’t let anything get past the Rift and into the Land Without Magic.”

“Can’t you at least persuade the Groke to return to her cave?” Belle pleaded. “People on these wretched islands could go back to their homes?”

The Blue Fairy took a deep breath and cleaned her blue skirts. “I don’t have that kind of power over her either. Now, where is my wand...” The fairy looked around, but it seemed, in the dark of the night, the wand had disappeared.

It happened incredibly fast, but Aunt Hortensia moved so swiftly, neither Belle or the fairy had time to react, before the Blue Fairy’s wing was ripped off, with a great howl of victory from Hortensia, and a cry of agony from The Great Protector.

“Aunt Hortensia, please!” Belle pleaded.
“I am not your aunt!” the possessed ghoul hissed back, cradling the shivering fairy queen possessively.

“She needs to mend the rift between the worlds!”

“Yes, we need to make sure the world ends, so that you can be reunited with your one true love,” the ghoul replied sardonically.

Belle moved around slowly, her hands raised up, trying to think of a way to buy time. She stepped on something, which she at first believed was a twig. She didn't look down, but the hopeful belief of having found the Blue Fairy's wand took over.

“Yes, it is rather shocking, but I am selfish like that,” Belle said, agreeing with the fairies, hoping she might somehow manage to pick up the wand and give it to the blue fairy before the army of Hortensia's flower fairies tore off the rest of the wings and turned her into dust.

“But love is hope, isn't it? Is that the kind of thing fairies believe in?” Belle went on.

“Fairies don't love, thanks to Blue,” Hortensia said viciously, tightening her grip on the blue wings that remained attached to the fairy queen.

The moment was interrupted by shouting coming from the slapdash village of shacks and moored ships, with running steps on the gangways, and voices approaching. Hortensia looked up at who was coming, while Belle crouched down, grabbed the thing she thought must have been the fairy wand, and quickly passed it over to the Blue Fairy.

Belle and the Blue Fairy vanished in a cloud of silver-blue dust as soon as the fairy queen received her wand, and they reappeared right at the edge of the Rift, at the edge of the world. Where the ocean water poured down into the deep pit between the Land with Magic and the Land Without Magic, and thick vapours ascended from the depths of the Rift.

Belle looked across the Rift and she could faintly see it, the Land Without Magic.

“That's the Land Without Magic,” Belle said, gasping for breath.

“You could kiss the Dark One, and end the curse, correct?” The Blue Fairy asked Belle.

Belle nodded curtly. “But only if he lets me.”

“And maybe he'll have no reason then, to bring magic into that world, if he finds what he wants,” the fairy queen said pensively. “In any case, he is already out there, and I've failed,” she added. “Maybe this was always meant to be.”

It seemed to Belle that the fairy was speaking more to herself rather than trying to make any sense of it all to Belle, who was still trying to mentally catch up on the fact that her great aunt had turned into a murderous fairy ghoul, and then Belle had proceeded to break her skull with a rock.

The fairy queen spoke words Belle couldn't recognise, and then she witnessed the Great Rift disappear with her very own eyes. In fact, the whole ordeal would have looked almost dull, if it hadn't taken place at the magical hour of dawn. The orange glow of sunrise kept growing stronger in the East, as Belle and the fairy waited for the lands to collide. The opposite edge simply came closer and closer, until there was no great divide anymore. There was no earthquake, or storm, or lightning.

Belle and the Blue Fairy stood on a small rocky islet, watching the long-separated waters of the Land Without Magic and the Land With Magic mingle with each other, but not mixing. They were
different colours, even.

“So, how am I going to get to where Regina, my aunt Sylvia, my father, and Rumplestiltskin are?” Belle asked.

Just then, a small part of the waters of the Land With Magic pushed deep into the foreign water of the Land Without. The stream grew wider, and the water rushed towards the strange western horizon, and the unknown, like a road.

“Did you do that?” Belle asked.

The fairy's facial expression alone would have told Belle she hadn't, but the Blue Fairy shaking her head slowly definitely asserted it was not so.

“There is magic out there,” the fairy said. “That's where it's headed. If you go, try stay on course, on the stream. That's probably for the best.” With her wand, the fairy conjured a sailboat which was no fregate, but not a tiny rowboat either. It sat on its own by the rocks where Belle and the Blue Fairy were standing. No ropes held it in place.

“I can't manage the sails,” Belle stated, perceiving the first obvious problem in this plan.

“Keep the sails unfurled. The stream has its own mind, it'll take you where you need to go,” the fairy queen promised, and then she was gone.

Belle, quite distraught by the way events of the night, stood at the rocks, and stared into the west, quite unable to believe everything that had happened in such few hours.

There were seagulls flying over the sky, crying. One of them woke Belle up from her reverie. There was no other way about it, she would have to get on that boat and hope that the wide stream would take her where she needed to go. And she hoped that no one would follow her.

With a shudder, Belle thought of the woman with the white furs.

She climbed on board the ship. As soon as she settled down, it was let loose of its magical restraints, and headed off to the Land Without Magic.
The Land Without Magic

Belle had never hurt so much as a fly in her entire life. Up until now.

She sat in the sailboat the Blue Fairy had practically tossed Belle into, to send her off to kiss Rumplestiltskin and to take away his magic. The ocean of the Land Without Magic surrounded her and the lane of water, the stream that rushed towards her destination. The sun kept rising from the east, and she was headed west and so she sat facing her own shadow, contemplating on how swiftly the night had passed, and how much of her nocturnal conversations she'd shared with the remnants of her dying aunt, and how much she'd been influenced by the vicious fairies towards the end.

No wonder Rumplestiltskin had such a dislike for them, Belle thought.

She found some dried blood from underneath her unkempt nails, which had grown too long, or had cracked and broken awkwardly elsewhere. Belle recalled how the stone she'd struck Hortensia in the back of the head had felt slick and slimy after the first two hits, but she hadn't seen anything in the near pitch black darkness, broken only by the elusive and faint light of the moon, and the barely illuminating blue light emanated by the Blue Fairy.

Belle washed her hands with sea water, and then sat on the deck a little while longer, enjoying the heat of the sun. There was wind in the air, but it wasn't the cold winter breeze which she'd endured for so long, but warm and summery air blowing from the south. Soon she began to feel hot, and she had to peel away the outer exteriors of dark wool she wore, until she was barefoot, wearing only her undergarments and a white silk shirt entirely too fine for the deck of a sailboat.

She sat down, huddled herself together by pulling her knees against her chest, and listened to her heart still racing, scared for what had happened, and what would happen. Belle was certain she was by no means safe. The stream the boat was following was obvious to the naked eye, its dark blue colour striking out between turquoise waters, and it was only a matter of time before the white witch and the pirate would follow her. Was the Jolly Roger fast enough to capture her before the end of the day? Quite likely, with a whole crew, and all those sails. How fast would they search through the shack and ship village on the rocky islets, before they extended their search, and found out the Great Rift between the worlds had vanished?

Not half a day, Belle expected.

A part of her just wanted to lie down on the deck and wait for the hours to pass until her ultimate capture. She was tired, and fearful. She hadn't even begun to unravel her thoughts and feelings about her great aunt Hortensia's recent demise. She didn't even want to begin doing that. Belle's last recollections of her aunt hadn't been the pleasant, perfect memories of a wise old woman who'd lived a long and interesting life, but of an arrogant stranger with questionable morals. Belle wondered if Aunt Hortensia hadn't gone and died there on the shore in the dead of night, would she have tried to pluck the Blue Fairy's wings off herself, in another effort to cheat death? Had she used Belle to summon the fairy, as much for her own purposes, as to find out how to get to the Land Without Magic? Would Belle have hit her own aunt with the rock, in order to save the fairy? (To find Rumplestiltskin?)

Soon enough, Belle's thoughts had run their course. There was no way of finding out the whats and ifs and whens of the previous night's events. Towards the end, everything had happened so quickly, she wouldn't have had the chance to think anything thoroughly anyway.

Being warm in the summer sun felt extraordinary, after such a long time having been without. Yet, as
the sun rose and the heat and light reflected off the surface of the beautiful, turquoise ocean became more intense, Belle withdrew down in the single cabin below the deck for shelter, and to explore the one-woman ship bestowed upon her.

At first, she looked for some kind of weapon, which she could hide upon her person, if there should be a ship approaching her from the west. Belle found a knife and a sheath for it amongst a myriad of tools and things, all of which she couldn't even identify. It was a small thing, not much longer than the length of her thumb. It might have been serviceable for carving and whittling, but by no means it was a weapon for a duel. And it hid splendidly inside her boot, once she put them back on.

There were also crackers, beef jerky, nuts, dried fruit and water, all arranged in separate, water tight containers. She found a change of clothes. There was a proper bed for one, with fresh linen sheets, and a fluffy feather pillow. Such very nice things.

Belle found a blue scarf, which she wrapped around her head, hoping to prevent herself from becoming sunstricken. She'd have to return to the deck to keep watch of the west, in case she was followed, and to keep watch of the east, in case there was land.

Hours passed as she scanned both horizons, her heart still thumping in her throat. She was still in the grips of panic-thinking, and was alert for the most minor things that happened. When a wave splashed against the boat at a different angle, creating a sound a little unlike the previous waves, Belle was startled. When a sea bird flew between herself and the sun, and cast a shadow over her, Belle was startled.

Nothing happened during the course of the day. The ship sailed itself, and Belle sat aboard, out on the deck or inside the cabin, staring at her broken and tarnished fingernails on occasion, munching on the dried fruit and crackers, when she wasn't expecting a black sail in the west, or a foreign land in the east. When night came, along with its moon and stars, she sat on the deck late into the night, glad that it wasn't so hot any longer that she'd need to fear for being sunstricken.

The sea was very beautiful, in all its blackness. It was calm too, for the most part, and the reflections of stars and the moon on its surface quietened her racing heart with their natural, easy beauty. She still felt haunted and shaky when she descended down into the cabin for the night and laid her head on the pillow, imagining what would happen if the pirate ship caught up with her while she was asleep. What if the next time she opened her eyes, she'd be in the cruel cage again, with the pale woman's soul-less eyes staring at her, like she were nothing but a curious insect.

Belle reckoned she'd have to sleep, despite these fears, or she wouldn't manage the next day through. She was already a mess, having eaten drugged food for weeks, and with all the lack of exercise and fresh air. She needed real sleep, not the drug-addled kind. Besides, it was summer, the night would be short. The rising sun would most likely wake her up in a few short hours.

She told herself these things with a reasonable, objective, rational adult voice, but still, her heart kept pounding in her ears every time she attempted to close her eyes for sleep, fearful that she might not open them again if she caught sleep.

"Try and think of something pleasant, dear," Belle heard an internal memory of a vexed Aunt Sylvia speaking to her in her mind. She had been seven or eight years old, and Maurice had been away, abroad, on business relating to his factory patents. Belle had been in aunt Sylvia's care for four months, the longest time she'd ever been apart from her father, until she'd agreed to become Rumplestiltskin's housekeeper.

Aunt Sylvia had been in such bad humours about Belle's fear of her father not returning from Arbonne. "Of course you can't sleep, fretting over things that haven't even happened, and are
unlikely to happen. If you simply focus your mind on something nice, you'll find sleep much sooner.”

“What do you think is nice, aunt Sylvia?” Belle had asked, and aunt Sylvia had given her a stare that indicated that lady Sylvia found Nice Things to be a very unladylike notion to be in possession of. She relented though, and ordered Belle to think about the softness of very fine muslin.

Instead of muslin, Belle returned to her memory of waking up sore and cold after a dip in an icy lake, next to Rumplestiltskin. It wasn't the first or last time she'd return there, in her mind. Rather than recalling the particulars of how he'd felt, cuddled so warm against her, Belle would now rather reminisce over how peaceful he'd looked, his head on the pillow beside her, eyes closed. Not pulling grins or grimaces with his face, he'd have looked almost ordinary. Well, apart from his skin, with its peculiar golden-green colouring.

Belle recalled another incident, a very gloomy and rainy night in late winter and early spring, which had washed away most of the snow from the Dark Villa's gardens and surrounding forest. After a whole day of pouring torrential rain, the whole house had felt moist and uncomfortable, and so Belle had stacked full all the haters and ovens and fireplaces in the house, and her cottage as well, to combat the clammy and cold moistness. The villa had become in effect so warm, it had made both herself and Rumplestiltskin a little weary and fatigued – they'd gone for a visit in the castle, through the magic door, to breathe some crisp, chill winter air high up in the mountains in a country far away, while the villa was left to cool down. Belle had even thrown a snowball at Rumplestiltskin.

After their return, much later in the night, it had still been too warm to sleep. Belle had curled up in the library with a book, pursued by the idle Rumplestiltskin who seemed to be only half-presently aware that he was following his maid around for company, and he'd asked her to read for him, while he sat on the floor near her chair, legs crossed, spinning gold with a distaff, until he grew tired of it. He'd leaned against the chair, not quite touching Belle with his head, and closed his eyes, while listening to her, and Belle's voice had grown quieter and much slower soon, when her eyes strayed from the pages of her book, to look at Rumplestiltskin instead.

Nice things, Belle mouthed to herself, now only half-awake.

She remembered how she'd wanted to take her hand off the book and reach down to touch Rumplestiltskin's hair, to find out how it felt. She hadn't dared. It was one thing to throw a little snow at him, quite another to... to reach out and touch him. Affectionately.

The memory of their briefly shared kiss returned to haunt her, making her lips tingle. It was awe-inspiring, how such a small, almost innocent touch, could make her feel so wholly torn inside. Even the simple reminiscing of it still made her skin shiver. Or was that the cool air in the cabin?

Daring to give in to the kind of bright and optimistic hope she hadn't felt in many weeks, Belle imagined what the end of her journey would be like, in the best case scenario. She would arrive at the docks of this new world, and announce her name, and who she was looking for. Within hours, or minutes, first would arrive her father, along with Aunt Sylvia and her family. And then...

The last time she'd seen Rumplestiltskin, it had been him throwing her out of his house. There was no reason why he'd seek her out.

But still, she could seek him out. Find out about what he was looking for. Explain her intentions to him. Tell him that the Blue Fairy had sent her to kiss him, to break the curse of the Dark One. Oh, she could list a number of things she wanted to tell him.

The land she was arriving to, she recalled then, was under the thrall of the Queen of Whiteland,
Regina. She had captured Belle in the first place. It wouldn't do then, for her to come out into the open so rashly. Without any friends or help to rely on. She'd have to come up with some sort of a plan, as to how to find her father amongst the … millions? Of people, who surely lived in this new land.

Maybe she'd start by finding a phone directory.

Would they have telephones, though, Belle wondered. In fact, she believed all villages and cities that she had seen during her travels, were intact. She recalled almost all the horses seemed to have vanished along with the people. And most domestic animals, apart from the old, the sick and the useless. So where were all this people, cows, sheep and ponies living in?

Belle's thoughts wandered around meandering paths, and she stayed in a lucid state between dream and reality, vividly imagining what the days to come would bring, or shunning away from sudden memories of her more recent forays into the life of an adventuress. She'd always thought a life of adventure would be much more safer, and cleaner, than it had been so far. She'd imagined train rides, and river boats... instead she'd had unexpected lessons in cross-country skiing, and being imprisoned on a pirate ship.

The night was restful, although she didn't fall into deep, true slumber at any point. Perhaps that was because she had slept through enough days and nights previously. Besides, the mild nervous expectation of something appearing in either of her horizons kept her eyes half-lidded despite all her self-assurances and attempted soothings.

The second day aboard the boat was in every respect similar to her first. Belle ate small bites at irregular intervals, was up on the deck in the sun for as long as she could bare to, scanning the oceans, and returned back in the cabin to sit on the bed and to think and plan ahead, for every possible turn of events.

On the afternoon of the third day, her worst fears started to become a reality, when she saw a hint of a ship in the west. If she could see them, it was certain they had seen her. She spent the entire day watching the speck – which turned out to be three specks – following and approaching her, little by little.

When the sun was close to setting, she spent the evening staring so intently at the approaching ships, she didn't realise she was in a harbour, not until she saw the dozens and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of boats and small fishing vessels surrounding her, each anchored and resting in the bay where the stream had carried her off to.

“Oh my goodness!” Belle exhaled, a relieved sigh, and turned around, expecting, by the sight of these boats, a village, or a small coastal town, reminiscent of hundreds of similar places scattered along northern Arbonne.

She looked up, in surprise. It was no small village.

It was the biggest city in the world, Belle thought, with disbelieving eyes. It had to be! She'd never seen a place like it! There were houses that towered taller than trees, shooting up, as high as small mountains!

Awestruck, but still very aware of the approaching ships behind her, Belle found a small, inconvenient little place between bigger ships where she moored her ship, gathered her things most efficiently, and ran off. She heard and saw someone, a port authority man by the look of his uniform, call after her, and then shout angrily, but Belle gave the man no second thought as she sprung like a hunted animal away from the quay-side, and into the forest of a city.
She would have liked to have stopped to stare and look around, to be amazed by how once she was inside the city, the tall building entirely blocked the setting sun. She wanted to admire the electric lights that were slowly turning on everywhere on the streets, and she wanted to scream and point at the metal carriages people sat in, pulled by what must have been invisible horses, but she didn't have the time for any of that. The deeper she got into the city, the more people she had to press through, until there were so many people she couldn't see where she was going. When she had the sense to stop running in panic and start looking around, Belle had to climb up a street lamp post to take a better look at her surroundings.

And indeed, all the people in her world must have been in this city, she thought, watching in stunned amazement at how many human beings could be in the same place at the same time.

The metal carriages moved in the middle of the street purposefully, while people stuck to the sides of the roads. Everyone seemed to be very busy. Belle saw no parks, and doubted anyone around her was out for a pleasant stroll. The air smelled of smoke and something unpleasant she couldn't put a finger on.

The fashionable size of a woman's hat seemed to have diminished while Belle had been a bird in a cage. There were fewer ladies around wearing the strict, full-body corsets she'd been used to seeing, instead, a lot of ladies seemed to prefer looser dresses now. Men seemed more or less the same as ever.

Next she looked up at the buildings, the enormous houses. There were shops on the street levels, with big, garish signs above their doors and windows, all of which lacked the stylish, subtle elegance of even the most modest establishment in Avonlea. She heard small explosions somewhere, as if a gun had fired, and she almost fell off the light post at that, but no one around her seemed to care. No one around her even paid any attention to her. People kept their stern frowns and marched on about their own businesses.

Belle interrupted a woman on the street by putting her hand on her shoulder. “I'm sorry, miss, but didn't you hear that terrible explosion on the street just now? What do you think it might be?”

The woman had been taking long strides in obvious hurry, and glanced around, in all irritation. “It was probably a car tyre. It's been like that all week on this street, after that glass sheet fell apart in the junction,” she explained, and was soon on her merry way, before Belle could ask her about car tyres, and junctions.

The road ahead of her seemed to go on forever. Belle felt she needed to make more of a distance between herself and the harbour she'd arrived in, and she walked on, avoiding the menacingly busy people. At some point, when the evening was turning into a night, the busy people vanished off the streets. In their stead, there were next party-goers, dressed up to the nines. In the cars, and on the streets. Belle witnessed the marvel of seeing electric lights forming big letters, in all the colours, enticing the exuberant people on the streets to go into restaurants and clubs. Above her, all the windows of the city shone with bright, unnatural light that wasn't from a flame. The whole place was electric.

After a few twists and turns, Belle started to feel she'd come a comfortable distance from the ship, and started to ask for help from strangers on the street, but they either laughed her off, or looked entirely disgusted by her. She kept this on, until a metal carriage stopped nearby her, and a police constable stepped out.

“You can't beg here, vagabond! This city is meant for decent people!”

Confused, never in her life having imagined a police constable to address her like that, Belle stayed
still and stared at the police man. Then she glanced down, and saw herself with the eyes of the police constable. In clothes she'd worn for weeks through, never washed, and which she'd often torn, she didn't look like the respectable society girl from Avonlea, like she usually did.

“And where... is my place, then, sir?” she asked, eventually, after having received a hefty dose of being stared down at. “I'm sorry, I don't know.” She wanted to say she'd just arrived in town, but she caught her tongue in time. “I'm lost,” she muttered instead.

“Up beyond the seventieth, rat!”

Belle wanted to shout something nasty back at the police man, but managed to hold her peace.

“I don't know where that is.”

“And I can't help it if you're stupid,” said the police.

“Not knowing something doesn't make you stupid,” Belle retorted insistently.

“Yeah, it just makes you ignorant,” the police replied, and grabbed Belle's shoulder so hard it hurt, and he shoved her to a street corner. “Run up this street, rat, run until it ends. There's a good girl. And don't let me see you bothering the good and decent folk anymore, do you hear me!”

“N-no, sir,” Belle replied, yanking herself free of the policeman's hold, and took off.

The street ended some hours after what must have been midnight. During her days of captivity, Belle hadn't walked that much, so her feet ached badly when she made it to the less respectable side of the town. There were Ladies of the Night, laughing at her fine clothes that had lost their finery during the adventure, and from them, after being the butt of enough crude jokes, she got a tip for a charity night shelter. No guests allowed under the influence of alcohol or opium, they'd stressed, but Belle didn't have that problem.

She made it to the shelter, but wasn't allowed inside since there was no admission past midnight. The guard gave her a blanket though, and let her sleep in the foyer. Belle didn't sleep, but she did close her eyes, and waited for the morning.

Good things come with morning, she recalled. It was some nonsensical proverb she must have heard often in her childhood.

She had the kind of dreamless, sleepless rest she'd had on her first night on the boat. When homeless people began to file out of the shelter, she gathered herself, and followed the poor people of the city to where ever it was they were going to. Belle suspected she might find breakfast this way. She did have all the food with her, from aboard the ship, but there was no knowing how long she'd have to last on them.

No one was going out for breakfast that morning. Instead, big metal carriages, pulling carts with metal wheels. These were all parked in a circle in the middle of the slums. The people driving them climbed up and shouted things Belle couldn't make heads or tails out of, and then the poor, eight of ten men, climbed on the open carts in the backs of the metal carriages, and away they all went.

Belle asked a young girl playing hopscotch alone, where they'd all gone.

“To work, I s'pose,” the girl said.

“To work? Where?”
“Y’know. To build the city. Until it's done,” the little girl said, perfectly aloof as she hopped on one foot, back and forth.

“The city is going to become bigger?” Belle asked, with growing concern.

“I s’pose,” the girl said.

“What happens when it's done?” Belle asked.

“Then they won't have to build it anymore,” the girl said matter-of-factly. She became bored with Belle and her conversation, and walked off, inside one of the not-as-tall-but-still-quite-tall houses that were pervasively present everywhere.

Belle stared around, at the grey buildings that seemed to own the landscape. Millions of people, building houses, every day, for thirty years through.

Rolling around on the ground, sad and forgotten, Belle found a half a newspaper. It was the first thing in this Land Without Magic to give her any real thrill of pleasure, and she looked for a safe, shadowy hiding place between the tall buildings to read it in peace.

The Mirror, it said.

Belle found photographs of Queen Regina in it. The story linked to it was almost insultingly awful, about how she had rescued everyone from the eternal winter, and how glad the population of the city were that she was at the helm of their nation. The protector and champion of the people. Queen Regina.

All the news items seemed to be about that, more or less.

Belle searched for any picture of mention of Rumplestiltskin, the Dark One, but she was disappointed not to find anything on him.

The news lamented with the state of mass unemployment, but the story ended with a hopeful, positive message that the Ministry was creating a special task force to deal with the problem of poverty in the city. Belle wondered if that involved turning all the beggars into birds.

The newspaper sported a large section of personal items as well as advertisement, and Belle looked into them next, hoping she might find anything that could lead her to her father or to her aunt’s family. There was no luck there. Not a single familiar name caught her eye.

But, Belle thought, both her father and Aunt Sylvia were avid readers of the newspaper too. If she put up a message in the personal section, it was highly likely that either one of them might catch it.

Now she only needed to know where to deliver her message.

And figure out how to pay for it.

Belle suspected that the newspaper people wouldn't accept payment in dried fruit and almonds.

She found the delivery address for Personals and the Advertisements wedged just between notices, on one side, looking for chorus girl dancers, the Rabbit Hole Night Club, and on the other a pawn shop ad.

She made her way back to the charity shelter, where she found the workers cleaning up from the previous night, and asked them for help. They seemed like dependable, even though a little skittish,
as people were, and she had to speak Arbonnaise to them, since they wouldn't understand what she was on about otherwise, but they weren't nasty or frustrated with her, unlike all the other people in the city so far had been. They gave her a few tips.

For her day in the city, Belle now had a map, and two points of interest to visit. She went to a hair salon first, where they washed and combed her hair, her long, luxurious hair. A hairdresser plaited her hair, secured the length of it with string on both ends, and then cut it off. She handed Belle some coins, and paper money, for her trouble, and wished her away soon. She didn't smell as pleasant as the hairdresser's regular customers.

Feeling oddly light around her head, Belle then made her way to the newspaper, to post a personal message. She didn't want to use her own name, so instead she paired aunt Hortensia's name with her own family name, d'Arbon, and explained she was looking for her friends from Avonlea. She dared mention the name of the street where she'd lived with her father.

The newspaper people were a little more understanding with her, and she even got a free copy of yesterday's edition, when she explained a small part of her circumstances to them – how she was without shelter and food, and was looking for her father. They all thought her name was Hortensia, so they called her Hortensia. Whenever they called her that, Belle thought of the rock she'd smashed into the back of her aunt's head.

There was a Wanted section in the day-old newspaper, and Belle wondered if she could afford to make herself presentable enough for any of the prospective employers listed there, with the handful of coins she had left after she'd paid for her ad.

She returned to the homeless shelter, and got a tip about new clothes. A well-to-do family had telephoned the shelter about donating some old clothes, and were to have them sent over some afternoon during the course of the week.

Belle made sure everyone at the shelter knew her name was Hortensia too. She'd left the shelter's telephone number with the newspaper, and they would forward it to anyone inquiring after her. The next day, while Belle was at the homeless shelter, changing into a strange woman's too-large, leftover dress, and hoping it would do for the job interview she had managed to set for the day after, one of the shelter workers came to tell her there was a telephone call for her.

Up until then, since for how long, weeks perhaps, ever since the white witch had caught her, Belle had walked and breathed, and been awake, but never quite as herself, but rather, as looking over her own shoulder, advising herself to go there, do this, say that. She was so senseless and numb that she didn't even shiver when she accepted the telephone call. When she heard her father's voice on the other line, it was like she slammed back into the world properly, with tears overflowing, and her breath catching in her chest so badly, she could only sob for a while.

"Oh papa, papa!" She managed to whisper, between gasps and sobs and sighs.

"Belle? Belle!" She heard, and it was followed by a clank and a thud, and a silence. She held her breath.

"Belle!" It was Aunt Sylvia, and Belle couldn't have been more happier to hear Aunt Sylvia's voice just then.
Aunt Sylvia's Displeasure

The main train station was in the central city, where all the three tracks that led out towards the edges of the great grey city met side by side. A great clock of black iron was suspended from the ceiling of the waiting hall, and all its four sides announced that it was six o'clock. Belle stood right underneath the clock nervously, wearing a dress two sizes too big. With the black leather boots, and a black men's belt gathering the fabric of her dress to her waist, Belle looked odd. She noticed people giving her snide, amused glances as they rushed past her at the station. Everyone was as busy as the day before, and the day before that.

She'd already cried almost three hours that afternoon, and was worried she'd go into pieces once again right there, in the middle of the train station. She kept her eye out nervously, both for Aunt Sylvia, who was to meet her there, and for the pale witch and her pirate assistant, who undoubtedly were still annoyed to have lost their hold on Belle.

The architecture of the train station was the same as all over the grand city: large-scale grandeur with dark metal showing everywhere, shaped with ornate, sharp edges and ends. Like black teeth or claws. Where another open space might have been airy and pleasant, the train station was oppressive, with the way the dark surfaces seemed to drink the light out of the waiting room, despite the tall ceiling. There were windows, but they weren't clear – instead they filtered only a soft glow of light inside. The majority of the lighting indoors came from electric lights, which were scarce.

Aunt Sylvia had told her to meet her underneath the big clock at six o'clock sharp. When Belle saw no sight or sound of her exactly at the time when she ought to have been there, she became nervous, and started searching the crowd for the faces of her assailants. Besides the pale witch, she imagined seeing The Bird Keeper, and Queen Regina out there. A shadow in the corner of the room, moving back and forth slowly thanks to a luggage trolley passing by, reminded Belle of the Groke. She looked up at the dimmed skylight, and saw what must have been the shapes of common crows, walking on top of the window glass outside the building, and Belle thought of the werewolves, the dark man, and Khutulun, attacking the Bird Keeper, plucking her eyes out of her head. Somewhere down in the hall, there was a sound which reminded her of the crack of a stone meeting the back of a skull, and it was approaching her fast. It was the sound of high heels on the granite floor of the waiting room.

“Oh my darling,” Belle heard, and she turned around to have aunt Sylvia's arms thrown around her. This was practically synonymous to having her aunt parade around the high street of Avonlea in her underwear, as far as her aunt's sense of dignity and decorum was involved. Sylvia wasn't crying, but she was trembling all over, and Belle could feel it in the wholesome embrace she was locked in. Belle tried to hold back her own tears, trying not to cause a scene, but she couldn't help herself, and they stood there, wordlessly, holding each other. Belle's tears were soaked up by her aunt's black overcoat, and Sylvia didn't seem to even mind, not at first anyway.

But Sylvia was a creature of habit, who eventually disentangled them both from each other, in order to open her black leather purse. She pulled a white cotton handkerchief out with her trembling hands and offered it to Belle. “Here, dry your eyes. Is this all you have? Nothing else to carry?” Belle nodded. “Alright then, I have bought you a ticket already. Let's go home.”

Home, Belle wondered. She thought of Blackwood Manor, of her father's house in Avonlea, and of the forlorn villa in the woods, high on top of a hill, when she heard that word, home.

“Where's papa?” Belle asked, her voice a dreadful croak.
“He couldn't come, on account-” Sylvia stopped herself, and grabbed Belle's hand in order to physically escort her to the train. “He's home, and so anxiously waiting to see you, my dear. Oh Belle. Belle.” Sylvia sighed her name like a prayer.

“Where does this train go?” Belle asked, once she was seated inside, opposite to Sylvia.

“The edge of the city. It's... more economic, to live there,” Sylvia replied, her lips going thin and tight as she mentioned the money. When was money ever an issue with Aunt Sylvia? And come to speak of it, speaking of home, she had implied she lived with Belle's father Maurice in the same house.

Belle looked, really looked, for the first time since their first meeting, at her aunt. She had black lace gloves, but not fine silk ones, but dowdy, inexpensive cotton lace pair. Her dress was black, her jacket was black. Sylvia used to have dozens upon dozens of ornaments on top of her extravagant hats, but now she wore a plain, black bonnet, covered with more black fabric. At the back of the bonnet was a short train of black lace meaning...

“Aunt Sylvia,” Belle said, aghast, “Why are you in mourning?”

Her aunt seemed displeased with the question, and Belle expected she didn't want to dwell on the matter, but Belle had to know.

“It is because... my husband, your cousin, his wife, and their child have been dead for quite some time now,” Aunt Sylvia replied, entirely without emotion, as if she were discussing the weather.

“Oh,” Belle said, unable to say anything else. She couldn't even offer condolences, at first. Her facial expression apparently was synonymous to the question “how”, because Aunt Sylvia replied to it next.

“They all set sail from Avonlea before myself. I stayed behind, despite the winter, a little longer, because there was no one else taking care of Hortensia, you see. I was to take the next ship with your father, we were headed for the islands of Avalon. There were unexpected icebergs on the open seas, which no one had properly prepared for, so the Baron's ship sunk. No one survived, since they hadn't brought any life boats. They brought on more people, in exchange of the boats.” Sylvia's explanation of the events that had led to her entire family's demise came quickly and easily. Her gaze wandered from Belle's face to glance outside past the windows at the busy ant colony of the great city's people on the platforms, filling trains around them.

A conductor announced the train's departure in three different languages before they got moving. Belle listened to the other passengers, and thought she heard at least five or six different languages being spoken all around her, from all over the kingdoms. Which were now one kingdom. One city.

“Please tell me, how's papa?” Belle pleaded.

Aunt Sylvia hesitated, worry plainly written on her face. “Oh, he's fine,” she said, eventually. “He's just a little indisposed right now. He... had a little accident in the stairs. Broke his wrist, and cracked a bone. That's why he couldn't be here,” Aunt Sylvia explained hastily. “but the doctor said he'll make perfect recovery. He's home, waiting to see you. Oh, he was beside himself. We can't get there soon enough.” A little emotion made Sylvia's voice tremulous, but Belle wasn't certain what it was about. She imagined it was happiness mixed with fear, but that seemed just unlikely.

“What an awful frock you are wearing,” Sylvia said suddenly, and Belle smiled, feeling like she were home again.

The train took them to the outskirts of the city, where Belle witnessed the edge of the town line. It
was literal: The city simply stopped at one point, and the landscape of incredibly tall evergreens started. The trees were as tall as the buildings of the central city, if not taller. Sylvia instructed Belle never to cross over into the forest. “It's dangerous,” she said simply, and that was that.

Sylvia and Belle had to walk from the station. Even though it was evening, and the sun was setting beyond the great evergreens, it was a little nicer to walk these streets, since they were less busy than in the heart of the city, and the buildings weren't overbearingly tall. Here and there, the grey buildings had been treated with lime, chalk and ochre washes. Overall, it seemed a humble, but pleasant little nook in the giant, sprawling city.

Aunt Sylvia told Belle about cars and tyres. She described her work in the local council committee, working for the beautification of the area, and for the schooling of orphans. Which, she had Belle know, was extremely vexing since none of them had been aging in the past thirty years at all, and the troublesome orphans actually never ever bothered to learn anything, since they weren't growing up.

“It's very odd. It doesn't feel like years have passed,” Sylvia explained. “I wake up every morning, feeling like we arrived here just yesterday. I have kept a diary, and counted the days, and my papers distinctly describe twenty-eight years have come and gone.”

Belle thought the situation sounded horrifying, but she said nothing, and listened to Sylvia as they walked.

There was no magic in the land, except for the spell that held together this bubble they all lived in. Many, many conveniences that had previously been allowed through the use of magic, had had to be re-invented with other resources. The fields of physics and medicine had taken giant leaps in the past thirty years, Sylvia explained. “Your father was first involved with the railway company, but after the first ten years, we had cars, because there were too many horses in the city, and it was problematic at the time. I don't expect you'd see a horse carriage on the streets anywhere these days, most of the horses work on the Westfield Farms now. And what a miserable place that is, for any animal. You should never go there.” Aunt Sylvia looked up sharply at Belle, with such seriousness that Belle felt the hair on the back of her head stand up.

“So, papa works with cars,” Belle said hesitantly, trying to re-route their conversation back to the earlier topic.

“He designs some part of the engines that make the wheels turn, I understand.” Aunt Sylvia halted and looked up at an ochre-painted building with six levels, and at the staircase leading inside. “This is us. Door number nine, mind that please. They all look the same.” She fished a key out of her pocket and let them both inside into a granite staircase. There were names on the many doors they passed. Belle counted at least twelve family names, as they climbed up.

Anticipation and excitement made her almost run up the stairs. Aunt Sylvia paused at a landing to catch her breath, and Belle hurried past her, her heart thundering at the prospect of getting to see her father again. There was a door already open at the top floor, and Maurice sat there, in the doorway, in a wheelchair (Belle's mind jumped to Aunt Hortensia for a second), smiling with tears streaming down his cheek.

There was a lot of crying, even aunt Sylvia joined in on it for a while. Belle couldn't take a moment for herself to inspect the top floor apartment, because she couldn't see anything for her tears, or the dizziness that followed all the rampantly raging emotion she was experienced. Against all likelihood, she had gone on an adventure to find her family and loved ones, and she had succeeded! They may all have been in a cursed city, but at least they were all together! She wasn't dead! These were all the points of their very disjointed and elated discussion that drew on long into the night, until the sun was well and truly down, and the electric lights illuminated the city around them.
Maurice sat in his wheelchair in the tiny drawing room, his arm in a cast, and a soft collar supporting his neck upright. Aunt Sylvia and Belle sat side by side on a settee. The dried fruit Belle had brought with her had been a wonderful treat for them, after a dinner of vichyssoise and stale bread. Their conversation of hours was beginning to die down at last, and Belle managed to take a look around, and realised, her father and aunt, they were poor.

The apartment was a far cry from the splendid town houses both of them had lived in, or the spacious villas and manors they were used to staying in.

The settee transformed into Aunt Sylvia's bed at night, which had been previously taken by Maurice. Aunt Sylvia had given up her bedroom momentarily, due to Maurice “falling down the stairs” - Belle had her suspicions that the injuries were not from any accident such as that, because every time she brought it up, the pair of them exchanged glances of dread and secrecy, and when she hinted there was more to the matter, both of them denied any other explanation to it.

Not one of them was feeling tired yet though, and so the conversation flowed from topic to topic, from Belle's adventures of skiing and sailing, to Maurice and Sylvia's memories of the Endless Winter and the horrors it had caused. Belle withheld everything about Hortensia, and of her being kidnapped by pirates and witches, because she felt uncomfortable talking about them. She instead told of how she had simply happened to be present when the Great Rift between the worlds had become closed, and of how she'd rescued a prince with fairy dust, inside an abandoned spa.

Everything was as splendid and pleasant as it could have been, under the circumstances.

“Sylvia, papa,” Belle said then, “I simply must find Rumplestiltskin. Do you know where he is?”

The pair of them exchanged more looks. Sylvia stayed uncharacteristically silent, while Maurice chose his words slowly.

“Why? Whatever for would you want to find Rumplestiltskin? You should be running away from him, if anything, he still has that damned contract over you.” Maurice reached over to the nearby liqueur cabinet to pour a little whiskey in his tea. Belle fidgeted, recalling how her papa had been in pieces over Belle going off with the monster in the first place, and felt a keen understanding for his fear of losing Belle all over again, especially after their thirty-year-ordeal.

“I think he's released me entirely from that engagement, papa, you don't have to worry about that any more. I need to see Rumplestiltskin... because...” Belle stammered for words.

Maurice looked up and down at Belle, with such sudden and vehement loathing, that it stopped Belle's thoughts in their tracks immediately.

“Good grief, Belle, what is wrong with you? You haven't seen your family in thirty years, and you come here only to find out where Rumplestiltskin is?”

“You need to see him,” Belle repeated, hearing her voice grow smaller.

“You need to see him? No, no you don't, petal.”

“Besides,” Aunt Sylvia butted in, her voice as chill as the everlasting winter, “no one knows where Rumplestiltskin is in this city. There has been no report on him in all the years we've been here.” She glared at Maurice rather than at Belle.

“Papa, I love him,” Belle said, and blushed at hearing her own voice. Instead of a serious and passionate conviction of her feelings and intentions, her words sounded like she was a squeaking teenager who had just met a boy at one of Aunt Sylvia's charity balls the night before.
Aunt Sylvia and Maurice stared at her as if Belle had turned into a frog.

“You have been through a very difficult ordeal, my dear,” Aunt Sylvia said eventually, “and you need some time to come to your senses.”

“Even if we knew where Rumplestiltskin was, it would be a cold day in Hell before I’d allow you to see him, ever again!” Maurice said vehemently, and set down his empty tea cup and saucer so that the spoon rattled, and Belle jumped a little.

“Fine, I'll look for him on my own, if neither one of you will help me,” Belle said defiantly.

“And how do you propose to do that? Where are you intending to live while you go about this foolish quest to become a slave again? Certainly not in my house!” Maurice bellowed at her.

“Maurice,” Sylvia said sternly, “Belle has obviously been under a lot of duress lately, we should let her rest.”

“And tomorrow she'll run off to set sail to Far Isles, or ski across the country to look for werewolves? We should have her committed to the sanatorium, before she gets herself killed.” Maurice was so upset, he was visibly shaking.

“I'm sorry, papa, I didn't mean to upset you,” Belle said quietly.

This amended her father's spirits visibly, and he relaxed back into the wheelchair. “I'm sorry too, petal. I didn't mean to shout. It's just... I don't think I can bare to lose you for the third time.” He bit his own lower lip, in the same fashion Belle often bit her own. She rose from the settee to give her father a hug.

The next day, Aunt Sylvia rose up early in the morning, after sharing an uneasy night's sleep on the drawing room settee with her long-lost niece. It was highly undignified a way to spend a night, but Sylvia hadn't wanted Belle to catch a cold, sleeping on the floor, although she had announced she'd gladly sleep on the carpet.

Sylvia despised everything that was set ahead of her for the remainder of the day. She had domestic chores to run. She had to assist her sister's husband with his injuries, to go to the bathroom. In the afternoon she had entirely pointless committees to attend, to do the same things over and over again which she had done for the past thirty years in this haven of a city. Refuge. Prison.

Every day in New Whitehall would have been the same as the day before, except that the city grew every day. Or new things would appear, but they wouldn't affect the state of mind of the population. They were all like cogs in a machine, going about their business, their appointed chores, whether they wanted to or not.

For a long time, it had seemed as if there was absolutely no point to rising up from bed in the morning, and going about her business, because the going-ons of this city would proceed as they would, whether she wanted to or not, and she had no say in it. And in the morning, when she did get up, it felt she were always doing it sleep-walking, rather than out of her own volition.

She couldn't even speak out loud about how she felt about it, not to anyone. Every time she tried, it was as though her mind went foggy and she forgot what she was saying, up until the next time remembered again.

With uncomfortable trepidation, Sylvia sat in the kitchen, drinking her morning tea, eating toast,
reading the morning newspaper, and wondering what sort of cog piece would Belle become. It was like the girl was in a state of falling, and she would land some way, where she would, some way or the other, and then she'd also be a part of the city's internal machinery, every day like yesterday.

Belle had insisted she should go to the job interview she had secured the day before, and Sylvia sat silently, watching Belle get dressed in that awful new gown of hers, and padding Sylvia's old shoes with paper. The beautiful girl who had once worn silk and satin to ballets and operas while rolling her eyes, was worried if she looked presentable enough in some middle-class woman's wrinkled old handmedowns. Sylvia bit into her toast as if the bread had offended her.

“I don't suppose you have an iron, aunt?” Belle asked, while she was inspecting herself in the mirror with a critical eye.

“I borrow from one of the neighbours,” Sylvia replied, subduing her own voice. Hah, she couldn't afford a clothes iron. For that reason alone she had contemplated on jumping from the roof of the apartment building. She would be happier dead, with her family. She had even gone up to the roof several times over the thirty years, but then she'd blacked out, and found herself sitting in the kitchen, reading the newspaper, and feeling the city's displeasure with her in the back of her head.

“Belle do you feel...” Sylvia started to say, wanting to know if Belle had caught up already on what the city was doing to them, “... that cleaning houses is a smart thing to do? I still have some connections, you know. There are young men around this city who remember how pretty and clever you were in Avonlea, and we could buy you a gown, and send you to parties...” Sylvia pushed tea into her mouth to make herself stop speaking.

“I don't have credentials for much anything besides ancient languages and cleaning, you know. But it's not forever, aunt, it's just until I find something better. Maybe we could find a bigger apartment to rent, if I get paid well enough,” Belle replied.

Standing in front of the mirror, Sylvia's niece was critically worrying about her hair. It was short, which in fact was very fashionable nowadays in the city. Sylvia could tell Belle was unhappy about hers, but was trying to find a way of hiding her pain about it by putting pins here and there, to pull some stray hair that was threatening to fall over her face and across her eyes.

“Maybe you should cut a fringe,” Sylvia commented, regarding Belle's efforts at keeping her hair in check. At least the hair was clean. That would make the interview easier.

Belle d'Arbon, one of the first women to attend the university of Avonlea, and the great-niece of the grand enchantress Hortensia Blackwood, was going to an interview about becoming a maid. Aunt Sylvia put the last of her toast in her mouth and chewed on it vehemently.

It wasn't right, she thought. There was nothing right about it at all.

While Belle was in the bathroom, cleaning her teeth after breakfast, Sylvia went to her desk in her bedroom. Inside, there were pawn shop tickets. She looked up a telephone number from the top one.

“What are you doing?” Maurice asked. He was lying on the bed, helplessly immobile. No wonder, Sylvia thought, after the beating he'd had the other week.

“Just looking for my stationary,” Sylvia whispered, lying, but her resolve was already faltering, the reason being the very fact that Maurice was lying in her bed in a cast, with cracked ribs and a pain in his neck, for the debate which he'd engaged in with Rumplestiltskin over Belle's fate, and whose fault that was. Who'd ever let a girl marry a man like that? Besides, the sorcerer-turned-man was playing hide and seek, for whichever reason. Let him hide in his wretched shop, with his crippled leg
and bad manners.

Sylvia took the stationary pad and returned to the kitchen. She sketched a list of groceries and wished Belle luck with the interview. The girl assured she would find her own way to the train station. She hid her face behind one of aunt Sylvia's bigger bonnets, before she left. Sylvia sat still in the kitchen, trying to phrase her hatred for the city at the bottom of the stationary pad, but her hands would only draw swirls and wavy lines with no resemblance to real words.

“We'll never tell her,” she heard Maurice speak in the bedroom.

Frustrated, Sylvia tore the paper into a dozen pieces, and then set out about her chores, which could never wait for too long.
Labour

Chapter Summary

For her continued survival, Belle needs to work.

Belle's plan to find Rumplestiltskin had been reduced just to that: a plan. Creating or having a plan didn't mean that being in possession of said plan, or acting according to the plan, would yield expected results.

Months turned. The late summer in the foreboding city turned into autumn. Belle found work as a scullery maid, which provided her with a room, and she could move out of her father and aunt's tiny little apartment, and there, in the chilly basement-level bedroom of a tall and proud stone house near the sea, Belle's plans dried up.

She had walked, ski'd, rolled, swam and sailed across half the world to come to this place, and all that time, her plan for locating Rumplestiltskin once she got there was to simply ask where he lived, assuming it would be as easy as asking anyone back home if they knew where the Dark Castle was.

However, in this land, everyone she'd casually mentioned Rumplestiltskin to were under the belief that he had remained in the Land of Magic. What was the winter to him, an immortal sorcerer?

Belle had no time to make inquiries outside the stone manor. The Hermaine household was immense, and despite a small army of servants, the work required all of Belle's daylight hours. And in any case, scullery maids were never to leave the basement floor, where they worked, and slept.

Her room was a cold, stone-walled little cell, with a hard bed, and a narrow window up near the ceiling. She thought if she could go outside when it was light, she could read, but that was a pointless wish – she had nothing to read at all. She had brought just one book with her along her journey, and that had been left in the sanitarium on the coast of Arbonne, with Princess Khutulun.

She had an afternoon off once every seven days, and used that time to take the train to visit her father, and to look for Rumplestiltskin. Belle considered using the message in the paper again, but she was uncertain if it would reach him. Also, it would draw so much attention, and there was the pirate and the witch at large in the city somewhere, looking for her. And of course, there was Queen Regina to think of. Belle might as well have walked straight into a prison again, drawing that much attention.

Ridiculous and pointless as it was, she spent her free afternoons walking in the city, hiding her face inside Aunt Sylvia's bonnet, while wandering the thickly packed streets, her eyes darting from face to face, searching for greenish-golden skin.

Leaves fell from the trees of the boulevards and avenues and the few small parks, and night came earlier in the evenings. At the cusp of winter, Belle stopped wandering the streets in the afternoons, and spent her free time with Maurice and Sylvia entirely, even though their conversation was always repetitious, humourless, and, between the lines, hopeless.

Even in the darkest of times, Belle remembered her father having been lively and talkative, and cautiously positive. He got out of his wheelchair as autumn progressed, but remained seated, quiet
and absent during Belle's visits. He spoke rarely about anything except the pure, sterile and dull facts of his work, or the weather. There was no spark in his eyes, and he avoided looking at Belle directly.

Belle had thought Aunt Sylvia's most remarkable characteristic had always been her willpower, apart from her capability to be as abrasive and inconsiderate towards other people's feelings as possible in any conversation. Having to sit with her while she sat hunched, leaning forward, and seemingly always making shopping lists for the market whenever Belle visited was even more unnerving than the emotional distance between Belle and her father.

Every visit Belle made, she had always resolved to bring these issues up with the pair of them, and prepared a speech in the train for them as she was on her way, but every week, Belle failed to mention their melancholic apathy, and forgot all about it for another week. She failed to notice herself how often her mind ran in this repetitious circles of making and dissolving her own plans, there was only a little voice in the back of her head saying something wasn't quite right, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was.

“One of the chamber maids was turned out last night, and another one's got the sniffles. They need someone to go light the fires upstairs,” the household cook informed Belle early one morning when she had just finished lighting the stoves. “The housekeeper wants you to change your apron and go up, help the girls.”

Belle nodded, “of course,” she affirmed, and went to wash her hands, before putting on a clean, white apron. The ones she used in the kitchen, cleaning pots and pans, was a shade of grey, made of sturdy linen, but the visible maids always wore crisp white aprons, which covered the fronts of their black dresses from neck to toe, had ruffly edges, and big white bows. A white muslin bonnet completed the uniform.

Belle wondered how she was to go about lighting the fires without getting any soot on the apron, and then went to look for the housekeeper and the chamber maids.

It was her first time in the living quarters, so she was a little lost at first. She followed the twisting and turning servant corridors, hoping they would lead her naturally to her destination, and eventually, they did take her to the grand foyer, with its grand marble floor, wall hangings and paintings.

Belle stopped to take a look of her surroundings, thinking it was the sort of house Aunt Sylvia would have approved of, when the housekeeper came from an adjacent room and instructed her not to stare and gawk around like a half-wit, and follow her instead.

“The other girls are doing the bedrooms, so you must start with the morning room, the parlour, and the library, and don't get any soot on the carpet, or my head will be on the chopping block. You do know how to light a fire?” She asked with eyes narrowing down at Belle.

“Of course ma'am,” Belle said, her cheeks slightly flushed in anticipation of getting to step in the household library.

There was no camaraderie between the household servants, only stiff business-like interactions. And the less the servants interacted with any household member, the better, in fact, it would have been preferable for the running of the Hermaine house that all the chambermaids could turn invisible at will.

As she moved from room to room, lighting fires, Belle recalled the curious and bizarre informality that Rumplestiltskin had regarded her with since the day they met. Now, being an actual maid in
what was considered a proper household, and taking for the first time real notice of her memories of how Aunt Sylvia and all her friends had ever treated their servants, Belle had to face the fact that her time working for Rumplestiltskin wasn't much work at all. She'd been spoiled and idle half the time. And she was now dead certain he had only wanted her there for the company.

It was a little heart-breaking, and she felt brittle by the time she padded into the library, the last room. First she had to draw the immense brocade curtains that blocked the sunlight, and then resist the temptation of the leather-bound spines on two walls around her. She spared the books longing glances as she marched from the window to the elegantly decorated and tiled heater.

The coal box by the heater should have been filled with coal. It was one of the footmen or the lackey's responsibility that they were filled during the night. Someone had forgotten the library that night then.

Risking getting coal dust on her white apron, Belle had to go back in the cellar, get the coal herself, and return before the housekeeper had the chance to become angry with her.

To Belle's utter surprise, there was a pregnant woman in the library, when she returned.

The woman had propped her feet up on a footstool. She was swathed under layers of sky blue velvet robes embroidered with white daisy flowers. Her long, flowing tresses of blonde hair hadn't been pinned up according to the latest fashion, but it was an early morning, and by the quality of her dress, she was obviously a member of the family. The woman hadn't noticed Belle yet, and besides, she seemed to be in discomfort, and was holding a palm across her forehead.

Belle froze at the door, remembering that she had to be quiet and invisible.

But the thought of marching into the room without recognizing the lady seemed ill-mannered to her.

“T'm sorry to disturb you, mistress, I was asked to light the fire,” Belle said softly, feeling odd that she was bobbing curteys to a girl younger than her. In another life, they would have been sitting in adjacent boxes at the opera.

The blonde-haired young woman peered at Belle from between her fingers, and sat more upright for a second. “Oh, so that's why it's so cold in here. Close the door behind you, will you?”

Belle complied, and proceeded wordlessly to fill the coal box, and to start the fire.

The woman moaned, and squirmed in the chair, and tried to make herself more comfortable.

Belle tried to concentrate on the first task at hand, but it was impossible to be invisible and quiet, when the woman was in such obvious discomfort, she worked with tense haste, and ended up with black soot marks on her palms and her white apron.

“Oh... bother,” Belle said, looking down at herself.

“What?” The woman asked, her voice now a little more imperious, like Aunt Sylvia's would have been, if a servant would make an outspoken statement like that.

Belle turned, and the young lady saw what was the problem immediately. Her frown of displeasure melted into melancholy apathy, and she looked away, out through the window, at the dim first light of morning.

“You'll want to get changed soon, before the housekeeper sees you,” the woman said, not sounding very interested on whether or not the housekeeper would see this. Then she squirmed again, and
reached behind her to reposition one of the pillows behind her back.

“Do you... need anything, before I go?” Belle asked.

“No,” the young lady replied, and looked back at Belle, withdrawing her melancholy gaze from the window. “Wait... are you new here?”

Belle bobbed and nodded at the same time.

“Look at this.” The woman pointed at her pregnant stomach.

“You're pregnant, mistress? Is the baby due soon?”

The woman sighed with deep resignation, and relaxed deeper into the cushions.

“I have been pregnant for almost thirty years, you idiot,” the stranger said. “You know, with the time having stopped,” she explained, when Belle’s face froze in horror.

Belle didn’t know what to say.

“And every day of it is terrible. I try and hide from Lord Hermaine around this awful labyrinth of a house. He hates me, because I used to be a scullery maid. The lords and ladies that come through here won't talk to me. The maids here won't talk to me, because the housekeeper scares them all off. And my husband...” The woman stopped talking, sensing she was headed towards saying far too much to a stranger.

“I'm not afraid of the housekeeper,” Belle said plainly.

“You probably should be. She doesn't mind throwing out maids. There are a lot of people looking for work out there.” The young lady withdrew her gaze and hid it under her palm again. “At least it's good the baby stays inside me,” she muttered wistfully with such regret, Belle wasn't certain she heard her right.

“If you ever need me... my name is Belle,” she offered her.

“And I'm Ella, but you really need to call me 'mistress','” Ella replied matter-of-factly, and then resumed staring out through the window with hopeless resignation, and lack of presence in her mind, it seemed not to matter if Belle left the room or not. She was to be invisible.

The housekeeper sneered when she saw the coal stains on Belle’s apron. Belle was ordered back into the kitchen.

Winter snow had already fallen when Belle had a second outing upstairs into the fine rooms. Lord Hermaine was to host a yuletide party, and as precursory to that, Belle participated in having the carpets and rugs cleaned, before she was to descend back into the kitchens to resume her normal duties. Her afternoon off had been suspended, and she was to spend that time cleaning the house. The housekeeper couldn't stress enough that the house should be entirely spotless, and not a speck of dust was to be seen, for the guests they were fine lords and ladies of the kingdoms!

While the other maids dusted the carpets outside somewhere, Belle went about, collecting the dust that had collected underneath them with old rags.

Ella was in the library, sunken in her chair, her feet propped up, wearing the same comfortable and
“Good afternoon,” Belle greeted her with a fond smile, as she might have greeted another university
girl, or her neighbour Alice from Avonlea, wishing the pleasant greeting would lift Ella’s spirits, but
the odd glare Ella gave her made Belle remember her place again. “Mistress,” she added, too late.

“I don't want to go to the dinner party, but my husband insists I do, so he doesn't have to spend the
night without me,” Ella said, with the droning, sighing voice of someone perpetually weary, and
turned her gaze back towards the window. The weather was overcast, the clouds pale grey. There
was no sign of snow on the streets, because it had all turned into slush under the cars and the street
lights. “You can't imagine the hell it is to put on a corset.”

Ella was right, Belle couldn’t. She descended down on her knees with a moist rag to catch the dust
from where the carpet had lain.

“For the first three years, he was very mindful, you know... never letting me do anything that might
harm the baby. I don't think he remembers the baby any more.” Ella twirled her blonde hair between
her fingers. “Now he's more worried about what the Queen is going to think, if his wife doesn't
appear at the dining table...”

Belle froze.

“I'm sorry mistress, but do you mean, the Queen is to visit here?”

Ella turned her gaze slowly. “Yes, Queen Regina is our guest of honour.” She glanced at the library
door next, as if expecting someone to come in. “You can't imagine how pleased Lord Hermaine is to
have her here,” she added, with a whisper.

Belle nodded, and continued cleaning, even though her heart had just jumped up in her throat. Her
hands were visibly shaking as she went through the floor, and she was worried she was going to
heave up her breakfast on the marble floor or in the bucket. With a great degree of self-control, she
managed to finish the library floor, and then she hurried out without goodbyes to the mistress. Belle
ran downstairs and then out into the inner courtyard where the other maids were washing the carpets
in the snow, and her breakfast ended up on the snow bank there. Eggs, tea, porridge.

With the horrible taste of bile in her mouth, Belle returned to the kitchen and fetched a cup of cold
water to drink.

“You look green,” the cook observed, and observed a piece of the upturned breakfast had ended up
on Belle's apron. “I can't have a sick maid in the kitchen today. Go into your room and lie down. The
housekeeper might have the time to send for the doctor.”

Belle hadn't the heart to resist the cook sending her off, but once she was in her room, her heart
started thumping fast and wild again, telling her she should run. Logically, Belle thought, there was
no way the Queen of the city would descend down into the kitchen in the middle of a yuletide dinner
party to see if there were any people she'd had turned into birds hiding there.

But the gut feeling that was now telling her to run also reminded her that she had mostly her intuition
and strangers to thank for the fact that she’d ever made the passage across from the Bird Woman's
house to the Land Without Magic.

It didn't take very long of her to pack her things. All she owned was laughably little – a tinder box, a
hair comb, some money in a cloth purse, the keys to Aunt Sylvia and Maurice's house, and the
clothes she wore when she wasn't in uniform. The old, worn hand-me-downs made her look what
she supposed she in reality now was: poor.

Belle knew she ought to have asked the housekeeper for the wages they owed her, but then the housekeeper would demand she explain herself, and stay until the end of the week, or the end of the month... no. Belle pocketed her meagre belongings, left a note on her bed, and cast her last glance around the cell-like little room she’d called home for four months, before fleeing the Hermaine house.

Belle had to walk to the train station in the slush, and by the time she arrived, her feet were thoroughly wet. She hadn’t had the time or opportunity to shop around for winter shoes. When she arrived at the station, an unpleasant surprise awaited for her: No more trains would depart that day, because the weather had made the tracks slippery, and there had been an accident.

And she didn't have enough money for a taxi fare.

She took a deep breath.

This was hardly her having to pour wine to the Groke...

Belle left the station area and walked down the street, looking for any well-off-seeming gentlemen. She beelined straight across the street to the first silk top hat she could spot amongst the ever-moving crowds in the heart of the city.

“Excuse me sir, could you please give me some money?” She pleaded. The man didn't even eyeball him, but strode off with brisk, long steps.

There was a woman with a wide-brimmed silk hat, the sort Aunt Sylvia had worn, in front of the train station, hailing a taxi car. Belle ran back across the street, and interrupted the driver assisting the woman into the cab.

“Excuse me, perhaps we could share a ride? Which way are you going?” Belle asked.

The driver grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her away. “What do you think you're doing, hassling my customer? Get your own car!”

The driver lifted her away from the car as if she weighed less than a feather, and closed the passenger door while glaring at Belle angrily. She watched helplessly as the driver got inside the car and then drove away, itching to say, or do something, to stand up taller and braver, but what was there to do?

There was a queue of taxis in front of the train station, and she flitted from driver to driver, asking each one of they could drive her home to the suburbs, even if she could pay only a quarter of the fare. Each car turned him down, some drivers showing her sympathy, others telling her to beat it.

Belle took her injured pride and herself away from the taxi station and headed down the streets aimlessly. She felt as if she was going to fall down and crumble into dust, for how brittle and helpless she was now. It was dark, and cold. She might have to walk across the city all night with wet shoes. She ought to have stopped and considered for a little longer, which way she was headed, but when she stayed put, she became cold all over, so walking it was for her then.

She re-steeled herself, pulled herself tall again, and dived into the crowd with the intention of begging the taxi money on the streets.

The later the yuletide evening grew, the less people there were out. People were mostly headed indoors, to their dinners and banquets and parties.

Belle stopped a group of tipsy revellers headed for a party just as they were getting out of the taxi.
The ladies were in scandalously short gowns which showed their legs, and with hair cut short all the way up to their chins, and the men's suits were hanging unbuttoned, and their ties loose. The group laughed her off and told her to get a job.

An older man with a smartly clipped, white beard she stopped next asked if she was interested in spending the yuletide night at his house, in his company. He promised he would pay the taxi fare in the morning. When his palm ran up her arm, caressing her rather intimately through her thin autumn overcoat and the dress underneath, Belle was so overcome with anger and revulsion, it was a good thing she didn't whack the man in the face with her fist right then and there, but she thought better of making a spectacle of herself on the streets.

“No,” Belle stated, her teeth gritted together, and brushed the man's hand off.

She took off in a swiftly paced trot, with no idea as to where she was headed, and no sense of which area of the nebulous, omnipresent City she was entering now. When she calmed down, she thought she should ask for directions to a homeless shelter. She looked homeless enough again. Directions were cheaper than money. Maybe someone would relent and give her at least that.

But there was a shortage of people to ask around, now.

Her feet like icicles, she trotted on. She saw a big, wide-shouldered man in a black coat come out of a building, a little way off. Belle waved at him, called after him, but the man didn't notice her. He climbed inside his car, a truck with a canvassed frame around the back, with an advertisement painted over the fabric. Belle just had the chance to read the word “antiques” when the truck drove past her, the big man intently keeping his gaze on the road and ignoring the small lady on the curb.

Belle sighed and moved on. Eventually, this brought her in front of one of the city's many establishments of entertainment. Yuletide evening had closed plenty of them, but this one had stayed open. The sign above the door and the windows said with big, garish, electrically lit colours: THE RABBIT HOLE.

There was a group of people just outside the door, and Belle felt reluctant to ask this particular set of citizens for any help, because, what sort of people hung out at a night club on yuletide eve? Besides orphans? She was about to find out, she thought, and walked bravely up to the merry little group.

They were all smoking cigarettes and cigars in a snug little circle, mostly women in the similarly scandalous party dresses Belle had seen earlier, ankles and legs showing. They had warm shawls around their shoulders, and some had champagne glasses in their hands. Belle breaking into the circle didn't disrupt their good humour at all.

“Sorry, if I could just please get directions to a homeless shelter?”

“What a little honey you are!” A drunken lady shrieked at her, “poor little thing!”

“Here, have a little drink,” another, a pale-haired party-goer said, and handed the meagre remains of her champagne to Belle, “it'll warm you up a bit.”

“Yeah, because you don't need any more warming up, Claudia! You've had the whole bottle already!”

And they all laughed. Belle accepted the glass, and finished it swiftly. She peered around the circle, and realised there were three exactly identical girls in the group, all happily, obliviously intoxicated.

“Do you smoke, doll?” A likewise intoxicated young man who seemed to have forgotten the contents of a whole bottle of oil in his hair was handing her a fresh cigarette, but Belle turned it
“There's no shelter around here, honey,” one of the pale-haired girls told her, “do we know any shelters around here, ladies?”

The nine or ten ladies burst into an animated discussion about the homeless situation in the city, which was quickly derailed into several broken-off topics about stockings, shoes, gin and the best looking cars.

Suddenly, the words Belle hadn't known she'd been in such dread to hear, until they came out, came out.

One of the women, the tallest of the whole group, counting all the men, looked at her sharply all of a sudden, and leaned closer to you. “Don't I know you from somewhere?” She asked, her voice lowering down.

Belle stared back at her, unable to croak an answer right away. “No, that's impossible, excuse me.” She left the warm circle of people and stumbled back towards the night. Fully aware that she wasn't breathing, and that her heart was thumping like an alarm clock inside her head, she trotted off, but the tall woman grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

“Oh, but we worked together, remember? In that crazy manor with that crazy old bird, right? That old witch kept us like animals, hahaha!” The girl continued, her voice kind and lively. Nothing threatening.

Still, Belle turned back warily, expecting something awful to happen.

But now that she looked again, properly, looked under the clothing, and the thick layer of make up the woman was wearing, she recognised the face.

“R...r..” Belle sought for her name. They'd only met briefly, after all.

“Ruby! You silly goose. How dare you forget my name. Come on, let me take you inside and buy you a drink, and you can tell me all about how you've been.”

“Oh, I possibly couldn't.” Belle blubbered, “I don't have money for a drink, and I don't know if they'll take me in, looking the way I do...”

Ruby looked her up and down, and so did everyone else in the group.

“Look, it's yuletide eve, I'd be a complete monster' - she winked - “to let you roam the streets on your on. It's ok, I work here, I got a place upstairs. I'll even lend you a dress so you can get into the party mood.”

“Let's get back to the party, ladies, our cigarette break has been exhausted,” one of the three identical blonde women announced, and the whole group filed inside, pulling Belle with them.

Belle was fairly certain that Ruby wasn't Ruby's real name, but she followed her around through the club, into the back room, up a narrow staircase, and deeper into the building, until they were at last alone together in a room which Ruby apparently shared with three other girls, counting the bunk beds.

“So... Ruby,” Belle stated, when the door closed behind them. “I really don't want to be a problem to you.”
“You’re that girl who was headed for Rumplestiltskin’s castle. I don’t forget about stuff like that. How did it go?” Ruby asked, while she went through a trunk at the foot of her bed.

“Nevermind me, how did you get here?”

“I got here on a ship from the Far Isles a couple of months back. Like pretty much everyone else there. Wasn’t that how you ended up here?” Ruby pulled out a purple dress. “This isn’t really my colour, but I got it as a gift from one of my adoring fans.”

“You mentioned you work here?” Belle asked squeamishly.

“Yes! I’m at the bar. My gran is furious I’m doing this, but I figured one of us should get a well-paying job.”

“Is it, then?”

“What?”

“Bartending? Well-paying?”

Ruby flashed a wolfish smile. “I get great tips.” She threw the dress at Belle. “Here, try that on. I’m guessing you don’t want to stand out of the crowd that much?”

“What makes you think so?”

Ruby returned to searching through her trunk. “We’re in a city ruled by the iron fist of the queen who put us both in bird cages. And you got terrified when I recognised you. Did you mention your name yet to anyone?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Maybe you could come up with a new one now, and I could introduce you to everyone downstairs? It’s mostly the regulars and the showgirls that are hanging around tonight, nothing too scary.” Ruby glanced over her shoulder, and frowned. “Why aren’t you changing?”

“Oh, oh, right,” Belle said, and held the purple dress at arms length for a short inspection. It was short, but Ruby had it right, she’d stand out too much in her dowdy old dress two sizes too big for her. Belle started to undress. She thought she ought to have asked Ruby for help getting home straight up front, but the girls had been the first friendly people in all the city she’d met so far, and they’d given her champagne. And she was very intrigued to hear more news of Ruby’s travels across the worlds.

“Try these shoes to go with the dress,” Ruby said, and stopped crowding the trunk after handing the high heels over to Belle. They were definitely not designed for wear outdoors in the winter, but they would allow Belle to leave her old pair to dry near the heating stove in the corner of the room.

“Your hair’s great,” Ruby said, briefly touching Belle’s bob-cut locks. “Goes well with the dress. I’m not ready to part with mine, fashion or not.”

“I just need a little padding for the shoes, they’re too big... I can barely stand up straight. And, do you think you could lend me some taxi money, after the party? I need to get home.”

Ruby halted entirely. “Then why are you looking for a shelter?”

Belle shrugged. “The trains don’t operate before tomorrow, and I don’t have the fare.”
“How did you wind up here in the first place?” Ruby asked, dubious all of a sudden, while she dug a roll of bandage gauze from a white box in the corner of the room.

Belle sighed. “I had to quit my job unexpectedly. I'm going to have to start hunting for another job tomorrow.” She tore some gauze off the roll and padded the heels of the shoes with it, until they fit her enough so she could move around convincingly enough.

“Want a job here?” Ruby asked, as she headed for the door.

“Are you serious?” Belle asked, her jaw dropping. She imagined working in this sort of establishment would do a great deal to revive the spirit of fire in her Aunt Sylvia's eyes, and shuddered at the thought of her most likely reaction, involving the words “disgrace”, “immorality”, and “eternal damnation.”

“Sure. We need a waitress.” Ruby opened the door for them.

“Let me think about it?” Belle said, and precariously wobbled towards Ruby and the exit.

“I'll ask you again in the morning. And your name was, miss?”

Belle shrugged. “I suppose it could be... Lacey.”

“Alright Lacey, let's go have some drinks with the showgirls!”

Ella Hermaine, wife to the heir of Lord Hermaine's estate and legacy, was feeling unwell at the dinner party. She had been bloated and pregnant, and sick and tired of it, for so long, that she sometimes laughed madly about the whole affair. But only to herself. The household demanded she constantly keep up the appearance that everything was normal, and that she should always rest, be a good mother and not disturb the pregnancy or the baby. But nothing was normal. Nothing had been normal in the past thirty years or so.

She could hardly bring up the subject matter regarding the construction of the city, and an ending to their present state of being suspended in time over dinner, especially with the Queen at the head of the table, smiling and directing every conversation that should transpire around the table. She seemed to hear every whisper and muted comment.

Ella was glad the Queen thought she was of a complete lack of consequence, as such, Ella was almost as far away from Regina as one could be, down the other end of the table. People spoke to her about her pregnancy and her coming baby as if the baby was to be born tomorrow, and not maybe another hundred years of the strange charade they were all participating in.

Ella nodded and smiled meekly, and kept her voice appropriately weak and demure.

In the middle of the dessert, Ella suddenly thought she must have overturned a glass of water into her lap when she hadn't paid attention, because she felt wet just underneath her thighs. But her glass was full, and standing where it ought to have, beyond the other side of the plate. Surely she hadn't wetted herself out of boredom?

Ella tried to catch her husband's attention across the length of the table, but Thomas had been drawn into conversation with his father and the Queen.

Ella signalled a footman next, and asked them to help her up from her seat.
“Oh my! My dear, I think your water just broke!” A lady sitting next to her announced, as Ella stumbled away from the table. She glanced over her shoulder in horror, seeing the wet stain growing longer down the backside of her gown.

Ella turned to the footman in panic.

“He... he'll be here!” She whispered.

“Goodness gracious, lady Ella is having her baby!” Someone else shouted.

“Don't you think she ought to be let out of the corset first of all?” Another voice piped in.

“But doesn't a corset help birthing,” a man's voice joined in, “I mean, squeeze the child out?”

Thomas was at Ella's side in the next moment, shoving the footman aside, and assisting her out of the dining hall. Ella looked past her shoulder briefly, at the amazed faces of the guests of the dinner party. There was one face that didn't seem pleased at all, though. The Queen looked like she was ready to murder Ella with her bare hands.
Lacey

Even though Belle had intended to leave the party before midnight, she woke up on the first day of yule in a stranger's bed with a headache. She couldn't bare to open her eyes when her consciousness drifted back in, because her brain felt about twice as big as it ought to have, and there was no room for it inside her skull. And the bed she was in was incredibly uncomfortable. There were no sheets at all, just rough wool underneath her and on top of her.

She moaned, when there was noise, and suddenly light bled into the room beyond her closed eyes. Belle turned away quickly, and pulled the blanket over her head.

“Rise and shine, Lacey,” she heard Ruby. “What's the matter? You didn't get ill in those wet shoes last night?”

Belle uttered a miserable no.

“Let me see you...” Ruby pulled the blanket away from Belle's face and recognised the symptoms soon.

“Let me get you breakfast, it'll help,” she said briskly, and ignored Belle's plea not to do it. The very idea of putting food inside her mouth made her feel violently ill.

Ruby brought very salty, very crisp bacon and eggs, and a cup of tea, and coaxed Belle to eat all of it, despite her feeble effort at protesting. Ruby sat on the edge of the bed, while Belle sat up enough to get the food in her mouth from the plate.

“You won't get sick... and well, even if you do, that's fine. But let's try this eating thing first?”

The tall, gangly werewolf girl watched Belle like a hawk while she ate.

“So... Lacey,” she said, “I think the girls bought you one too many drinks last night.”

Belle nodded, and ate through a crunchy bit of bacon. “They were very nice,” she said, her voice low and a little broken. “Did I sing?”

“Yes... they wanted to see if you could audition for the chorus. You passed the singing test, but failed the dancing part.”

Belle nodded slowly, recalling now why her knees felt bruised.

“I've had fever in a cottage with no fire... and been bit by a vampire. And still, I've never felt this awful ever before in my life,” she whispered, voice croaking, and bit into another piece of bacon.

“But... I think... I had fun last night.”

Ruby smiled, showing all her white teeth. “Last night, coming here, you really looked like you could use a bit of fun.”

“I can't remember the last time I really did have fun... fun like that...” Belle muttered, and sipped her tea.

“Do you need me to walk you to the train station?”

Belle nodded slowly. “Thank you, that would be great. I don't really even know where the station is. I just sort of ended up here while not looking where I was going.”
“Damn, girl...” Ruby said, “What sort of trouble are you in?”

Belle sighed deeply. “Just trying to avoid trouble, that's all.”

“But you'll go home today, right? So, how's your search for Rumplestiltskin going?”

“Not well,” Belle admitted, and finished her tea briskly. “I don't suppose you know where to find him?”

Ruby shook her head and stood up. “No, but the moment I see some green-skinned guy walk up to my bar, I'll give you a call.”

“As for my other adventures. Princess Khutulun tried to kill the Groke with a sword, but only ended up with frostbites,” Belle said.

“I wasn't really holding my breath and waiting for spring to be honest,” Ruby admitted.

Belle looked down at herself. She'd fallen asleep in her slip. Despite her brain being all swollen, and looking at things being hard, she the room around her a look. It was another bunk-bed room just like the one Ruby had taken her into the night before, but not the same room, and it had more beds. There was a chair next to the bed, and on top of it, her clothes, folded neatly.

“A lot of girls work here?” Belle asked, as she reached for her oversized dress.

“Sure, the revue alone has twenty chorus girls, and then there's the Tripletease Triplets. And the band. And the stagehands. And the waitresses. And the wardrobe. And bartenders, like me.”

“You mentioned something about a position being open?” Belle asked. “I really need to work, and soon.”

Ruby seemed apprehensive, and Belle picked up on that, even though she also dreaded having to climb out of bed because she wasn't certain her feet could handle her standing up.

“I don't know, Lacey, you seem maybe too... sweet, for this kind of place.”

“I'm really good at math, I promise,” Belle replied.

Ruby seemed thoughtful. “Just hang on in there for a moment and let me get back to you.”

Ruby left Belle to get up and get dressed alone. Belle had just finished doing the laces on her shoes when Ruby returned, holding a black slip dress from its hanger.

Belle looked at the dress, confused. “It's a slip,” she said. Granted, it looked very nice. It had tiny sequin decorations.

“No... it's the waitress uniform, in this establishment, on most nights,” Ruby corrected her with a grin. “The boss was out last night and what you saw was us being... more casual.”

Belle's eyes widened in horror. “Where's the rest of the uniform?”

Ruby smiled with her teeth again. “You get an apron with a pocket for carrying around change.”

“Does the apron reach past the knees?”

“What do you think.” Ruby took the dress away. When she returned, she had her coat on, and was ready to escort Belle to the train station.
They talked only of Ruby and her grandmother's journeys, and Belle was glad to hear their travels had been mostly safe. No one had died. Ruby let Belle understand that her gran was somewhere in the city taking care of the children, and trying to stay away from Regina's path. And Ruby worked for the both of them, but luckily a girl could get great tips at an establishment like The Rabbit Hole.

“But why did you come to the city?” Belle asked.

“I guess you didn't get a very good look of the Far Isles on your way through? It was a real shit hole. The only people who got to eat there were people who worked for the crazy old witch who ran the show, and the rest of us were half-starved. We had to take the chance,” Ruby explained with a sombre expression on her face.

Belle nodded in thoughtful understanding. “Thank you, again, I really can't tell you enough how much you saved my life last night, taking me in like that.”

“Don't mention it. We girls have to stick together. If you need more help, if want to call me, for any reason, don't hesitate.”

By the time they reached the train station, Belle had made a decision.

“Do you think it'll be alright, if I come back to The Rabbit Hole tomorrow?” Belle asked coyly.

“You want the job then?”

Belle nodded. “I wouldn't mind great tips. And... I don't think I'll find Rumplestiltskin if I continue working as a maid twelve hours a day.”

Ruby grinned. “Just eight hours a night, this one. Did you need money for the train ticket?”

Belle shook her head. “No, I have just enough...”

“And the ticket back?” Ruby asked pointedly.

“Ah.”

Ruby gave her the train money and hugged Belle goodbye. “See you tomorrow, Lacey.”

“Until tomorrow, Ruby.” It bothered Belle that she still couldn't remember the werewolf's real name.

The noise of the train and the closeness of people in the overcrowded compartments made Belle's throbbing brain throb more. She held on to Aunt Sylvia's bonnet with both her hands, shielding her eyes from the sunlight, when she walked to Maurice and Sylvia's home. What a surprise she would make too. She might have called. Then again, it was better she hadn't. She'd ended up missing again, and what would the two of them have thought?

_I don't think I can bare to lose you for the third time._ Her father had said that, red in the face after shouting at her.

When Belle had first arrived in the city, she'd paid more attention to how horrifying the spell that kept it running was, but after almost half a year, it was difficult to be shocked by it any longer. Time hung in its strange suspension in the air, and days turned to nights turned to days. The city kept building itself bigger and bigger, and everyone simply went along with it, with no question of Queen Regina's authority. Belle had stopped paying attention to the relatively horrible situation of poverty, tight quarters and other extremes that reigned in the city, and simply went along with it, trying to get by from day to day.
As she walked towards Maurice and Sylvia's house, she once again saw the city as an outsider. Belle wandered that she too had managed to fall into a dull rut, like everyone else. She wouldn't have even noticed it, if it hadn't been for the unusual events of the yuletide eve. The routine had even made her quest of searching for Rumplestiltskin a futile sort of repetition of going through the motions. Now, thinking about it, she realised she was never going to find him by walking on the street and expecting to see him in the crowd. No one had seen a green-skinned sorcerer in the city in the past thirty years, so why should they see one now?

She muddled over her plans, trying to come up with something more clever, something she could invest more time in now that she might get a job with less hours. Belle made her way through the streets and climbed up the stairs all the way to Maurice and Sylvia's top floor apartment, and had to push those unfinished ideas out of her mind when she was greeted by the scrap remainders of her family.

“Oh, you weren't supposed to be here until a week from now!” Aunt Sylvia greeted her.

Belle smiled. “I wanted to come by and wish you a happy yuletide,” she said, evading the little detail of having walked out of her job as a scullery maid.

“Do come in then, I'm sorry we don't have any food prepared for you, you might have called and warned us,” Aunt Sylvia said, and let her in.

“Belle? You've come for a visit?” Maurice called at her from the corner of the sitting room, peering over the newspaper. “I thought you were coming a week from now.”

“No, I managed to make the time to visit now. Actually, I'm not sure when I'll have the time to come again, to be honest.”

“Why is that?” Aunt Sylvia said, turning sharply. She'd been headed for the kitchen, but stopped dead in her tracks. “What has happened?”

“Nothing much... I've decided to look for another position, that's all,” Belle said gingerly.

Aunt Sylvia's frown turned into a deeper frown. “I see.” She vanished into the kitchen, while Belle went to sit with her father. She kissed him on the forehead and then took a seat on the other side of the coffee table.

“Happy yuletide, papa. How are things with the cars?” Belle asked. It was probably the safest topic of conversation between the two of them, besides weather.

“They break, we fix them,” Maurice muttered. He read the paper for a short while longer, until he folded it and put it down.

“How are the pots and pans, petal?” Maurice asked, with a little pain in his eyes.

“It's honest work, father. But I thought I'd try another kind of job. Soon.”

“Hmh. I see. What kind of job might that be?”

“I uhm... I made friends with a lady in town, who works in a... restaurant, and she asked if I was interested in waiting tables.”

“Good grief!” Aunt Sylvia shouted from the kitchen.

“Is everything alright, aunt? Did you drop something?” Belle called out.
“No... I'm fine. Just making the tea, dear!” Sylvia replied.

Eventually, there was tea and biscuits laid out on the coffee table between the three of them.

Aunt Sylvia broke a biscuit in half and dipped it in her tea. “So, tell me dear, are you going to try becoming a fisherman or a taxi driver next?”

Belle avoided rolling her eyes and smiled pleasantly at her aunt. “If waitressing proves unbecoming to me, then maybe.”

“You can't become a taxi driver, petal, you don't know how to drive a car,” Maurice stated with some concern. He had reopened the newspaper again, and was pencilling in letters in the day's crossword puzzle.

“You could teach me!” Belle suggested, suddenly excited at the prospect.

“Well that would be pointless, since none of us can afford a car,” Aunt Sylvia muttered.

“That's no matter, I could always steal one,” Belle said, and dipped a biscuit in her tea.

“Belle Camille Victoire d'Arbon!” Aunt Sylvia said, and Belle stifled a giggle, suspecting that Aunt Sylvia's tea might come out through her nose any moment now.

“I wasn't, perhaps, entirely sincere with that statement,” Belle remarked demurely, and kept her eyes on her saucer while Aunt Sylvia drew breath.

“I can't drive a car in any case. I can only repair them,” Maurice said solemnly, and continued on with this crosswords.

Aunt Sylvia drank her tea calmly after another second, and then put down the cup. She poured everyone another round, and re-settled.

“Do you need to stay the night here?”

“If it's not too inconvenient?”

It meant sharing the bed with Aunt Sylvia, but it wasn't so bad. She didn't snore, and she kept the whole bed warm, being the type of person who never got cold.

“What are your things? Didn't you have luggage?”

Belle shook her head and reached for her second warm cupful of tea. “No, most everything I own are safely in the pockets of my overcoat.”

Aunt Sylvia's eyes hazed over into the melancholy thoughtfulness that so often preoccupied her here. “Of course.” Perhaps she was thinking of the last summer they had taken the train together to the countryside, to visit Hortensia, and their retinue had so much baggage, they needed a separate wagon to get everything to the house from the train station.

Belle thought she might try to cheer up her aunt by describing the grand house she'd been working in, but prudently decided against it at the last moment before opening her mouth.

“I'll need the address and telephone number of where you'll be staying,” Aunt Sylvia said flatly, and pushed her notebook towards Belle. She couldn't remember the address, and had to copy the number from a piece of torn paper on the corner of which Ruby had scribbled the phone number.
“I'll call you with the address tomorrow,” Belle promised.

The next day, Belle's new life as a waitress started in a whirlwind. There was not only the new experience of handling customers, their orders and their money, all of which were foreign things to her, at best she'd been at the customer end of this kind of transactions, and always in cafés.

While Ruby was showing her the ropes, the afternoon buzz of the night club was in full steam. There was a rehearsal on the stage, and the men in charge of lighting were being shouted at by the stage master, the director was shouting at the chorus girls, and the chorus girls were all taking verbal abuse while practising their splits. Often, some person or other, who was working in the club, passed Ruby and Belle's practice lessons, and Ruby would quickly introduce Belle to them, but after the first ten names Belle was out of her depth with trying to remember them all and their jobs.

She felt incredibly self-conscious about her uniform. The bodice was too low cut for her taste, having worn button ups that reached all the way up across her throat for most of her life. Ruby kept telling her it was fine to show a little décolletage and that they were not in a nunnery, but it didn't stop Belle – now constantly having to remind herself that her name was Lacey – from trying to pull her dress up. But then it showed more of her knees, and so she would pull the dress down again.

“Hey, you must know all those old grand oil paintings from two hundred years ago? All the women show half their breasts in dresses from those days!” Ruby comforted her. “Queens and everyone!”

Another thing about the dress was a feature Belle hadn't noticed yet while it had been on the hanger. The skirt part had two layers, the layer above decorated with sequins, but it had a long sideways cut along the side of her thigh. The layer underneath was transparent chiffon, and was a few centimetres shy of displaying the customers the model of her underwear, and the tiny apron with the money pocket didn't help. When she walked past, anyone could see where the line of her stocking ended and her bare thigh under the chiffon began. If she had realised this the day before, she wouldn't have taken the job, but now it seemed a little late to change her mind.

“Do you think I look shameful?” Ruby asked, catching Belle blushing as she was looking up and down at her uniform again.

“No...” Belle replied, trying to lie really well.

“This is the reason why we get great tips. And remember, if a customer gets handsy, you can tell them the bouncer sends his regards.”

Belle nodded. “Got it.”

“Sometimes they'll want to put your tip inside your bra. That's usually good, since it's easier to put big notes rather than big coins in there.”

Belle could feel her face turn a deeper shade of red.

“I'm guessing... no one's ever put anything inside your bra before?” Ruby asked quietly.

“No.”

“Well... it's a first time for everything!” She said brightly, and pulled her down to sit in a booth with her. “Look, Lacey, if you want to back out, it's fine. I can maybe get you to stay here for another night, so you don't need to go in a shelter.”
Belle took a moment to consider it.

Belle had made friends here, the first friends she’d made in the city since her arrival. The pay would be better, the hours were shorter. She would be undoubtedly marked as a *sinful woman* for the rest of her life for working an establishment that was just a hair's breath away from some sort of prostitution probably – the dancers weren't exactly dressed for the coldest winter on the stage, and Aunt Sylvia would declare Belle unsuitable for marriage for good in any *proper society*. But then again, that hardly mattered, since she was already a social disgrace simply for the fact that she had worked as a scullery maid for half a year, and she’d done all of that while dressed up from the tips of her toes to the crown of her head.

“No, I'll be fine, I just need a little practice,” she uttered, at last.

Ruby slipped a bank note in Belle's bra, just like that. And smiled. “There. Was that bad?”

Belle laughed weakly, keeling over a little, as she fished the money out. “Not entirely terrible.”

It wouldn't be the same with a customer, some man with eyes dressing her down like she was for sale, Belle knew.

Ruby took the note, and put it inside Belle's bra again. “More practice,” she said, giggling a little.

“Well well well!” A man's booming voice interrupted them. “Ladies, are you practicing for the new show for the stage tonight?”

“Hello hello, boss, I'm just showing the ropes to our new waitress.”

“You teaching her how to be a customer then?” The black moustached man in the fine suit asked. “Get up on your feet, fresh blood, let me see what we got here.”

Belle's thoughts returned to him thinking of all the ways men could stare at her while she was wearing the uniform, and their boss was just doing at least three of those ways to her now. She tried to smile, and not to make a bad influence, although it irked her to do so. She'd expected... she hadn't known what she'd expected out of her employer. Someone as funny, compassionate, and friendly as the showgirls and Ruby?

“Very nice,” the boss declared. “What's your name?”

“Lacey,” she replied.

“Lacey,” he repeated her name, and licked his lips. Then directed his attention on Ruby. “Good work.” He took off towards the front stage and left Ruby and Belle alone.

“Good work?” Belle asked.

Ruby got out of the booth as well. “Pffth. I think Keith is going to want to put his hands on you. That's our boss, Mr Nottingham. Don't worry, he's more harmless than he appears. He'll paw you when he's drunk, but he doesn't force himself on anyone. You just have to move quickly out of his way when you see him coming after dark, hear that? Other than that, it's just his eyes all over you.”

Belle suppressed a comment, and nodded.

“You can do this, and you'll be safe. Just have to be smart, and I know you're smart,” Ruby said assuringly.
Belle fished the bank note out of her bra, but Ruby told her to keep it. “Get yourself shoes that fit. You'll need them, standing here all night every night.”

Despite her initial reservations, Belle was delighted with the showgirls' revue. The music was wonderful, the girls' singing and dancing was amazing, their skits funny, and best of all was the fact that there was always such a happy mood around the club. She'd expected something darker and dirtier, but what happened most nights was that people arrived to see the show, clapped their hands, drank wine, had a nice meal, although it was mostly for the sake of being able to drink more, played at the gambling tables, danced, and left the club between two and four in the morning.

The first time she saw the burlesque tease, Belle thought she might die out of shame, for watching Claudia's sisters tear off her clothes on stage, to the background music of the riotous clamour of applause and wolf-whistling from the audience. But Claudia was never exactly entirely naked, and at the moment when everyone thought she might finally be, her sisters covered her with feathered fans, or layers and layers of gauzy veils, or whatever it was according to the evening’s theme.

And what happened in the audience was quite amazing. The whole mood of the entire club changed into something indescribable. After the midnight show, it was as if everyone were completely carefree and walking on clouds. Apart from Belle, who viewed the entire thing from sidelines, curiously examining the human behaviour under these circumstances.

The first week went on without incidents, up until Belle's first time of having trouble with a customer. It was an early midweek night, and she went to a table where the maître had just put their first guests of the evening.

Belle froze, once she got to the table.

Maurice went to and stayed in some kind of shock, being only able to stare at the tablecloth for the moment being, and Aunt Sylvia was looking Belle up and down as if she were a caterpillar that had just crawled on her plate in the middle of a lunch in the garden patio at Hortensia's house. After the visual examination, Sylvia actually reached her hand out to touch the split skirt part of Belle's uniform which showed off the side of her thigh. Sylvia lifted the chiffon, said “hm”, and let it fall down again. Then she rose from her seat.

“Belle, you will go change your clothes immediately, and we will go home and never, ever discuss this matter again. Maurice, get your hat, we're leaving.”

“My name is Lacey, madam,” Belle said curtly.

“Don't be ridiculous. You know this is insupportable!”

“If you don't wish to eat here, then I suggest you find another restaurant,” said Lacey.

“Maurice, say something!” Aunt Sylvia snapped.

Maurice looked up, but had trouble meeting their gaze of their waitress. “I'm glad your mother is dead, because she'd die of shame, seeing you like this,” he managed to wheeze.

The maître approached them from the entrance, asking what the trouble was.

“These people were just leaving, they were not aware of the nature of our establishment,” Lacey explained. “They don't approve of the Tripletease Triplets.”
“Ah, I'm sorry our club is not to your taste, madam,” the maître said politely, “I'll have your coats checked out.”

Belle took off towards the bar without saying goodbye, her head spinning.

“If you don't come with us now, don't bother coming home again!” she heard her father shout.

Expecting the earth to open up and swallow her any second now, Belle stomped past the bar into the kitchen and had a glass of water there, trying to catch her breath. She curled up on top of a stool, wondering what the hell was wrong with her. Was she really this desperate, that she had to resort to a night club for work? Was she a loose woman of no moral fibre? Working as a maid would be far more respectable, and a lot less heart breaking for her family.

But working as a maid was a lot more heartbreaking for her, she thought, straightening herself up. She'd just spent months waking up every morning to spend an entire day comparing the contrasts of working as a housekeeper for Rumplestiltskin and as a maid for a lord from Arbonne. Although it was something that had never depressed her to the verge of tears, it had been something that had slowly worn her thin in some way, worn off her shine, and made her thoroughly joyless and dull.

It wasn't the best or the most sensible thing, but Belle felt she couldn't pretend to be a parlour maid or a scullery maid in any household in the city, even if it was the only occupation she had any sort of credentials for. It was an odd thing, this sudden aversion now to her old position, and she couldn't have put it to words to anyone, to explain it. It was just something she felt, and sometimes a person just had to make a decision based on how they felt about it. And it didn't mean she felt good about dressing up like a street walker to get tips in a night club. It just meant she felt less bad about being a waitress, than being a maid.

Winter went on and Belle, or rather, Lacey, worked the night club, got her tips, and never heard from her aunt or her father after their grand scene together. She avoided Mr Nottingham, ate her breakfasts together with showgirls, ran errands with Ruby, and spent her free time trying to find the elusive Rumplestiltskin no one had seen or heard of in thirty years.

Belle was gradually easing into the job. One night, the worst happened – a drunken customer had slipped his hand under her skirt and up to fondle her bum through her underwear, and she had screamed first, and then had the bouncer get rid of the man. The man's entire retinue complained, explaining the bouncer that the waitress was just a little bit skittish, just look at her, showing off her leg like that, what was she thinking? And then the bouncer got rid of the rest of the group.

After that, Belle put more effort into pretending she was someone else than Belle d'Arbon when she came to work. Every time she now put on the uniform, instead of a pampered bookworm, she decided to present herself as Lacey, whose persona had grown from just a fake name to a little bit of an alter ego. Lacey drank cocktails with showgirls after the club closed. Lacey sang. Lacey danced, even if she was terrible at it. Lacey flirted a bit with the customers, and got extra tips for it, which were deposited inside Lacey's bra. And what happened to Lacey at night was of no concern to Belle by day.

She built the character on purpose. She didn't come up with the concept on her own at all, it was something she'd thought of when she'd overheard the showgirl revue in the backstage talking about ways to handle stage fright across many nights. It was something called a stage persona, and in three months, Belle had built herself one, and secretly even took pleasure in it.

Unfortunately, Lacey also attracted Mr Nottingham's attention much more easily than Belle-under-
that-name ever had. But Lacey had her own suave methods for swimming out of Nottingham's advances.

Everything went fine, until one night in early spring, Belle saw a familiar face at the night club.

It was a normal night in every other manner. The club was only half-packed full since the triplets hadn't put on a new show in a while. Lacey didn't even have to come to work before midnight, since the club ran well on half its staff. She was only coming in to cut another waitress' shift in half, who needed to wake up early the next morning. The hours between midnight and four in the morning were strange, what with people getting more drunk and less respectable by the hour, but it didn't scare Lacey any more.

First thing upon her arrival, Ruby had her deliver a bottle of champagne to the backstage, to the triplets, as well as a bouquet of roses. “There's some rich guy in here spreading money around, and wants to know if Claudia and her sisters want to join him in his table.”

“Right then,” Lacey acknowledged, and took off with the roses and champagne ice bucket in tow, glad to be delivering a gift to Claudia, Laura and Paula, who Lacey happened to think were excellent people and friends.

“Is he good looking for a rich guy? Rich guys are always old grey farts, they never look good,” Paula said, hearing the tidings.

“I don't know, I never got a look,” Lacey told her.

“What table is he in?” asked Laura.

“Twenty-seven.”

“Go and take a look! Come and tell us what you think!” Claudia shooed Lacey back out there.

Lacey walked past tables, picking up empty glasses where she could as she headed back to the bar, and was planning a circuit around the rich guy's table in such a way that he could take a subtle look at him.

She didn't plan on running into him at the bar counter.

Ruby was just talking with him when Lacey arrived, explaining that he had sent the champagne as was instructed. The man turned, and for whatever reason, Lacey recognised the face instantly.

“Oh. You,” said Gaston, and sneered, then seemed to find something amusing. “Nice skirt,” he added, with a wink.

Ruby leaned over the counter. “Lacey, do you know Mr Leroux?”

“Lacey? No, wasn't your name-”

“My name is Lacey,” said Lacey, very persistently. “My name is Lacey!”

Ruby and the man both stared at her. Lacey felt a little odd, as if she was about to have a fainting spell. But no, she was fine now, and once again, aware of the situation.

She looked up at the tall rich man who had sent the champagne. “I'm sorry, are you at the bar because you couldn't find a waitress? Perhaps I could get you all sorted?” Lacey started walking the man back to his table, and he followed suit.
“Sorry, I thought you were this girl I once met. A lifetime ago. Are you sure you're not Belle? It's too strange, if you're not.”

Lacey laughed and nodded. “I'm pretty sure I know my own name. My name's Lacey. I sent the champagne backstage, and the dancers loved it. But what could I get for you, sir?”

“It's all just second-rate moonshine in this city. I'd kill for a real whiskey, but I'll take any vodka cocktail that hides the taste of acid you put in it.”

Lacey laughed at the stranger, what was his name again? Ruby had called the man Mr Leroux. He was sitting in table twenty-seven. And he didn't look bad at all. Nuh-uh, not bad at all. Claudia, Laura and Paula wouldn't mind at all spending the night with him. And he'd give the best tips.

“Just a moment sir,” Lacey said, gave the man a cocked smile, and flitted off, pulling her dress down to show a bit more cleavage.
Belle has forgotten her real name and her real identity, and believes she is a waitress called Lacey who is having an affair with her boss.

After winter came spring. The Rabbit Hole revue put up a new show, people came and went, and business was as usual. Six days a week the club was open, and stayed open until four in the morning.

There was a police detective in the city, a very particular one. She was more known as the lady wearing trousers than with her real name, Emma Swan. The detective visited the night club one evening and started asking around. A woman had gone missing, and the trail so far suggested, she might find Kathryn Nolan at the Rabbit Hole. Emma interrogated every waitress in the house, showing a crisp black-and-white photograph of the missing woman.

Lacey, one of the waitresses, seemed to have no displaying her neckline a little more amply than the other girls. She wasn't as curvy as her co-workers so perhaps she was compensating. Strange thing though, Emma could have sworn she'd met this woman before. Briefly. Or perhaps it hadn't been this same woman, perhaps the family was the same.

“Do you by any chance have a sister who works in a fancy uptown manor across the city?” Emma asked casually, after she was done asking about about Mrs Nolan.

“No, I have no family anywhere,” Lacey replied flippantly, and gave a cocky smile as she took off.

When the clock struck four in the morning, Lacey helped the last of their clients towards the cloakroom, and she was hardly tired. When the front door was locked by the bouncer, she had to move on to the bar to go through the night's sales, and to share her tips with the other waitresses. They pooled everything together and shared the night's winnings equally amongst each other. Lacey hated that, she never ended up with as much as she put in the pot. It was a stupid rule, she thought, and made the other waitresses lazy.

That was why she kept a few notes to herself in her corset.

“Good night everyone,” Ruby announced. She was the one that had decided they share their tips. Lacey was a little puzzled that she'd ever considered Ruby as a friend. Her memory was a little fuzzy on how long back Ruby and her went, just a year or two? And had Ruby gotten Lacey this job? Or had Lacey helped out Ruby? Old friendships hardly mattered, since nowadays Ruby was always butting into Lacey's business, as if she were a helpless little child.

So Lacey kept quiet more and more quiet about said business.

Everyone else filed upstairs to their bunk-beds and their shared rooms, but Lacey fished out a pack of cigarettes from her apron pocket and headed towards the back alley loading area. The kitchen was dark, with no lights on, but it didn't bother Lacey, she knew her way around The Rabbit Hole, she didn't need any lights. Besides, it was better that she did this in the dark.
Getting through the storage room slowed Lacey down. The crates of supplies might be packed just about anywhere around the room, but the faint distant light coming from the partially open door helped her find her way, first to the door, then outside to the dimly lit alleyway. The sky above was overcast, and whatever light there was was coming from the end of the alley, from the street lights.

There, in the relative lack of light of the crowded back-alley, stood a man in a cheap suit, drinking the remains of a cocktail that hid the terrible taste of the awful faux-gin that was manufactured in a distillery of limited means somewhere else in the great, big sprawling city. He put down his glass on top of an empty crate - there were piles of them all around - and then he took out his lighter and cigarettes.

Lacey pulled out one of her own, and leaned in for a light. He lit his first, and then hers.

“Been a good girl, Lacey?” He asked.

“No,” Lacey whispered with a wicked smile, and fished the hidden bank notes from her corset, to pocket them with the rest of her tips.

“Naughty,” he said, and grabbed her in a sudden kiss. He blew all his cigarette smoke inside her mouth, and Lacey gagged and coughed when he let her go. The longer she coughed, the harder he laughed.

“Fuck you,” she managed to say while grasping for breath.

Keith managed to quit laughing. “I'm just saying, if you're going to smoke, you have to do it for real, you need to breathe that smoke in, not just fill your mouth and hold it there until you blow it out. Nobody likes a poser, Lacey.”

“Don't be like that, I only just got started,” Lacey muttered, and inhaled her own cigarette, trying to do as Keith had suggested, take it all the way in. When she blew out the smoke, she added, “and I'm only doing it to have a reason to sneak out here. In case anyone asks.”

“Aren't I flattered,” Keith Nottingham said, and stepped closer against Lacey. Keith kept smoking, his cigarette in his left hand when it wasn't in the corner of his mouth, and his right hand wandered around Lacey's body, tracing her waist first, and then crawling up to fondle her breasts with no hesitation, while Lacey moaned, smoke coming out from between her chattering teeth.

“Let's go up,” Keith said, with a little whine in the tone of his voice.

“No,” said Lacey matter-of-factly, a little impish grin on her lips, and blew smoke into Keith's face. He plucked the cigarette from Lacey's hand and threw it on the ground along with his own.

Keith pushed himself harder against her and started kissing and sucking Lacey's neck just underneath her ear.

“This necking, it's all kid stuff, Lacey,” Keith whined at her, between changing the side of her neck to her throat.

“I'm not going to be the girl the boss fucks, got that?” she said, her voice wavering just the slightest bit, with his hand on her breast, and his teeth nipping her just underneath her chin.

“You think I care to be the manager who fucks around with waitresses?” Keith replied petulantly, and continued his administrations.

Lacey said nothing, and just let Keith's hand and mouth turn her body all hot and bothered. Later on
she'd stay in the alley and work herself until she'd be rid of the itch, but only after Keith went up. Living in a room with five other girls, privacy was a real luxury. And it wasn't as if Lacey wasn't keen on putting out for Keith, or anyone else, it was just that her cynical side knew that once that happened, she'd have the life expectancy of a fruit fly at The Rabbit Hole. The moment Keith got tired of her, Lacey would be on the streets, with no place to go, no money, and no friends.

Just starting this whole affair had been a stupid idea, but Lacey was pretty good at doing dumb things. She even rejoiced a little at her own stupidity, with the thrill of knowing she was pushing herself to do things anyone with a common sense wouldn't do.

Lacey loved feeling alive.

And oh boy wasn't Keith doing all he could to help her feel just that.

They were quiet for minutes, while nothing progressed nowhere. When Keith's other hand not on her chest tried to wander down between her legs, Lacey grabbed it and stopped it.

After a while, Keith pressed his crotch against Lacey's. “You're killing me, Lacey,” Keith whispered in her ear, and not for the first time, Lacey was a little tempted to shimmy up her skirts and drop her panties.

But no.

“It's just a little fun we're having, take it easy,” Lacey said calmly.

“Fun? It's more like torture,” Keith muttered.

“Things would get way strange, if we started fucking. It's not like I want a relationship or anything. If you want it so bad, you should go and find anyone you like, right now, if you want. I don't mind.”

Lacey turned her head and captured Keith's mouth into a long, wet, brutal kiss. When it was over, she squirmed away from between the cheap liqueur crates and her boss. “Good night, boss,” she whispered sensuously, and leaned down to pick up her half-dead cigarette from the ground where Keith had thrown it.

Keith seemed to accept his fate relatively well again. He didn't look happy, but he wasn't breaking crates either, which was what he did when he was considerably more drunk, and would rail at her for being such a slut – hah, if she were that, she'd be giving him what he wanted.

When Lacey was certain Keith was gone, and when she'd finished the cigarette, Lacey went to the darkest corner of the alley to relieve herself of her little problem. She sat on the edge of a crate, and slipped her hand under her skirts.

Of course, she could have let Keith do that to her, but then she would have had to give him a favour in turn. Lacey was afraid she might be too easily swayed to do just about anything, after a certain point. And she had to be smart. You're very clever, you know that? someone had said to her, at some point, Lacey recollected, but couldn't remember who had said that. A man. A strange man, a long time ago. The memory was foggy and unreal.

She returned inside, brushed her teeth, washed her hands and face, and fell into bed just as the clock struck five.

Keith Nottingham didn't feature into the closing procedures of the night club every night, but as
spring progressed, his and Lacey's private outings became more and more frequent, and Lacey had a harder time keeping them secret. Nottingham couldn't care less who knew what he was up to with her, but Lacey was well aware that necking the boss wouldn't ease her relations between the rest of the establishment.

The first person to walk on them was Ruby, who just giggled, smiled, threw out a crate, and excused herself quickly, but confronted Lacey the next day with a frown on her face.

“Lacey, are you sure you know what you're doing with Nottingham?” Ruby asked the question out of the blue in the middle of the afternoon at the club, just a few minutes before opening time.

“Relax, it's just a bit of fun,” Lacey said.

“I'm worried about you. He's an asshole, Lacey,” Ruby said, and Lacey turned her back.

“Do me a favour and mind you own business,” Lacey said curtly.

And that was pretty much the last time Ruby and Lacey had a conversation at The Rabbit Hole.

Next it was a couple of showgirls from the revue to witness Nottingham pawing Lacey in the storage room. After that, pretty much everyone at The Rabbit Hole knew what was going on. The rest of the night club staff started to ignore Lacey, but a few of the showgirls started to invite Lacey to their parties.

Lacey didn't care if it was because she was suddenly a social orphan that needed to be picked up and looked after, or if it was because the showgirls suspected that her possibly becoming Mrs Nottingham would mean a friendship with Lacey would pay off in the long run. All she cared about was that she got enough tips to eat food that wasn't stale turnips and mystery sausages, and that she could save up enough money on the side to get a fancy new dress, and shoes to go with that. And enough good fun times to distract her from the dull and monotonous routine of what working at the night club really was.

In late April, Lacey received a surprise. She had barely woken up. It was late afternoon, and she was the only one asleep in her shared quarters, when the shift manager popped in.

“Get up, Lacey! Nottingham wants to see you in his office.”

Despite Lacey having worked at the club for four months, and them having spent almost two months necking at odd hours to pass the time after the club closed, it was the first time ever Nottingham had officially asked Lacey to do anything or go anywhere. Lacey dragged herself out of bed, certain that it must have been something about the night club that Nottingham wanted to see her about.

When she finally managed to drag herself up to the office, she couldn't even enter since there was someone else seeing mister boss already. Lacey waited impatiently, having been woken up for this. She leaned against wall in the corridor, tapping her heel against the wood floor, while the transaction inside Nottingham's office dragged on and on. Finally, a tall man in a suit and a bowler hat emerged. He pocketed a brown envelope in his breast pocket just as he stepped out, and Nottingham called after him.

“Give my regards to Mr Gold!”

The man in the bowler hat replied nothing, but his eyes passed over Lacey briefly, and he touched the brim of his hat with his leather-gloved hands briefly as he passed her with a brisk pace.
Lacey barely heeded the stranger, too busy to sashayed into the office and close the door behind her. She walked right up to the desk and glanced over her shoulder, at the late shadow of the man who'd just left the room. “Who was that?”

“It's rent day, doll, all you need to know,” Nottingham replied, and got up.

“What's up, are you firing me now?”

“Lacey, calm down,” Keith replied, and walked around his desk. Lacey thought he was going to come over and kiss her or something, but he walked right past her, to the coat rack in the corner of the room. There was a big cleaner's bag hanging from it, and Keith took it, and extended it to Lacey. “I got you something.”

Lacey accepted the bag with apprehension. She opened a few of the buttons and peered inside. Then she had to open the rest of the buttons too, to get a better view.

It was a party dress. It had all sorts of things going. Sequins, feathers and very thin chiffon.

“There's shoes inside the bag too,” Keith commented, pacing a little back and forth.

“Nice. Who's it for?” Lacey asked.

“Thought you could wear it at the club tonight,” Keith said, returning to his desk and his nice chair.

“It doesn't really go with my waitress uniform.”

“There's a bunch of other gifts I got upstairs, I thought you could unwrap them tonight, after the midnight show. How about that?” Keith brushed his belt passingly as he mentioned unwrapping, and Lacey laughed.

“And I go back to being a waitress tomorrow?”

“I already told you, I don't fuck waitresses,” Keith said, and reached for his cigarette tin and lighter. He offered Lacey one too, but she declined.

“So what would I be, if I were not a waitress?”

“You could be... working on your back, instead of on your feet,” Keith said, and smiled with his teeth as he lit his cigarette. “Take the dress with you. Wear it tonight, and come sit in my table. Your shift is covered, so don't worry about that.”

Lacey hugged the bag a little closer to her body, narrowing her eyes. “What if I don't want to?”

Keith laughed. “Sure you want to.”

The phone rang just then, and Keith pointed at the door as he picked it up. “Nottingham,” he replied.

Lacey left the room, holding the bag, and feeling quite a few mixed emotions.

The dress was great, for sure. But hardly worth whatever Keith had in mind.

On the other hand, things were not that wonderful any more between Lacey and the rest of the club. Apart from a few of the dancers, so it didn't matter a bit if Lacey actually fucked the manager now.

The few hours of the rest of the afternoon passed, and Lacey spent the time idly by playing cards with the dancers, and watching them rehearse, all the while thinking about the black party dress she'd
stashed under her bed. And about things she would have to do, if she was to put it on.

A tired burlesque dancer flopped next to Lacey, sweating either from last night's partying, or that day's aerobic exercises. It was Paula, one of the three triplet stars of the revue. Lacey loved the triplets. They were fun. Nothing could put down their optimism.

“Paula,” Lacey whispered, “I want to show you something in my room. Can you come up with me?”

The cheery little dance star made sure she wouldn't be missed while she was gone, and up they climbed. Paula was very impressed by the dress, when Lacey dragged it out from under the bed. While Paula was gushing over the feathers and sequins, and thinking what hair style Lacey should wear with it, Lacey tried to come up with a way of telling her embarrassing secret.

Paula picked up Lacey's awkwardness and put the dress back in the bag. “Not a waitress uniform,” she said, but Lacey couldn't fathom if she was happy or sad.

“No. Keith wants me to quit. Make me his... girlfriend. I'm moving upstairs tonight.”

Paula grinned. “Our manager is an asshole.”

Lacey shrugged. “Yeah but I don't have to carry half-unconscious customers to the coat room at four in the morning.” There was an uncomfortable pause.

“You'll manage it, with Keith,” Paula declared confidently and optimistically, like Lacey had known she would. Paula turned around, about to leave, most likely to return to practice, but Lacey took a hold of her arm and turned her right back.

“There's something... nghh... else,” said Lacey, the words coming out of her mouth like the taste of vomit. She was literally shaking a little now. “I need uhm. Help.”

“How do I...” Lacey started, but found unable to finish her sentence.

“Go on...” Paula said, and waited. And waited. “If you don't say it now, I'm leaving.”

Lacey hugged herself with her own arms and grimaced. “I need to know how to pop my maidenhead, so I don't bleed tonight.”

Paula's eyes flew wild with surprise, and her mouth gaped open for a few seconds. Then short “Oh, oh, oh!” started dropping out of the gape. Wells, hmms, and aahhs followed shortly, as the blonde stage starlet turned on her thinking engine.

“Have you tried fingers?” Paula asked.

“Yes!” Lacey replied, sure that her face was as red as a beetroot now.

“Right, right... how about... there are cucumbers they slice into cocktails, they're in the kitchen, right? Try a cucumber?”

“I don't think I can do it.” Lacey grimaced.

Paula looked at her with a soft smile. “Then maybe Keith is going to be very disappointed tonight if you can't be on the receiving end of things.”
Lacey shook her head. “No, I mean... I don't think I can get turned on by a cucumber.”

“Aaah you're talking about moisture! Good point. Maybe you should try it while having a bath?”

A bath. Lacey couldn't remember ever having had a bath in her life.

“We have a bath tub in our dressing room”, Paula explained. “No one else is supposed to use it, you know, hot water rationing and all that, but I think this is a special occasion.” Paula was about to head off again.

“Could you maybe pick the cucumber for me too, I don't know what size is good,” Lacey called after her.

“Sure thing, honey!” Paula called out to her, and then... was gone.

Lacey was damned if she was going to start bleeding when Keith Nottingham penetrated her. That was how she ended up in Paula, Claudia and Laura's bath tub that evening, while the triplets were out. Lacey had the sequined dress along with her in the bathroom, and she kept staring at it while she pretended to enjoy the bath. Her hair was piled up above her so it wouldn't fall into the water.

Paula had left the cucumber on a stool next to the bath tub. It was a little crooked. Lacey wondered if Keith's would be crooked. It would certainly be fitting. Lacey picked up the cucumber and submerged it under the water, while she lay back and tried to will herself to relax, despite the terrible notion that something was slightly off, like there was another her inside her head, whispering from a distance, but the words wouldn't reach her, and came to her all muddled and nonsensical. The manager's girlfriend. Why shouldn't she enjoy this? No harm would come to her, for while time stood still, she wouldn't even get pregnant. Surefire.

Parties, drinks, dresses, shoes, all that was yet to come.

She guided the cucumber home, and perhaps used a little more force than necessary, to make sure she'd draw blood. Twice. Three times. It stung a little, and mauling herself deeper inside was perhaps a little unnecessary, but there you had it. The deed was done. She pulled out the cucumber and threw it carelessly over the side of the bath tub.

Lacey sat in the tub, watching the rather short string of red substance bleed out of her. She helped it along with her fingers, while marvelling how she could feel heavy regret and wondrous relief at the same time. The sadness passed more and more by the second, until there was only a strange sort of feverish joy left, and the whispering voices in the back of her mind subsided. Lacey smiled like a cat with a bowl of cream and found she could relax properly at last.

Once the bathwater started to feel too cold, she scrubbed herself swiftly, and got out. Toweled herself. Once she was suitably dry, it was time for Lacey to wear the exotic gown.

It was by no means a gown she could have worn to theatre or opera, or a dinner. Even Lacey had second thoughts about appearing on the night club floor wearing it. For one, it was meant to be worn without undergarments. Even though it had long sleeves and a hemline that went all the way down to her ankles, and a fluffy train of dark feathers, half of the upper body was made of partially transparent chiffon. Lacey could get by without support around her breasts, to her luck, but she felt more naked than ever in this nightgown of a dress. The parts that didn't show her skin were embroidered black flowers sewn haphazardly across each other, and decorated around their edges with glittering sequins.
She had a feathered headband to go with the dress, and the shoes, the lovely shoes with their heels. Rather tall heels, she found, as she put them on, and felt a little uncertain in them at first. She had to walk around the tiny floor of the bathroom, holding the train of her skirt on one arm, as she practised walking.

At length, she finally emerged from the bathroom, like a butterfly from her cocoon, into the Tripletease Triplets' dressing room, a nest full of feathered fans, velvet gowns, sequins, chiffon, make-up bottles and powders. Lacey applied some of the make-up as liberally as she dared to, and soon her eyes were surrounded by dark lines under dark eyeshadow. A full body mirror gave Lacey a good view of her transformation from a waitress of Nottingham's girlfriend. No one in the night club would have any question as to Lacey's role in their manager's life, not while she was wearing this dress. Just then, the orchestra in the nightclub played a particularly loud melody. Trumpets seemed to herald her entry.

"Time to face the music," she told herself, dug a smile out of her mental back pocket, and entered the party.

The manager wasn't just content to keep Lacey sitting in her booth all evening long. He wanted her to circulate with him, meet their regular customers, and of course, to dance with her. "Let's show you around, sugar," he'd said in her ear, with his lips pressing against her skin, while one of his hands had rested itself permanently on one side of Lacey's bottom, and it stayed there even during a waltz, rather than at her waist where it was customary for people to hold their dance partners.

"Can't wait to see what else you got for me," she reminded him, flashing a bright charming smile as an afterthought, hoping he wouldn't take offence at her bargaining.

"As long as you bring something to the table," Nottingham said. He grinned widely, and leaned in closer again to mutter into Lacey's ear with his moist lips pressed against time, "and speaking of tables, I think we'll start on one, when we get upstairs."

Lacey pulled back a little to make an impish face up at him and to give back her retort. "You said I'd get to work on my back from now on?"

Nottingham leaned in to whisper things about what they could do with her back against the wall, and Lacey couldn't help but feel herself turn on, the more promises he dribbled against her ear. She craned her neck a little to look at the time, it was almost time for the midnight revue. This was the last dance. They were to leave after.

One of the bouncers interrupted them on the dance floor. "Sorry boss, Dove's here and wants to speak to you about the rent."

Nottingham didn't seem pleased by this surprise. In fact, he looked a little scared. He gave Lacey a quick, ferret-y glare. "Go up, now. I might be a while. I expect you to be ready by the time I get there." Then he ran off in a hurry across the dance floor, accompanied by the bouncer.

Lacey didn't even bother to wonder what that was about. Something or other that didn't concern her. She flitted out of the night club and had the pleasure of getting to ride the lift all the way up to the top floor of the building. The lift was out of bounds for everyone else except the managerial staff. No more walking the damn stairs for her, and a good thing too, since the new high-heeled shoes were beginning to take their toll on her.

Nottingham's private rooms were fancy, of course. Nothing but the best for the top rat. Lacey was
not surprised. She found her presents laid out on a sofa. A new coat. Sparkling rhubarb wine, which
was the closest thing you could get in the city to champagne. A perfume. Jewels (cheap tinsel and
glass.) Lacey made herself comfortable, and popped open the rhubarb wine, and poured herself a
generous glass. As she drank it, and really let the taste flood her mouth, it made her think of her aunt
who had bottled her own summer wine from rhubarbs... Lacey shook her head, wondering where
that thought had come from. It was like in the bath, she was having someone else's thoughts whisper
in her head.

Then she noticed there was a balcony with a view. Gleefully, she took herself out, and admired the
view of the great city at midnight in spring. The coat got good use immediately, with her sitting out
there, watching the millions of little lights around her, all cheerful and pretty, while Lacey sat above
them, drinking and smoking like the queen of the whole world, all the while expecting Nottingham
to follow her upstairs and to fuck her on the dining table. Ha!

It happened so that Lacey was standing at the balcony at a fortuitous time. There were very few other
people at that time looking out over the city as she was, and so she got a marvellous eyeful of an
unexpected incident.

Somewhere, in the inner city, a golden light burst out. It moved and expanded like a great big
balloon, growing larger and ever so larger. When it had engulfed just one building, it looked very
curious. When a dozen buildings were trapped inside the ever-enroaching gold bubble, Lacey started
getting afraid. Something terrible was approaching, and it was coming faster than a train! She left the
balcony, hoping that whatever the thing was, the walls of the top floor of the Rabbit Hole would
protect her from it.

She dived on the sofa, in between her gift boxes, and waited for the inevitable crash of that fearsome
force impacting the outer walls. Instead, the light simply passed right through her, went across the
room, and continued on their way, without anything more dramatic than that happening.

Belle d'Arbon jumped off the sofa with a yelp of surprise and terror a second later, and looked under
the coat she was wearing. And closed the coat again. She felt wobbly in the shoes she was wearing.

Someone called the lift down then. She could hear the engine turn on, as it left the top floor.

“Oh, hell,” Belle whispered.

There must have been another exit somewhere, a fire exit, stairs... she opened all the doors, until she
found the right one.

She’d forgotten how to breathe, and walking wasn’t coming very naturally to her either, as she went
down the stairs more in the fashion of sort-of throwing herself downwards. Her feet were not only
killing her, but they weighed like led. She managed to stay up by hanging on tightly to the railing
and thankfully ending up landing on her feet as she egged herself on.

She needed, oh she needed to get to Aunt Sylvia's house, she told herself, on and on, and she needed
to be as far away as possible from the Rabbit Hole.

Shivering with the strange rush that was taking over her body, Belle managed to get back to her old
room where most of her things still remained. She would have preferred to leave the chiffon dress
behind, but there simply was no time for it, Nottingham would come looking for her from this room
next. Belle grabbed her purse, and her savings, changed her shoes. She wrapped a scarf around her
head to hide her face, and descended down into the back rooms' hubbub of the night club. The show
was on, and every stage hand and performer was busy at work. She passed the stage fairly sure none
of them paid too much attention to her.
She slipped into the storage area, where the kitchen staff were busy moving fresh stuff in, waste and empty crates out. A couple of them acknowledged her, but no one said a word as she sidled past them to the back alley door, and ran off into the night.
Chapter Summary

Aunt Sylvia has an errand for Belle

Belle spent four hours of the night at the train station, waiting for the first train of the morning. The coat she'd now presumably stolen was the warmest thing she'd worn in a long time, and it was long enough to cover up the dress underneath, especially the revealing parts of it. She sat on a bench and waited, and waited, while calmly collecting the memories of everything she'd been up to as Lacey in the past months between Yuletide and spring.

At two in the morning, another strange bubble burst through the city, a dark purple cloud whirled across the train station, and was gone. Since Belle hadn't had the opportunity to anticipate its arrival quite in the same way as had happened with the golden light, she was merely a little startled when the purple cloud rolled over her on its way somewhere else, vanishing as swiftly as it had arrived. By three in the morning, Belle had already forgotten the odd cloud. She had plenty of other things to think about.

The first train homewards left the station at half past four. Belle was much calmer and more herself when she rode the train through the city. The sun was about to rise beyond the forest of tall buildings, and painted the sky with a pleasant hue of orange. Belle, exhausted but very awake, put aside her thoughts for a moment just to appreciate the sunrise. When she left the train station at the end of the line, she caught a glimpse of herself from the faint reflection of a glass-covered poster advertising cigarettes. She could barely recognise herself underneath the make-up. Her hair was curled, and the feathered headband was still wrapped around her head, fallen askew and towards the back of her neck. Belle tossed the headband into a waste bin, and continued a walk home that felt like she was headed towards an executioner's block.

Her imagination was simply not capable of fathoming how her father or Aunt Sylvia would react to her showing up back at their apartment wearing something Sylvia could undoubtedly describe only as a prostitute's nightgown. There was even the very, very real chance that they might simply throw her out, cut her off. In a way they had, hadn't they? They hadn't contacted her in four months. And this was where Belle was now headed.

The rising of the morning sun gave her courage, if only because it was warm, and the colour of the sky was pleasant. That was enough to will her heavy feet and heavier heart up the stairs, to be screeched at and judged by the only remaining members of her family. Once she got past the first flight of stairs, she had no hesitation left. This ordeal would simply have to take place.

She still had her own key, and she turned it in the lock softly. After all, it was just past five in the morning, and she didn't want the wake up anyone. And if she was to be lucky, she might have time to wash her face before anyone saw her.

The tiny apartment was as she'd left it the last time. She heard the unmistakable sound of her father snoring coming out of the sitting room. Belle hung her coat in the rack and left her shoes by the door in order to pad quietly around. She headed into the kitchen first, for a glass of water.

Beyond the door was her Aunt Sylvia, sitting at the dinner table, crouched over a notebook, writing
furiously, scribbling with a stub of a pencil so short, she could barely keep her fingers around it, and she had such a profound expression of fierce emotions, it made Belle stop dead in the doorway. When Sylvia noticed her, at last, her face went white and blank.

The clock on the wall ticked time away. Belle looked down at the floor, because she felt Sylvia's staring was piercing a hole in her skull.

Eventually, someone had to speak, and Aunt Sylvia chose to be someone. “Are you here to stay?” She asked, surprisingly level-headedly.

“Yes. If you don't mind,” Belle said, and looked up at her stern aunt, who was worrying her lower lip with her teeth. Belle hadn't ever before really observed that they both had the same habit when they were nervous, or mulling over something. But it was true, there you had it.

More seconds ticked away.

Aunt Sylvia packed away her pencil and notebook, and sighed. “You really ought to clean your face before your father wakes up,” she was about to turn to the pantry, when she stopped mid-move, and gave a very critical once-over at Belle's clothes. “I'll try and find you something decent to wear while you take care of that.”

“Of course,” Belle replied, mumbling the words half-heartedly, and retreated to the water closet. Supplies: one toilet bowl; a shower; a water pail. She even found her old tooth brush she'd left there four months ago. She decided to start with the teeth, they were still sticky sweet from rhubarb wine she'd drank during the night. While she did that, Belle avoided looking into the mirror, partially afraid that she'd find Lacey staring back, wanting to get back... from where ever she had gone.

Aunt Sylvia's magnanimous calm was doing no favours to Belle either. She'd expected a swift and precise execution mere seconds after her arrival, but now she was to wait for her father to wake up, and most likely Belle would be reduced to a silent party once again while Maurice and Sylvia talked over her what was best for Belle.

To be fair, she'd almost ended up selling herself for glass diamonds and rhubarb wine. Maybe she really was completely lost. She certainly did feel lost. And alone. Belle spat the toothpaste out of her mouth and moved on to trying to remove the black eye-liner. Tears welled up, and started streaming down her face, making a bit of a mess of her cheeks. She tried hold them back as she attempted to remove the kohl with soap and hot water, but she ended up with just a lot of black smear all over the sides of her face. She gave up, and allowed herself to cry properly. All of it came tumbling abstractly, with no particular reason attached to the tears.

When she came out again, eyes sore and red from crying, Aunt Sylvia was ready and waiting in the hallway, a white slip and ruffly pantaloons. She looked a little rattled when she saw Belle's washed-up face. “Oh my darling, go put this on in here.” Aunt Sylvia ushered Belle into her bedroom along with the crisp, white cotton undergarments. Belle had just finished changing when Aunt Sylvia returned with a bottle of cooking oil, and a few rags.

“Sit on the edge of the bed,” Aunt Sylvia commanded her, her voice soft, mindful of the man snoring in the next room. Belle acquiesced, and closed her eyes when Sylvia rubbed her face with a cotton rag soaked in cooking oil. The rag turned darker.

“Now then,” Sylvia whispered, and took Belle's hand in hers, “What's the matter?”

No Are you pregnant?, or any questions about the chiffon gown or its origins.
Belle simply leaned against her aunt and let the tears come again. “Oh, everything,” she whispered, and closed her eyes, while Aunt Sylvia petted her hair and crooned into her ear.

When Belle thought she was done crying, she sat up a little straighter and tried to look at her Aunt straight in the eye. She had changed, somehow. There had been the burst of gold light in the city, the night before, perhaps it had affected Sylvia as well? Her face looked kinder, and wiser. In fact, she had more of a resemblance now to Aunt Hortensia. Poor, dead Aunt Hortensia.

“No, I don't know. I thought I loved him, and that he loved me, but I've thought a lot of silly and childish things, now that I think about it.” Belle further hid her face with her palms, and rubbed the oily skin in slow circles. There was the threat of tears coming again, and she was trying hard not to choke on them. Aunt Sylvia grabbed her in her arms and held her while she cried a little more.

“There there,” Sylvia whispered, “you are not silly or childish. Everyone has to go about the world on their own and get a little lost. When I was your age, I did that too. Quite a bit.”

Belle was absolutely astounded by the idea of a young Aunt Sylvia doing the things Belle had done. Well, perhaps Aunt Sylvia hadn't ran away from the Groke, or shoved a cucumber in her vagina, but there was definitely some kind of a confession in those words.

Sylvia continued petting Belle's hair. “It'll all be right as rain, I promise. You just need a little time.”

But no. Belle burst into hiccupsing sobs. “No, I don't know, how it can be! He thinks - I'm dead - and he'll never - come looking - for me and - I'll never find him, and tell him .” Words failed her.

There was more to it than a simple confession of love. She wanted to tell him she knew why he'd done everything he'd done. She wanted to describe to Rumplestiltskin what kind of a person she'd found underneath his layers of pretence and posturing. She wanted to help him find his son. She wanted to tell Sylvia that she was afraid that if she didn't find Rumplestiltskin, then he would be terribly alone and miserable for all eternity.

But was any of it real? It was everything she'd just built up in her mind, based on memories of events that had taken place so long ago, they didn't even seem real to her. If she ripped away all the fanciful things, the only facts remained were, one: she had shared a kiss with Rumplestiltskin that had threatened to disarm him of his magic. Two: he got rid of her.

Another fact: she couldn’t find him.

But it was no good even attempting to explain any of that to Sylvia. Belle couldn't even explain to herself why she should continue to pursue Rumplestiltskin, when all she'd ever gotten out of it was a whole lot of awfulness. Maybe she was hitting her head on a brick wall. The train was at the end of the line. She was here, he was not. Maybe she just ought to stop, she thought.

And words too, they stopped, stopped coming altogether in her mind. She was so very tired. Aunt Sylvia held her, until she fell asleep, she must have, because she woke up later in the day in Sylvia's
bed.

How quiet it was.

Aunt Sylvia was sewing something in the sitting room when Belle got out of bed and looked around. “Where’s father?” Belle asked, realising they were home just by the two of them.

“Maurice left for work. I didn’t mention yet that you came home last night, I thought that surprise would be best saved until he gets back home,” Sylvia said, and held up her sewing. “I’m taking in the seams of one of my dresses for you to wear, how do you like it?”

It was a black-and-green velvet dress which was just a little too ostentatious for ordinary day wear, but it was better than going out wearing just a slip. Belle simply couldn't go back to the Rabbit Hole for the rest of her things.

“It's very lovely, thank you, Aunt,” Belle agreed, and gave Sylvia a kiss on the cheek.

“Let's get you tea and something to pad that tummy with,” Sylvia suggested, and a moment later Belle had drawn her feet up snugly in the corner of the sofa, and watched Sylvia remove pins from the almost-finished dress.

“How would you feel if I asked you to meet some new people?” Aunt Sylvia asked Belle. “There's a charity ball soon, for orphans, and I thought it might do you good to meet new people. Mingle with some single men.”

Belle nodded, while she cradled her tea between her palms. “It might be a good distraction.”

“Yes, I think so too. There's a single man of some fortune I'd like you to meet, especially. I'm not saying you should get engaged right away, but I'm saying you might be surprised to like other men besides Rumplestiltskin, if you gave them a chance.”

A reasonable request. Belle had no heart at all to decline.

“If it pleases you, I'll see him, and all the other ones you'll have lined up for me.”

Aunt Sylvia nodded. “Just try not to roll your eyes too obviously when their small talk bores you.”

“I know how to behave...”

“Do you now.” Aunt Sylvia pursed her lips, and turned the dress. “Here, try this on.”

The dress came with a golden-yellow sash, and Sylvia helped tie it up properly. The bodice was green, the skirt was long and black. The detailed embroidery at the neckline and the sumptuous velvet were what made it seem a little too good for an ordinary afternoon at home.

“I had a pair of peacock earrings that I used to wear with that dress, but I had to sell them,” Aunt Sylvia said, and retrieved a yellow scrap of paper from her writing desk, “I think you need some air, so how about you go and try get those back for me.”

“What, now? Wearing this?”

“I'm sorry, did you have a prior commitment, at the Rabbit Hole perhaps?” Sylvia snapped, raising an eyebrow. “Here, take some money for the earrings, and for the train.”

“No, no,” Belle declined, “I brought some money with me, I'll take care of the earrings, and the tickets.”
Aunt Sylvia insisted on buying the earrings back herself, and Belle was allowed to pay for the train tickets.

“This coat isn't terrible,” Sylvia noted, as she helped the dubious gift on Belle's shoulders, with an intonation probably meaning *I like that you don't look like a street walker while wearing it*. Belle wouldn't have liked to wear it, but it was what she had to do with. Sylvia gave Belle a critical scrutiny before she allowed her to leave, tucking her hair behind her ear and adjusting her hat. “Please don't lose more of my hats, this is the last one,” Sylvia reminded her, and then ushered Belle out.

Stepping outside all alone felt a little bit scary by now, for Belle. She'd ran away from a pirate, a witch, and now a night club manager through the busy, crowded and dirty streets of the city, and she'd stopped feeling safe entirely, especially in a crowd. She kept scanning faces, afraid that her eyes might meet those of her pursuers by some chance.

The train wasn't any better. She found a seat and read the directions to the shop, provided by her aunt, but kept glancing from the piece of paper and its pencil scribblings every thirty seconds, just in case she was being watched.

Aunt Sylvia had drawn her a map on her sketchpad page, and Belle followed it beyond a station she'd never stopped by before. There were mostly small shops in the area. A very harmless-looking precinct of the great and sprawling city. Belle took her time meandering through the streets, making extra sure she was on the right track – she had had quite enough of adventures – up until finally she found the street Aunt Sylvia had directed her to. The buildings on both sides were tall, with six or seven levels of housing above the street level, which was dedicated to shops alone. But no numbers. Belle read the signs instead, until she found what she must have been looking for – a pawn shop.

But the plaque on the door said, in large letters, CLOSED.

The business hours, detailed on a card in the front window, claimed the shop was usually open at this hour. Belle wondered if the proprietor had merely stepped out for a short while.

There were a number of lovely things on display near the front of the shop, and Belle admired the knick-knacks and doodads while she waited.

The spring afternoon in the shopping district was entirely uneventful. Belle still kept her eyes on people passing by, and no one wanted to mind her business.

She hated the thought of going back to Aunt Sylvia empty handed, so Belle tried the front door, and to her surprise, found it open. Perhaps it was some kind of a mistake? Would it be decent of her to lock the door and take off, or would the proprietor mind if she slipped inside and waited there.

After weighing her options for almost a second, Belle decided to enter. A little silver bell chimed just above her as she entered, and it was strange, but the sound was strangely familiar. *Every time a bell rings,* she thought to herself, and descended into the shop. Dusty, but cosy.

“Hello? Is there anyone in here?” She called, even though the front of the store was so small, only a midget or a fairy could have hidden from her in that room. But a partially drawn curtain partitioned the front from a back room.

“Yes,” a man's voice carried out from beyond the velvet curtain, “but I'm afraid the shop is closed. Please leave.”

Belle hesitated for a moment. Of course she ought to leave, if the man asked him to.
“But this will only take a moment, I have some money for you, you see.”

The conversation paused. Belle took the man's lapse of silence as a positive consideration in her favour, and she advanced to the back of the shop and past a curtain. The proprietor had his back turned towards her, but she launched into her explanation right away.

“My Aunt Sylvia,” Belle started, and didn't notice the way the man froze in place at those words, “she pawned some valuable earrings that have been passed on in the family, and she was hoping there was still time to buy them back, I have the ticket you gave her, if you need it.”

The shop proprietor turned his head a little, and peered at her from the corner of his eye, and said nothing.

“Is there something the matter?” Belle asked, softly.

When the man turned on his heels to face her entirely, with a somewhat agonized face, as if he'd eaten some extremely poor fish, Belle thought, oh how strange, he moves just like Rumplestiltskin. He even dressed like Rumplestiltskin. But his hair was not right, nor was his skin, or the colour of his eyes. This man had lovely, brown eyes.

“Belle?” He asked, and her name fell off his lips with an agonized whisper, while he knit his brow in a familiar expression that Belle had seen, and could remember.

She had to take a hold of a nearby surface to lean on it because she thought her knees were feeling very weak and they might buckle at any second now. Rumplestiltskin caught on with that and crossed the empty room between them to hold her by the shoulders, still wearing the stare of disbelief.

“You're alive. This is not a trick, you're a alive,” he whispered to her, and Belle could do nothing but nod at first, because her head was swimming.

The next second they were holding each other – he more than her, perhaps – and repeating each other's names like they were holy mantras. Eventually, Rumplestiltskin, this one in human skin, plied Belle off, and held her by the arms again.

“You have to tell me what happened to you,” he told her, a fierce anger already building deep inside him, and Belle shook her head at it. As it was, she had questions of her own.

“It... it's a long story. How are you so... human? Is it because we're in the land without magic?” She queried, with equal intensity, while trying to ignore the demand of her body that she plaster herself against him and never ever go away.

“Ah, no longer that, my sweetheart, there is magic here now. And this is... just a ruse.” Rumplestiltskin smiled wickedly, and snapped his finger. The illusion vanished, and there he was, as Belle had learned to know him: green-golden, scaly, with the eyes of a cat, and teeth black where a second before they had been almost white. Another grand gesture, and the illusion returned.

“That purple cloud last night,” Belle remembered suddenly, “that was magic. But what was the golden light?”

Rumplestiltskin smiled, seeming extremely pleased with himself. “I arranged someone to help me along on my way. The golden light was the spell on this city breaking. None of the citizens are no longer slaves to the Queen Regina's whims.”

“She's the one that took me, she had me imprisoned,” Belle said, recognizing the name. The next
thing she knew, she was already regretting telling him that, as he listened to him rant and rave about how much the Queen would suffer.

“Absolutely not,” Belle declared, and shook her head as she leaned away from him, “You can't hurt anyone, if you want me to stay with you,” she said, pleadingly, and that gave Rumplestiltskin pause at last.

“Of course, my sweetheart,” he whispered, and grabbed Belle into a fierce embrace. She closed her eyes tightly and wound her arms around him. Rumplestiltskin smelled of himself, and Belle was happy she could press her face into his hair and his neck and inhale him. She'd never properly embraced him before in her life, not like this, and she found herself slowly, meticulously, tracing the feel of him underneath his suit, and she found it thrilling that he was doing the same to her. There was nothing untoward with the general areas both of them were touching, just arms, and back, but then Rumplestiltskin's hands wandered up along her arms, and caught her face in his palms to pull her back just a little bit.

Belle opened her eyes to see her beloved so mournfully sad, it broke her heart a little.

“I wish I could kiss you,” he muttered, and Belle nodded in agreement.

“I know,” she whispered in response, “but this is rather nice too,” she added, and ducked back into the embrace. They swayed together for a little while, and for that moment, it was perfect and enough for Belle.

Eventually, at long last, they managed to untangle themselves from each others' arms, but Rumplestiltskin still held one of her hands in his, after they broke apart.

“Do you need anything?” He asked.

Belle smiled brilliantly, unable to control her facial expressions. Some parts of her cheeks were already aching from overuse. “Mm. I don't know. I am well. I thought I was here to collect Aunt Sylvia's earrings, but I'm not so sure... does she know who you are.”

Rumplestiltskin nodded, and seemed grave again. “Yes, I had some... words, with your father, last summer.”

Belle nodded, and the aching brilliant smile faded. Ah.

“It... I hope it doesn't matter anymore.”

That was why Aunt Sylvia had been so strange about sending her out, Belle thought, she hadn't wanted Maurice to know.

Belle nodded slowly. “My Aunt sent me here because she wants me to meet a single man of some fortune.”

“Oh indeed? How... nice. I do have her earrings still.” Rumplestiltskin dropped Belle's hand and led her back into the shop. She stood still as she watched him open a glass display case and bring out the earrings.

“Why the pawn shop?” Belle asked.

“A disguise. I have spent twenty-eight years here without magic, and this city is full of people who I imagine would love to get the better of me in a fight.”
Belle nodded. “Hmm. There's a pirate and a witch, who were looking for you... I suppose they are the kinds of people you've been hiding from?”

Rumplestiltskin's interest was effectively piqued. “Do you remember their names?”

“No... sorry. The woman, we saw her once, in the forest, outside the Dark Castle. You shot her in the head!”

“And you were worried she wouldn't make it,” Rumplestiltskin remarked, as he wrapped the earrings into a tiny package at the counter.

“The pirate had a hook for a hand,” Belle continued, trying to remember details of events that had taken place almost a year prior.

The description gave Rumplestiltskin some pause. “That is... interesting.”

Belle frowned a little. “What sort of deals did you make with these two?”

“Very unwise ones,” he replied, and that seemed to be the length of the discussion he was willing to get into about these subjects.

Belle hesitated for a moment about sharing more details of everything that had transpired aboard the pirate ship. But just mentioning how Queen Regina had had her imprisoned had sent Rumplestiltskin into a fit of rage, she hadn't even told any of the terrifying particulars. Belle had to assume something much worse might happen if she explained how she had been drugged and kept in a cage and interrogated with potions. And those two weren't the only people Belle had been on the run from. What if she tried to explain what had happened at the Rabbit Hole? Would Rumplestiltskin simply turn Keith Nottingham into a mouse? Or something worse?

And so Belle decided to keep her silence, and her secrets too.

For now, she thought. Until everything calmed down.

For now.

“How did Aunt Sylvia and my father find you?” Belle asked, hoping to change the tone of conversation a little lighter.

“Your Aunt has quite the memory for faces, she came here, and recognised me instantly.”

“She is very sharp,” Belle admitted. Rumplestiltskin pressed the wrapped-up earrings into her palm and she pocketed them, to allow her both hands to be free to grab Rumplestiltskin into another embrace. And – oh how wonderful – he responded with a strong embrace of his own.

“Do you need to leave soon?” Rumplestiltskin muttered near her ear.

“I'm not sure. I need to see my father soon. We've... been apart for some time, recently.”

“If there's anything you need,” he repeated himself, “please tell me.”

Belle felt a little embarrassed to be asking, but she plied herself out of their mutual embrace and worried her lip just before uttering the words.

“Do you think, perhaps, you could arrange me some clothes?”
In a matter of hours, Belle had not only a new dress, but several of them. She also had a new, beautiful townhouse, with acres of space, and furnishings, and a seaside view. Aunt Sylvia and Maurice were being picked up by Rumplestiltskin's assistant, a man called Dove. Belle found herself wandering from room to room with Rumplestiltskin shadowing her wherever she went, both of them ending up in what was now her bedroom, marvelling the fact that that very night she was going to sleep in a room of her own, in an actual bed, not a bird cage, not a boat, without maids, waitresses, aunts, adventuring sword princesses, beasts, vampires or ice monsters. It had been quite a while since she had had something so absurdly normal as that. The night before she'd gone to the opera, some thirty years prior.

“I think... I should go, before your family arrives. Call me on the telephone, if there's anything you need,” Rumplestiltskin told her, and squeezed her tiny palms between his huge hands.

“You should stay, I'm sure they'd like to thank you yourselves for all of this!” Belle said, and wrangled her hands free so she could capture his wrists with them.

“I'd rather not. Besides, I have other things to attend to, which I've been ignoring all afternoon.”

“What things are they?”

He blinked slowly, considering his answer. “I have to find someone, in this world.”

Ah. “Yes... your son?”

Rumplestiltskin tilted his face slightly, and regarded her with a soft look in his eyes. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Of course,” Belle replied, and released his wrists, “don't let me keep you,” she added, and tried to control her own hands, to keep them to herself.

“May I see you tomorrow?”

“Please do! How early should I expect you? For breakfast?”

He grinned and leaned in, as if to kiss her, but remembered himself at the last moment. But he didn't pull himself away, they just stood very close together for a moment, eyes locked and bewildered. Time stood suspended for a little while, and neither one had the courage to breathe. Not until Belle found her eyes wandering south, to take a closer look at his lips, which were so close, and so inviting. The moment ended then, and Rumplestiltskin pulled himself back, away from her.

“Lunch,” he promised, and removed himself hastily from Belle's bedroom, while she retreated to the end of her wide, luxurious bed, sat down at the end of it, and thought her heart might burst out of its seams before they would see each other again.

End Notes

Collected references and inspirations:

The Fairy Tale of Aunt Hortensia, Dulcina and the University Student; and Aunt Hortensia's Most Beautiful Fairy Tale by Mika Waltari
Every Woman’s Guidebook, a collection of authors
The Cottingley Fairies
The Groke, the Muskrat, Stinky, Snufkin and Teety-Woo by Tove Jansson
Arsène Lupin by Maurice Leblanc
Raggen det är jag by Gunnar Widegren
Hvitträsk
East of the Sun and West of the Moon
Bolshevik Mean Girls
A Journey Through Europe (the original)
On The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin
A Tale of Two Cities by Charles Dickens
A Song for Arbonne by Guy Gavriel Kay
Lyonesse by Jack Vance
Sokushinbutsu
Howl’s Moving Castle by Diana Wynne Jones
Stardust (the film because cba to read)
Un long dimanche de fiançailles by Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Lady Chatterley’s Lover by D.H. Lawrence
Peter Pan by J.M. Barrie
Swan Lake by Tchaikovsky
Jorinde and Joringel, Brothers Grimm #69
Turandot by Puccini

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