Mr. and Mrs. Gold

by ShakespeareanHoneyBadgers

Summary

What if Rumplestiltskin HAD rescued Belle from the Evil Queen? What if Belle had never been in the asylum, instead right there at Mr. Gold's side as the story unfolded? Highly AU, a look at how Season One may have played out had Belle been present for each episode.

Notes

Well hey this is now going to be posted to AO3 for some reason! Yay!
Disclaimer: As you can probably tell from the fact I'm writing fanfiction, I don't own Once Upon a Time or any of its characters.

Guarding the most important prisoner in the kingdom wasn't a prestigious job. It required long hours underground in a damp mine with minimal light and nowhere to sit. Still, it went to the most prestigious guards, ones that had proven themselves in battle or duty, and even on them it was taxing. They had to remain constantly alert, always on their game, in case the little man in his solitary cell decided to cause mischief.

They claimed he couldn't escape, but Kingsley had seen enough of magic not to put anything past a loophole, and here was the best loophole shark in the world. On the best of days, he was restless, pacing around his cell and muttering to himself. On the worst of days, he pestered the pair of guards, trying to weasel information of any sort out of them. A previous guard had let his name slip, and was mercilessly tormented with every gruesome detail of his future. The guard had gone mad, and all the little man did was giggle as he sobbed.

Rumplestiltskin was a sick monster, and Kingsley was glad he was locked up.

Today, he was different. He perched on the wall as easily as if it were a chair, completely still except for the occasional movement of his head or flick of his eyes. He watched the ground as if there was a play being performed in the dust, one he was eager to see the end of. He was silent. He looked calm.

Porter clamped a hand down on Kingsley's shoulder, looking the fellow guard in the eye. A look that said he shouldn't dwell on this, lest Rumplestiltskin pull him into a trap. Kingsley turned away, still apprehensive.

Rumplestiltskin's head jerked up as he stared out of his cell. His lips slowly peeled back to reveal a rotting smile.

"She's coming," he announced.

A chill coursed up their collective spines as they exchanged a glance. She could've referenced anyone; the Evil Queen, Snow White, even Cinderella… Rumplestiltskin slipped down from his perch and started running his fingers through his hair, smoothing down his clothes as if trying to look his best.

Kingsley's blood ran cold. It was none of them. It was someone far more sinister and bloodthirsty, the kind of monster who would call the Dark One her husband (the kind of monster who the Dark One would obey without cause). The Caretaker. The Devil's Bride. The Harlot of Hell. The Chosen One. She was called plenty of names, and she answered to them all.

Heels thudded dully against the ground, announcing her arrival. They drew their swords and raised them as a hooded figure approached quickly, a basket on her hip.

"Stop!" Kingsley thundered, his voice an octave higher than usual.

She paused in the torchlight, her cloak a bright shade of blue with intricate golden details. It was parted down the center to reveal a simple maid's dress, also in blue, and a pair of simple shoes. She lifted her gaze, revealing silken brown curls and a comely face. Startling blue eyes peered at them as though she was amazed to see anyone down this dark corridor.
It had to be her, coming down to visit Rumplestiltskin unannounced, but she didn't strike him as being particularly...bloodthirsty. Pretty yes, innocent maybe... It could just be a mask.

"What are you two still doing down here?" She asked, paying no mind to the swords drawn at her, "You should be at home, with your families and loved ones, while you still have them."

She tried to brush past them, but they blocked her way.

"Miss, you can't be down here." The woman sighed impatiently.

"The curse to end all curses is on its way to the kingdom. I'd like to spend my last few moments of freedom and happiness with my husband."

"But-"

"What am I going to do? Spring him free for five minutes? Please," she gently brushed the sword aside and continued towards the prisoner.

The guards stared after her as Rumplestiltskin grinned, hands clasped together.

"She's right," he said, "You might be wasting the last moment you'll ever have with your dearies again just watching the pair of us do..." He paused dramatically, "...nothing at all."

They looked at the pair one more time, before turning tail.

Rumplestiltskin waited until they were gone before moving to the spikes of bars. Belle reached with her free hand inside and he took it as delicately as porcelain.

"You took your time in coming to visit, dearie," he lightly chided.

"I would've come sooner, but I had to work through your honey-do list," she countered.

She rested her head against a bar as his fingers slowly laced in hers. She closed her eyes, while his flicked over her face, memorizing her.

"Everything's in order," she said, grasping the handle of the basket tighter.

"Of course."

"Packed... Ready to go..."

"Good."

He raised his other hand to her cheek, pushing curls back and tucking them behind her ear. Her eyes opened to meet his.

"It's going to be alright," he murmured, "I've made sure it will be."

"When, though?" He shrugged.

"In about...twenty-eight years." Belle grimaced.

His hand traced down to her chin, keeping it firmly up.

"We won't even realize our prison...one day we'll wake up and it'll be like we just got there."

"It's easy for you to say. Twenty-eight years is just an eye-blink to you," she grumbled. He smiled.
"I'll wake you up the minute I come to," he leaned against the spikes, his body as close as he could manage to hers, "I promise."

She leaned forward, letting the bars and Rumplestiltskin support her. His promise was as good as a deal, and it eased her anxiety somewhat. Still, the unknown loomed before her, the only certainty that there would be some form of unhappiness waiting for them. They were not the main antagonists, but Regina wouldn't make things easy for them. She didn't want to go to sleep, to fade into some horrid limbo where she might not even recognize Rumplestiltskin. Even if her life wasn't perfect, she enjoyed it.

Rumplestiltskin's lips were on her temple; not kissing, gods no. Just there, a comforting sensation for them both. He watched over the top of her head as a thick green mist started to slink its way down the corridor, coming ever closer to them. He didn't betray what he saw to Belle in any movement or noise.

He closed his eyes while she stared unblinkingly at his chest. The last thing he smelled was her. The last thing he tasted was her. The last thing he felt was her.

III

It was a jet plane slamming right into his chest, knocking him back. It was a bullet to the head, one that didn't kill him instantly but rather exploded once inside and smeared his brains against his skull. It was a shot to the groin of shock and pain, and a shot to the heart when it finally caught up with the rest of his body.

Mr. Gold kept his cool, even as another life violently asserted itself in his conscious. He smiled and nodded to her.

"What a lovely name."

In fact, it was probably his second favorite name right now. And what a lovely young woman the savior grew up to be.

The flash of sudden knowledge was ebbing thankfully and he tried to put himself back into the proper pair of shoes. He was standing here as Mr. Gold, a pawnbroker and business man with a limp, not the magic-wielding leather-clad Rumplestiltskin. Before him was Granny, not Widow Lucas, and behind him was Ruby, not Red. It was hard to tell whether the looks were normal, or if they suspected anything out of the ordinary. Both personas warranted the reactions he was receiving.

He sized the savior up. She had just arrived to their little town, so she couldn't've done much damage yet. How many realized the truth? Was it just old Regina ruling on her little suburban throne? Even Emma didn't seem too conscious.

"Enjoy your stay…Emma."

He turned to leave, glancing briefly at the not-so-big bad wolf and the bell next to the door.

Bell…bell… Belle.

He nearly tripped over the step as he was struck with another blow. This time, it wasn't knowledge, but urgency that unseated him. He had to go to her. He had to bring her back to him as he promised he'd do. Ignoring the throb in his bad leg, he hurried down the sidewalk, wishing he could run. That evil soul…
Rumplestiltskin had asked Regina for comfort, for a good life for him and his Belle. She had given him exactly what he asked for. They lived in a grand house and wanted for nothing; Regina had even kept their marital ties intact. But their relationship had dissolved into mere civility. They passed each other on their errands occasionally, talked business between their shifts at the pawnshop, told each other goodnight and slept in the same bed. They didn't fight or argue. They didn't do nonsensical romantic gestures or exchange anything more poetic than a tired "love you". The most physically intimate they ever got was a quick peck, and that was only on rare occasions.

It was a comfortable marriage, but stagnant as a glass of water, and he could not see the woman he fell in love with tolerating that.

He rounded the mailbox that proclaimed in calligraphic letters "The Golds", up the steps to pause briefly at the "Welcome" mat before swinging the front door open. He wanted to shout her true name, but stopped himself in the nick of time.

"Rose!"

"In here," she called back, a siren to a tired sailor.

He entered the parlor to see that some things never changed. She was curled up in a deep seated chair, legs tucked underneath her and one arm supporting her head. "The Count of Monte Cristo" was unfolded in her lap, long curls cascading like a veil over her face. Twenty-eight years of suppressed passion suddenly bubbled to the surface and it was all he could do not to jump her. She glanced up from her book.

"How was Granny's?" She asked. She then started to take him in, his less-than-perfect appearance, his breathy voice, his wild lustful eyes. She furrowed her eyebrows in confusion, "What's-"

Mr. Gold started forward, closing the distance between them with long strides.

"It's time to wake up, Belle," he murmured. She stared at him.

"Belle? Who-"

He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her. Unfortunately he had no time for tenderness, immediately putting his all into it. Belle gave a squeak of surprise, at first unyielding to his advance. Her lips softened, kissing him back tentatively. They held the kiss for as long as Mr. Gold dared, then he slowly retreated.

She stared at him and, for a minute, he feared it hadn't worked after all. Then, she spoke.

"Rumplestiltskin?" She glanced around, bewildered, "Where are we?"

"In a land without magic."

She turned back to him and he restrained himself from kissing her again. Barely. She was processing the merge, two lives forming a similar hybrid to the one he had been experiencing. The dust was quick to settle and she laughed.

"I can kiss you." Her eyes lit up as though he had given her the world. Mr. Gold gave her a wolfish smile back.

"I can kiss you." He proved this fact by doing it again. Belle was only too eager to comply.

"The Count of Monte Cristo" fell to the ground as Mr. Gold continued his advance. Belle uncurled,
positioning her legs on either side of him while her arms wrapped around his waist.

They spent the remainder of the night catching up on twenty-eight years of suppressed passion, and nearly three decades of avoiding true love's kiss. They kissed until their lips bled and their lungs burned, feeling as though they were reunited at long last, even if they had never left each other's side.
Emma meets Mrs. Gold; Regina confronts Mrs. Gold about a book she's given to Henry.

Belle attends Snow White and Prince Charming's wedding, offering a warning about the Evil Queen's threat.

Emma Swan had lived her adult life in cities around the United States but, as couldn't be helped, she had also spent some time in small towns. They were quaint little oddities, where everyone knew each other's business and everyone's faults were under a microscope. Emma preferred to be invisible, anonymous, just another face… Storybrooke wouldn't let her have her way. In the twelve or so hours she had been there, she had met the mayor, the sheriff, the town proprietor, her son, the town's grandmotherly matron, her son's shrink, and a slut wanna-be, with just about as many varying accents. If there was a stereotype, Emma was sure it would be found here.

Still, nothing prepared her for her first glance at Mrs. Gold.

She had just dropped Henry off at school, deciding to go back to the diner in hopes that her hot chocolate was still waiting for her. She glanced down the street to see a young woman making her way towards the heart of town. A book was open in her hands, and she seemed completely absorbed by it. She stepped off the curb and into oncoming traffic.

"Hey, lady! Look out!" Emma yelled.

The town's speed limit of 25 wasn't exactly the throes of death, but cars still had a good couple of tons of steel on a pedestrian. The cars coming from either direction slowly came to a stop to let her pass, as though prepared for the woman to completely ignore the common sense laws of the road. She stepped up onto the curb of the other side, rounding a sign. Pongo bounded after her despite Archie's best efforts to restrain him. Archie smiled and greeted the woman as she quickly patted Pongo, eyes never leaving the page. Archie didn't seem the least bit phased at the woman's lack of greeting, continuing on merrily.

There was some remodeling going on in one of the shops, construction workers moving in and out with supplies. Seconds before a 2x4 would have smacked her in the face, the woman ducked, straightening after the danger had passed. The worker gave her an apology instead of what Emma thought was a well-deserved "watch where you're going". A couple of other workers set down the children's see-saw they were moving out and she walked up one side and down the other as if it were part of the road. The workers picked the see-saw back up and kept going.

She paused in front of the post office, peeling a hand away to rummage through the woven straw handbag on one arm. She pulled out some letters, pushed them into the mailbox, and then continued to the next intersection. She stopped at this one, letting an Oldsmobile that thought it was a sports car pass, before she continued on her journey. Emma couldn't stop staring. If that
chick tried to read a book walking down Times Square like that, she would've been run over. And the townspeople just adjusted to her like it was some everyday occurrence? Strange things happened, but this was just downright bizarre.

Emma made her way back to Granny's, only to see the woman standing in the pathway leading from the outdoor seating to the entrance. She didn't take a seat. She didn't put her book away. She just stood there, reading. Emma studied her a moment, expecting her to notice her gaze. She didn't. Emma shrugged and moved around her, going inside.

No one was paying attention to the woman outside. Emma took a seat at the counter and Granny immediately came over with her warmed-back-up hot chocolate. Emma thanked her, but continued to watch the strange girl. She looked to be about Mary Margaret's age, slim and pale with long brown curls pulled back in a loose ponytail. She wore a white button-up blouse and dark blue jeans, caught between casual and business. She was odd, but overall harmless, Emma decided.

She finally closed her book, glancing around as if wondering how she had got there. She recovered quickly, pushing the door open.

Emma jumped when a chorus of "good morning"s erupted from the diner. The girl smiled and started to greet them back.

"Good morning Sheriff Graham, Sidney, Walter, Kathryn…Granny," The elderly woman gave a maternal smirk. The girl started to make her rounds, chatting up each customer in turn as though it were a party.

Emma leaned in towards Granny conspiratorially.

"Who's Little Miss Sunshine?" She mumbled.

"Rosaline Gold," Granny replied, "A funny girl, but she's got a good heart."

Ruby started to set a place a seat away from Emma; a cup of tea, a cinnamon roll with a side of fruit, utensils.

"You're late," Ruby chided the woman goodnaturedly once she was done working the room. She shrugged.

"Can't help it. The slave driver turned off my alarm."

Rosaline Gold hopped up onto the stool and then glanced at Emma, who was trying to pretend she wasn't just watching the stranger. She smiled.

"I'm sorry; I don't think we've met before."

"We haven't," Emma said. The woman offered her hand.

"My friends call me Rose," she said. Emma shook her hand.

"Emma…my friends would probably call me Emma if I had any." Rose laughed. Emma didn't mean for it to be a joke.

"Well it's nice to meet you…Emma." Rose pulled the book out of her bag and set it on the counter, "Thanks for letting me borrow it, Ruby. It was pretty good."

Ruby's jaw dropped, eyes widened in astonishment as though Rose had just slapped down
irrefutable evidence of Bigfoot.

"I just gave that to you yesterday! There's no way you could've read it all already, it's like four hundred pages!" Emma glimpsed the cover; a man's tie with the title "Fifty Shades of Grey" to the right of it. Rose shrugged.

"It was a slow day."

"You're insane!" Ruby declared, snatching the book off the counter as if insulted, "It took me six months to read it! Six months!" Rose frowned.

"Does this mean I can't borrow the sequel from you?" Ruby gave a growl-snort hybrid, rolling her eyes so hard Emma swore they'd snap off their tendons or whatever they were attached to.

Rose picked up her fork and cut into her cinnamon roll. The frustration subsided and Ruby's elbows came up onto the counter, leaning in towards the older woman.

"Sooo…?" She pried. Rose glanced at her.

"So…what?"

"So what did you think?" Ruby grinned, "Pretty hot, am I right?" Rose shrugged, chewing and swallowing.

"It's not the best erotica I've ever read, but I did get an idea or two to try out." If it was possible, Ruby's grin widened.

"Oh? With who?" Rose held up her left hand, arching an eyebrow.

"Who do you think?"

Ruby examined the hand for a moment, then recoiled so violently it was as if something had bit her.

"With him? EW! That's disgusting!" She shrieked.

No one had been paying attention to the conversation before, besides Emma. Now everyone in the restaurant had turned to see the cause of Ruby's outburst. Rose sank lower in her seat, partially covering her face with one arm.

"Goddammit, Ruby…" She grumbled. Ruby threw her arms up in the air.

"I need to go bleach my eyes!" Though it was questionable whether her threat was serious or not, she did retreat to the kitchen.

There were two rings on the third finger of Rose's left hand; one was a typical golden band, while the second was a little less typical. The ring was studded with small stones that looked like topaz, but they sparkled as if there were flecks of glitter somehow inside of them. She was married, so either everyone referred to her by her maiden name (odd, but not unlikely) or she had married into the Gold family (more likely). Emma wondered how the woman was related to the man she had seen last night; daughter-in-law maybe? Then she caught sight of her inner arm.

It was too ugly to simply dismiss as a bruise, but it was dark like one, running from her wrist to the crook of her elbow in a direct line. It was jagged like a scabbed gash, but in shades of purple and black. Emma had seen a lot of birthmarks before (it helped in her line of work to have some
distinguishing feature like that), but none had looked so…sinister.

"So what brings you to town, Emma?" Rose asked, resting her arm scar-down on the counter. Emma grimaced as she realized she had been staring at it.

"Uh, well…my past actually." Rose's eyebrows lifted.

"Really?"

"Yeah, it uh…caught up with me." Emma was still getting used to explaining the situation.

"In a good way or a bad way?"

"Good way," Emma insisted quickly, drumming her fingers against the coffee mug, "My um…the son I gave up for adoption…he found me."

"I can imagine that would be quite a shock," Rose said, continuing to eat.

"Yeah, it was…" Emma waited, but Rose didn't seem inclined to interrogate her, "…you don't wanna know who he is?"

"I figured if you wanted me to know, you'd tell me," she sipped at her tea, "And if not, well, there's always the grapevine."

Emma wrinkled her nose in distaste.

"If it's anything like the grapevines I've heard through, you can't really trust it."

"I've got a few strong branches," she assured her.

Emma let the woman finish up her breakfast, playing with her cup and trying not to watch her like some sort of weirdo.

"…it's Henry," she blurted out, "The Mayor's son."

Rose glanced up at Emma, tilting her head to the side. There was no accusation in her eyes, nor was there surprise. There was merely curiosity at the new information. Those blue eyes were a wonder, though, so big and blue she looked like a newborn or a chick with contact lenses or something. Emma bet she could wrap a lot of people around her fingers with those things. She found herself wanting to believe that the innocence wasn't a show, that this lady was as honest as she appeared… but Emma had found out a long time ago there was no such thing as an innocent person.

"He has your chin," she finally said, setting her fork down, "Hopefully the news hasn't caused too many ripples in either of your lives."

Emma snorted, "Well it's not like telling a kid the Easter Bunny isn't real; he's got a parent who gave him away for Christ's sake. Everything changes when biological meets adoptive."

"Words of wisdom," Rose noted. Emma thought it was just common sense.

She sighed.

"His other mom isn't too happy about it, closed adoption, sneaking away to Boston to bring me home, yada yada." Rose tried to suppress a smile.

"I'm sure Regina isn't taking to it well. She's a bit…controlling and yes, Sidney, feel free to tell her
I said that if you want to," she raised her voice without turning around. The reporter looked like his hand got caught in a cookie jar, focusing much more intently on his bacon and eggs now. Rose grinned at Emma, "The mayor already knows how I feel about her."

Ruby cleared away their dishes and then went back to leaning on the counter, acting as though she was just another girl hanging out with her friends instead of a waitress on duty.

"Emma's going to be here for the week," Ruby offered. Rose smiled.

"That's great. I'm sure Henry's dying to get to know you, and vice versa." Emma shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't think "dying"'s the right word… I mean, I do want to get to know him, but…I don't want him to get too attached," she frowned, "I don't really stay in one place too long."

"I'm sure he's thrilled just to know you care," Rose murmured. Emma blinked.

"What makes you say that?" Before Rose could answer, Emma noticed the collective breath being held. Ruby had gone as rigid as a retriever during the hunt, staring out the window. Emma turned.

It wasn't much of a stare-worthy sight, in her opinion. It was only Mr. Gold idly standing on the sidewalk in front of the diner, trying his hardest not to look like he was waiting. Rose sighed.

"There's the old ball-and-chain now," she said, sounding a little too cheery to be using that phrase, "Check please, Ruby." No sooner were the words said that Ruby took off for the register.

Rose rolled her eyes at Emma as if to say "can you believe these people?". Emma smirked, but she didn't agree with her. If the man owned most of the town and had such a reputation, it had to be for some reason, even if it was only a matter of presence.

"It was nice to meet you, Emma," Rose said as Ruby set the receipt down in front of her. She pulled out a twenty and set it on top, "Keep the change," she told Ruby, who murmured a quiet "thanks".

" Nice to meet you too, Rose."

"Good luck with Henry…and Regina."

"Thanks."

Rose hopped down off of her stool and headed for the door, receiving and giving goodbyes to the other customers. She paused at the door, back against it.

"And Ruby?" The waitress glanced up, "Since you're not letting me borrow the sequel, I'll just have to go out and buy it during my lunch break. I want to know if Christian changes his ways for the woman he loves."

"Don't spoil it for me!" Ruby whined. Rose winked, and then slipped out the door.

Emma watched her go down the walkway, drawn in she guessed as much as everyone else.

"Well, guess it's time to fill the car with antifreeze and salt the roads," Granny said to no one in particular, "Because hell just froze over."

"Mr. Gold doesn't come to the diner," Ruby insisted, filling Emma in on the local drama.
"And you never see them together," Graham piped up, "It's always either one or the other."

"For years I thought they lived in separate houses, or he slept in the pawn shop or something."

Sidney offered.

Mr. Gold smiled as Rose came up to him, his eyes darting away and then back to her boyishly. He didn't look a lot like the man who was being all creepy with her at the inn last night; it was hard to believe anyone found him intimidating the way he acted with Rose in sight. She strolled up to him, a few words were exchanged, and then they kissed.

That was not the way a father-in-law might kiss his son's wife. No, Rose was his wife, Emma was sure of it now.

With all of the gasping in the background, it was like she had flashed him or something.

"Did that seriously just happen?!"

"Sidney, please tell me you got that!"

"What alternate universe am I in? Because there is no way I'm seeing this in Storybrooke…"

"I need to get my glasses checked."

"I don't know what kind of drugs he's on, but I'd like some."

Rose slid her arm into his and they walked away, their strides matching effortlessly as they disappeared from sight. It hit Emma low in her stomach, and she wasn't quite sure why. Yes, there was the age-old question of "what's that guy doing with that girl?", but there was something else. Something sharp and hot. Envy maybe? She hoped not.

"For the longest time we thought she was a mail-order bride," Ruby told her, lips pursed thoughtfully, "But apparently she grew up here."

"That led to the rumor that she was sold to him to pay off her father's debts," Sidney continued, "Unfortunately there's no evidence to back that claim."

"Gold digger using her body to earn an easy living?" Emma guessed. Sheriff Graham shook his head.

"Even more unlikely than the mail-order bride scheme. She doesn't take enough of his crap for it to be about the money…"

"It would have to be a helluva lot of money to put up with him," Kathyrn piped up. Granny planted her hands down on the counter.

"I'll tell you what happened; that girl turns eighteen, wants to get out of the house, out of Storybrooke, carpe diem and all that jazz. She'll take whatever road's in front of her, and Mr. Gold just so happens to be the first guy she lays eyes on," she grunted her disapproval, "He's a predator, mark my word, and predators go after the weak and vulnerable. She didn't have a chance after he convinced her he loved her." The customers slowly nodded, agreeing that the theory made sense. Didn't everyone know a girl like that, who wanted freedom from her life at any cost?

Emma wasn't sold on any of their theories. The way he looked at her was the way every woman wanted to be looked at. Being that lovesick could turn any predatory man into the feeblest of prey.
Regina was, as usual, on a mission. Her solid walk and quick gait warned people of this, and they pretty much stayed out of her way. Dr. Archibald Hopper wasn't too difficult a man to intimidate, but she felt this deserved a more…personal touch. She was on her way to his office when a sight as horrid as the working clock tower met her head on.

They were together. Not merely taking a companionable walk, but they were together. Arms linked, stride matching stride, practically one person save for the sharp contrast between their attire. Rosaline's free hand was gesturing wildly as she spoke, her body animated with the scene she was painting. Mr. Gold was quiet, keeping his eyes down on the sidewalk, intently listening to her as his cane rhythmically met the pavement. They looked close. They looked like lovers.

"...I mean, how can you do that to a woman? If she's not in the mood, she's not in the mood and trust me, I would not be in the mood if I was in that situation. You ever do that to me and I swear to the gods I will beat you over the head with your own cane."

"Trust me, dearie, if I ever did that to you I'd hand you the cane and let you knock some sense back into me."

Both parties slowed as they neared each other, watching each other like a couple of cowboys at high noon. She was seeing them. They were seeing her. Neither was quite sure what to say about the matter. As usual, Mr. Gold broke the silence.

"Good morning Mayor Mills."

"Good morning Mr. Gold, Miss French." Rosaline frowned, but didn't object. Regina liked using the wrong name; it gave her the slightest power over the beauty. She glanced between the two of them, "What are you up to?"

"Oh, you know... Enjoying the sunshine. It's a rare sight in Maine, let alone this late in the fall," Mr. Gold said easily, "It's one of those little miracles that make you grateful for another day. Air in my lungs, beat in my chest, the loveliest girl in all of Storybrooke by my side..." Rosaline pretended to be bashful, doing that annoying chin-to-chest thing as Mr. Gold laced their fingers together, "What else do I need?"

Regina studied him. She was no stranger to paranoia, and many times over the course of twenty-eight years Rumplestiltskin being Rumplestiltskin had caused her worry that the curse wasn't as all-encompassing as she hoped. He was as slippery as a tadpole to pin down and get exactly what you wanted from him...and with this strange woman coming into a town where no one ever left or arrived...not to mention how much this was against the specific curse she had inflicted on the pair...

It was enough to make the Queen suspicious.

"Well, then, you two have a nice day," she said before he could feed on her doubt like a piranha.

"Take care, Mayor Mills," Rosaline said cheerily. Regina continued on her way.

She should have killed that girl when she had the chance.

It was hard not to look at each other, but they managed for a block or so. They exchanged a mischievous glance, and then burst into giggles like a couple of school children who got away with setting a whoopee cushion on the teacher's chair.

III
Even on the happiest day of her life, her stepmother just had to find a way to ruin it. All the guards that they could afford to attend the wedding couldn't stop the witch that was Regina. The Evil Queen had been vague about her latest scheme, which only drove Snow White more insane. It's hard to fight something when you don't know what you're fighting.

Still, Snow was determined to not let the disrupted ceremony dampen the celebration. Her and Charming danced and ate and laughed as they reveled in the fact that they were finally together. Surrounded by their loved ones, it was impossible to be completely down in the dumps. So she pushed the threat aside for now, and held onto James as though he'd vanish in a cloud of purple smoke.

Snow didn't jump when the Maid of Honor was suddenly at her ear, bending over the chair. Red didn't mean to sneak up on people; it was just habit.

"She's here," she murmured, "No sight of him, but I saw her." Snow nodded and immediately stood.

James caught her hand.

"And where are you going?" He tried to sound playful. Snow shook her head.

"Just out for some air."

James rose to his feet, grinning slyly, "Isn't it a bit too early for secrets?"

Snow bit her lip, caught.

"She showed up," she admitted. James's eyebrows raised.

"Maleficent? I thought she only crashed christenings."

"Not Maleficent," Snow glanced towards the crowds of well-wishers, "The Caretaker."

James stared, "Who's she?"

"The Dark One's bride," Red murmured. He tensed up.

"You invited her?"

"Them," Snow corrected meekly. She bristled at his glare, "They did a lot for us."

"Yeah, half of it damaging," he growled.

"It was better than snubbing them and hoping it'd go unpunished," Snow turned away from him. James stepped towards her.

"You're not facing her alone," he insisted, "I made a promise to be with you…it wasn't circumstantial." Red gave a wistful smile at the sentiment, but quickly shook it off.

"Come on, lovebirds. Who knows how long she's staying."

They wove through the people like fish in a stream, their faces so determined no one dared to attempt small talk. They passed each ring of social interaction until they were at the fringes, reserved souls clinging to the walls and shadows as though afraid of interacting with others. One woman was especially withdrawn, standing in a corner with a goblet in one hand. Her flowing gold dress, long-sleeved gloves and torso covered in every sort of gemstone made her as apparent as a
candle's flame in a dungeon. Ostentatious but not gaudy, there was something classy about her ensemble.

She was given a wide berth, though several people kept glancing over at her. Her body language was a blatant "don't mess with me", though there was something lonely in her carefully diverted eyes. She finally rested her gaze on them and she smiled.

"Do I get to call you Mr. and Mrs. Charming now?" She asked lightly. Red excused herself as the spectators drew away, giving the trio some privacy.

She made her way over to them, unhurried and casual.

"Congratulations. You two will be very happy together." Snow looked for malice but everything, her eyes her smile her voice, generated sincerity. Snow smiled back.

"Thank you, Belle." She seemed surprised to hear her own name, and delighted. There must be such a fear to be too casual, not to offend or displease the mistress of the most powerful man in the realms…

Snow was suddenly ashamed. Here she was, trying to find ill intentions in her childhood friend, the girl who wanted nothing more than to make the world a better place. She was treating Belle as though she were Rumplestiltskin.

"Thank you for inviting us," Belle continued, "Unfortunately Rumplestiltskin's busy helping another girl get to her ball."

"You're going stag?" Snow guessed. Belle nodded.

"It's nice to have an evening to just go out and relax…" She gave a pointed glance at those who hadn't given up and joined the party, the most desperate of souls, "But there's always a few who think they can just come up to me and start begging for help. I should invest in disguises."

James shifted his weight and cleared his throat. Snow fidgeted with her ring.

Belle's lips puckered in an "oh" and she quickly shook her head.

"I didn't mean you two; an Evil Queen threatening to destroy your happiness is cause for concern. It's mostly those who don't understand the limits or price of magic, or the ones with petty complaints. Sometimes you just have to work through your problems, or learn to live with a beauty mark on your face." She gestured towards the doors, "Shall we take a walk?"

They went out to the palace gardens, a place where they could guarantee there wouldn't be any mirrors. Belle looked at the blooming flowers with appreciation, taking in each bush.

"What is Regina planning?" James demanded. Belle reached out, tentatively feeling the petals of a rose.

"You're not going to get far if you want to play Twenty Questions with me," she said, turning back to the royal couple, "I don't have very many answers; I'm on a strictly need-to-know basis with precognition."

"Tell us what you know, then," Snow pleaded.

"If the price isn't too steep," James interjected. Belle laughed, her curls bouncing as her head shook.
"Yes, yes, always with the price. This oracle's free, though; consider it our wedding present," she
drew closer, looking each of them in the eye in turn, "Regina's threat is legitimate; she has
something vile in mind for us all. But it will take time for her to get ready. You have a year before
you need to start worrying."

"A year?" Snow's face fell, "Until what?"

"Sorry. That information will have to cost you." She took their hands, making James uncomfortable
and Snow concerned, "A suggestion, though?"

"Yeah?" She brought their hands together, folding them into each other before she let go.

"Enjoy every minute you have with each other. Time is so precious."

Snow and Charming continued to hold hands while Belle started to retreat.

"I'll see you at the baby shower then, Snow?" Snow furrowed her eyebrows.

"Baby shower?" Oh, right, precognition, "Yeah, sure."

Belle beamed.

"You're leaving already?"

"I have curfew," she explained, continuing through the garden, "I've got five minutes unless I want
to try and ride a pumpkin home."

They watched as Belle faded into the mist, vanishing like a thought.

III

Mr. Gold's phone vibrated against the counter. He picked it up, only for it to vibrate again. Two,
three, four, five picture messages from Mrs. Gold. He flipped it open and browsed through them.

It was a sequence of Emma with a chainsaw, then Emma starting the chainsaw, then Emma taking
the chainsaw to a branch of a honeycrisp apple tree, then Regina screaming at Emma with the cut
branch at their feet, and then of Emma walking away from the scene. Under the last picture Belle
had texted "I want her on our side :)"

Gold chortled and nodded to himself. It was a pretty compelling case to have the savior with and
not against them.

III

It had been a pleasant unexpected day off, Belle thought as she threw open the garage door. She
had walked Mr. Gold to work, run a few errands, had lunch with her husband, run a few more
errands, passed by Regina's house just in time to snap pictures of Emma laying minor waste to the
precious apple tree, and then spent the rest of the afternoon at the bookstore. Gold wouldn't be
pleased at how many armfuls she had come home with, but that was what happened when he gave
her a credit card and set her loose.

She gazed upon the refuge Rumplestiltskin had given her. Most men claimed the garage as theirs,
but he had taken one look at the size and decided it would be better suited as her library, getting a
small tool shed for himself instead. She would read in here, but there wasn't any space to curl up.
Floor-to-ceiling shelves lined the walls and she could barely squeeze through the slender aisles to
get at whatever book she wanted. She was trying to figure out how she'd find space for her latest purchases when a voice came from directly behind her.

"You gave it to him, didn't you?"

Belle spun around, cornered at the end of one of the aisles. The figured blocked out most of the outside light, but she saw tell-tale signs in the silhouette; the business suit, the way the ends of her hair defied gravity.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Belle said honestly.

"The book of fairy tales. Henry. You gave it to him." Belle relaxed a bit. Right, that "it".

"I'm not the only one who owns books in this town, Madame Mayor."

"But your collection is by far the largest and most expansive," she gestured around them, "So tell me, why did you do it? Do you want to fill his head with lies?"

Belle turned her head, staring at the spines of some of her favorite novels.

"...you know I volunteer at the library every Saturday, don't you?"

"Yes, I see you there when I drop Henry off." Her tone was irritable, not sure where Rosaline was going with this.

"What do I do there?"

"Something with kids, I think."

"I read to them. Fairy tales, mostly. And you know who's there every Saturday, despite being older than most of them, doe-eyed at the thought of knights and princesses? Henry." Belle turned back to Regina, "He loves that book, and I knew he'd take care of it. So yes, after I got through it I gave it to him, because stories are the most precious things we have. They teach us right from wrong, give us hope, give us somewhere to escape to when this world is just too cruel." She stared her right in the eye, "I also invited him to browse my other books and borrow whatever caught his fancy. You want to scold me for nurturing your child's love for reading? Go ahead; I'm more than willing to have that fight."

It was Regina's turn to look at the books.

"You're right," she murmured, running a finger over "Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There", "Fairy tales are important…but false. I find that there's no room for gray; a person's either good or evil, never just a person, in such stories. I think they send the wrong message," she pursed her lips, "How do you feel about basements, Miss French?"

Belle's heart pounded.

"They're alright, I suppose, as long as they have a window."

"Did you know that the hospital has one?" Belle reminded herself to breathe.

"No, I didn't."

"It's their psychiatric ward…an asylum, if you will," she glared at Belle, "It's a place for people who can't tell the difference between fiction and the real world. Excellent accommodations, I've heard. You don't even have to sleep on the floor." Belle raised her chin.
"Do you think they send murderers there too, or just those who tell the truth?" She challenged. Regina's eyes widened and she opened her mouth to retort.

"Dearie, I love you, but I just can't afford to support your habit. If you keep getting this many books a week I'll have to raise rent lest you read us out of house and home." A wave of relief washed over Belle. Regina turned at the voice, appearing a bit too guilty to be accused of just having a friendly chat.

Belle saw Mr. Gold over Regina's shoulder, standing outside the garage and leaning slightly on his cane. He gave the mayor a cruel little smile.

"It seems you beat me home."

"It seems I have," Regina said mechanically. She started back down the aisle, and the claustrophobia eased up.

"Not hard to do, I guess," Mr. Gold said good-naturedly, gesturing towards his leg, "I'm sorry if I interrupted something."

"No, you didn't," Regina insisted, giving him her best politician smile, "I was just leaving."

"I'm sure," Mr. Gold stepped aside and Regina made her retreat. Regina was a smart woman; she knew better than to stay between a beast and his beauty.

Mr. Gold watched her go before making his way towards Belle.

"And what did Her Majesty have to say?" He asked, examining her. It was a habit that hinted at his old paranoia, his hatred of anyone laying a finger on his Belle, but she felt it was justified this time.

"Henry's book." Was all she had to say. He nodded and Belle folded her arms, "I think she's suspicious of us."

"Yes, I'm sure she is," he rested a hand on her shoulder and squeezed it, "We'll just have to be careful, my dear. Our little stunt today was too noticeable."

Belle nodded, thinking if she told him about Regina's threat to lock her up again there wouldn't be anything to be careful about. He'd strangle the Evil Queen in her sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Holy. Crap. I can't believe the response I've gotten just from the first chapter. I feel less deserving than Mr. Gold when Belle forgives him. I am just having so much fun with this; it's so fun to play with the characterization of Mrs. Gold, having characters react to her, seeing what would change in the storyline and what wouldn't, coming up with backstory. I have a general plan of where I'm going with this but please, feel free to comment on what you'd like to see. I've got one fairy tale character that I'm going to put in during the ninth chapter, and I'd really like to do more (the more obscure-yet-recognizable the better) (edit: I totally added a whole bunch of OCs, and suggestions for what to add for this story would be pointless).

I just realized this towards the end of the chapter, but some people may read Belle's Storybrooke counterpart as "rawz-a-lin". My original intention was for the
pronunciation to be "rose-a-leen"; prettier sounding in my opinion and goes better with the "Rose" nickname. But if you're dead determined to call her "rawz-a-lin", I can't track you down and force you to use my way. I'm just stating what I meant without funkying up the spelling of her name.
Belle lay belly-down on an Agrabah rug, dressed in a pale yellow night shift with a blanket wrapped snugly around her. She stared at the contraption before her, watching the clock in anticipation. Two minutes until midnight.

It was slightly larger than a dollhouse, a dark Gothic castle with three towers. A dragon was perched on top of the clock, wings down, eyes closed and head bent. Two pairs of doors opened in each side tower, while the draw bridge opened the body of the castle. The details weren't the best, especially compared to Gepetto's work, but it was one of Belle's favorite pieces in Rumplestiltskin's collection. She had saved it from a life covered in dust in the west wing, bringing it to their bedroom. She liked to watch it before bed.

A hard thud startled her, and she looked up to see Rumplestiltskin sitting beside her. He was in his night clothes as well, a linen shirt and cotton pants.

"I thought you said you hated the Time Clock Dragon," she teased.

"I do."

"And that if you wanted to know the happenings of the world, you'd just use your scrying pool."

"I would."

"And then you wouldn't have to watch the stupid marionettes that make you want to claw your eyes out."

"They do, and much worse."

"Then why are you here?"

He grinned down at her, arms resting on his knees.

"It's a good show tonight."

The gears began to whir as the clock struck twelve. The haunting melody began to play as the dragon reared its head, wings spreading out as its mouth opened in a roar. Lights spun within, showing glimpses of silhouettes. The intro continued for about thirty seconds before the dragon froze mid-roar. The shutters to the highest tower flew open, revealing a simplistic wooden puppet.
It cleared its throat, bobbing around as though worked by an enthusiastic five year old.

"Ladyfleas and gentlefarts, may I present to you tonight's tale… Charming Snow!" The puppet was yanked down into the castle, shutters slamming shut. Belle giggled. Rumplestiltskin snorted derisively.

The drawbridge lowered to reveal a forest scene with a pure white carriage going along, the backdrop moving as the horses trotted in place. The left tower's doors opened to reveal a hooded figure sawing at a tree, laughing maniacally. The tree fell from the tower into the main stage, making the horses rear and nearly topple backwards. The prince floated out of the carriage to investigate the tree, while the maniacally laughing hooded figure snuck inside the carriage and stole a pouch. A blonde woman inside shrieked and flailed, which made the prince draw his sword, hum a heroic theme, and pursue the hooded figure through all three stages of the Time Clock Dragon.

Belle gasped as the hood fell off, which Rumplestiltskin thought was a bit much for a magical puppet show.

"I know her!" She exclaimed. Rumplestiltskin straightened.

"Who?"

"Snow White!" She laughed, "We used to have play dates together!"

"Well what a coincidence," he smirked, "Two ladies fallen from nobility's grace… Fate's funny."

If it was possible, Belle watched the show even more intently, observing the figure of Snow White flying up into a trap, kick her future lover in the groin, kung fu fight a gang of trolls, and generally fall in love with someone she had only spent a day or so with. The puppets bowed before the stages closed; the dragon roared one last time, and the gears slowed to a halt.

"I like the scrying pool version better," Rumplestiltskin complained. Belle sighed, smiling dreamily.

"She found her true love… Not someone I'd swoon over, but to each their own." Rumplestiltskin raised an eyebrow.

"And pray tell, what is your type?" Belle rolled over onto her back, grinning up at him.

"Monsters, apparently. The meaner the better."

"Oh? Is that so?" Belle nodded.

"I suppose I'm a bit of a masochist," she sized him up, "You're a little too pretty to be a monster, though."

Rumplestiltskin jerked his head back, fluffing up like an offended rooster.

"Well, I assure you Little Miss Masochist, what I lack in repulsiveness I make up for in pure utter spite."

Belle groaned as suddenly the Dark One rolled onto her, letting his entire weight rest upon her torso and legs.

"Get off, you're squishing me," she protested. He bobbed up and down as she laughed.
"Like a snail," he said proudly.
"I can't breathe!"
"You're breathing well enough to talk and laugh."
"I'll suffocate."
"Tell me I'm ugly."
"You're heavy is what you are."
"Tell me I'm ugly!"
"Fine, you make ogres look like princesses!"
"That's better, dearie." Belle squirmed, but Rumplestiltskin didn't budge.
"I called you ugly; get off!"
"No. I'm staying on until you pass out, then I will drag you to my bed and spoon you mercilessly."
"Heartless beast."

Belle's head fell back dramatically as she closed her eyes, going as still as possible.
"...you're a horrible actress," Rumplestiltskin observed.

III

Mr. Gold worked on a Time Clock Dragon of this world; a small television set. It was about as reliable as the puppets; staged "reality" shows, biased news reports... It was hard to tell if the color was still a little off or the orange people were just a group of those housewives of whatever city.

He glanced up as the bell tinkled, and smiled.

"What can I help you with, Miss French?" There was a glint of mischief in his wife's eye, taking her time in approaching the counter.

"So... I heard you buy babies, Mr. Gold." Mr. Gold glanced around as if making sure the coast was clear.

"Not as part of my pawn shop, no... But I've done some under-the-table adoption work," he lifted an eyebrow, "Where did you hear that from?"

"The maid," she said offhandedly, pressing up against the counter, "Do you do estimates?"

"Of course, dearie." He made a show of pulling out a notepad and clicking his pen, "Is this your firstborn?"

"Yes."

"Very nice, congratulations," he made a checkmark, "...are you a crack whore?"

She narrowed her eyes at him and he shrugged as if to say "it's just a question."

"No."
"That's good," he made another check mark. "Any history of mental illness, disease, generally poor health?"

"Not that I know of." He made another check mark.

"Might I inquire as to who the father is?" The end of his question tilted up hopefully. Belle tried to keep her face in check as she answered.

"Gaston."

Mr. Gold shot her a glare and she bit back a laugh. He made three large x's in a row.

"Well, the rest depends on how healthy the baby is when it arrives, and what gender-"

"Sexist."

"I'm just being practical," he defended. "There's been a trend with girls lately, so a boy would be more valuable. Still..." He drew a total line under the marks and started writing in all capital letters, "In my professional opinion, even with considering the father, any child of yours would be..."

He circled the value and twirled the notebook around. She leaned over and read the word "PRICELESS". Belle rolled her eyes and Mr. Gold smirked, feeling he had scored a brownie point even if she wouldn't admit it.

"That's going to be hard for you to negotiate with," she pointed out. Mr. Gold shrugged.

"Just give me your best pitch." Belle considered her options, hemming and hawing.

"I could use a bigger garage..."

Mr. Gold stared at her.

"You'd trade your first born for bookshelves?" He shook his head, "Maybe it's a good thing you're giving your child away." Belle wrinkled her nose.

"It is Gaston's kid." Mr. Gold weighed that fact.

"Fair enough, though still the cheapest baby I've ever gotten. So, when's the due date?" Belle leaned over the counter.

"It's an imaginary baby. It doesn't have a due date." His shoulders fell.

"You're not pregnant?"

"I'm not pregnant."

"Not even with Gaston's baby?"

"I'd rather spend twenty-eight years locked up in an asylum than do that with Gaston."

"Oh," Mr. Gold looked down at his notebook, then slowly leaned forwards. His eyes flicked up to meet hers, lips mere inches away from hers, "If you want," he began quietly, "We could go into my office and I will do what I can to...remedy that fact." Belle smirked.

"I wouldn't sell a baby if it was yours," she murmured, giving him a quick kiss before rocking back
on her heels.

Mr. Gold looked mildly disappointed that she didn't take him up on his offer, gradually straightening.

"So I overheard something juicy at Granny's this morning," Belle began, setting a muffin and a cup of tea down in front of him. Mr. Gold glowered at the Granny's logo and Belle narrowed her eyes, daring him to reject perfectly good food simply on the premise of where it had come from.

Mr. Gold sullenly picked up the cup and sipped at it, wincing.

"And what did you hear, dearie?"

Belle hopped up onto the counter, swinging her legs as she unwrapped her own breakfast.

"Henry talked Mary Margaret into reading to that coma patient."

"The John Doe?"

"Yep. And you know what happened?" Mr. Gold mulled over the possibilities.

"John Doe woke up and shouted "Snow, Snow, where have you been my darling Snow?"?" Belle huffed.

"No…" She smiled, "He grabbed her hand."

Mr. Gold stared blankly at her.

"He grabbed her hand?"

"Yes! Most coma patients don't just go from 0 to 60; they make improvements gradually."

"…so all it takes is a hand-grab and you go all lovey-dovey?" Mr. Gold clarified. Belle fumed.

"He's been in a coma for twenty-eight years! The sound of their story stirred him!" Mr. Gold picked at his muffin.

"So all I have to do is grab your hand when you think I'm asleep-"

"That's not the point," she shook her head, "The curse is starting to lift, even I can see that. Soon Snow and Charming will be reunited, finding each other at long last!" She paused in her enthusiasm, frowning, "This…doesn't make you happy?"

Mr. Gold sighed, preparing to give his lovely the cold hard truth.

"Belle, the only love story I'm concerned with right now is ours. The Charmings did their part…if I need them again then I'll be more interested in their hand-grabbing."

Belle cringed. Even after so much time had passed she was still horrified at how cold-hearted Rumplestiltskin could be towards others. She knew it was a defense mechanism, one even she had been forced to use during her days as the Devil's Bride. Otherwise most deals would tear a sane honest person apart. So she tried to accept its necessity, though her heart was still pretty tender despite what she had seen and endured.

She turned back to her tea.
"Twilight" says he'll be conscious before the week is out," she challenged. The deal-making twinkle came to his eye.

"The Godfather" begs to differ."

III

"Sometimes doing the brave thing is foolish, dearie," Rumplestiltskin remarked. Belle fixed her gaze on him.

"I need to do this. For myself as much as the world," she clenched her jaw, "I have to prove that what Regina did to me will never happen again."

He knew there would be no dissuading her, and he wouldn't try after that.

Both faces of his being loved Belle. To his cowardly wool-spinner self, he admired her courage no matter what she was faced with. Her loyalty was reassuring, but he couldn't grasp why such an intelligent beautiful woman would want someone like him. To his monstrous dark self, she was someone who could play his games with him, someone who refused to take his shit and stood up for herself. He felt his power deserved such a lovely and sharp-witted accomplice, and he'd do anything to keep her at his side.

Neither face liked seeing her in that black dress. Black didn't become her.

Her chin was jutted up, every step tense as they made their way through the palace gardens. She was getting back up on the horse that tried to trample her to death and honestly, it terrified and aroused him. They were each building up their defenses for the coming confrontation, determined not to let any weakness show to their client.

Regina was, as she was prone to, sitting under her apple tree. With her was the Huntsman, brooding as usual. She stood and smiled.

"So glad you could make it, Rumple," she glanced over, defined eyebrows lifting, "Oh and you brought your little Belle with you? Afraid to leave her alone?" She cooed. Rumplestiltskin sneered.

"Actually, dearie, your summons came to us in the middle of our honeymoon."

"Honeymoon? There was a wedding? And you didn't invite me?" She gasped, "I practically got you two lovebirds together. Or...are you just referring to the ceremony as a wedding?" She gestured to Belle's left arm, "May I?"

Before Belle could speak, Regina had grabbed her arm and pulled down the sleeve glove. Covering the vein from wrist to elbow on her inner arm, a cracked line was formed as though it cut into obsidian rather than flesh. Dark magic pulsed in it, a little oozing out of the fresh wound. Belle grimaced at the pain.

Regina tsked at her.

"Your father raised you better than to sell your soul to the Dark One," she scolded playfully.

Belle tore her arm away and pulled her glove back up. Regina straightened.

"But we're not here to discuss the corruption of a lady. Rumple?" She gestured towards the palace. Rumplestiltskin lightly touched Belle's lower back, a reassuring gesture, before following after
Regina. Belle felt heat rise to her face, humiliated by the Queen belittling their wedding. No, it had not been traditional, but how could they have a normal wedding when they couldn't even kiss? Who would even come? Regina was just trying to get under her skin, that was all. She shouldn't let her, but…

Belle glanced over to see the man that had been with Regina still there, watching her. Belle folded her arms.

"What are you looking at?" She muttered. He shook his head.

"I didn't imagine the servant of the Dark One to be so beautiful, is all." Belle felt like rounding on him, flirting with a taken woman…but there was no flirtation in his tone, nor admiration. It was just a statement, plain and simple.

"He's a connoisseur of beautiful things," she said, walking towards him, "He admires them, collects them, cares for them…"

"But you're not part of the collection," he insisted. She raised her eyebrows and he continued, "He doesn't look at you like you're an object. He sees you as an equal, his partner."

He was a handsome man, no doubt, but Belle couldn't stop staring at his eyes. They were so blank, so empty, and yet she felt sadness coming from them. Unconsciously she sat down on the bench beside him and he glanced away.

"Yes, I'm very lucky that way. It could've turned out a whole lot worse for me, taking that leap into the unknown." His lips twitched.

"There must've been quite a lot at stake to give your life away." Belle nodded.

"There was." She leaned over, trying to catch his eye again, "What about you?"

He made something between a smirk and a grimace.

"You could say that."

III

Belle lay on their bed, looking at an abandoned corner of the room. It was far too early for the Time Clock Dragon to stir even if it did work in this world… Most of the time she just watched it, trying to wield the magic of hope to make it work. Her hope apparently wasn't powerful enough.

The phone rang and Belle huffed, rolling off the bed and jogging to the office phone.

"Gold residence, Rose speaking."

"You're home then, Rose?" She blinked. How could she answer the home phone if she wasn't? "Is something wrong, Sheriff Graham?" There was some crashing, as though through branches.

"We have a missing person, the John Doe from the hospital?"

"Yeah?"

"We don't know how far he's gotten. Could you keep an eye out on your property, in case he's more mobile than we thought?"
"Of course, Graham."

"Thank you, Rose." The line went dead.

Of course she was concerned for James, and she was already looking out the window towards the woods. But there was an excitement buzzing in her veins as she dialed Mr. Gold's cell phone.

"Guess what we're watching tonight?" She gloated. Mr. Gold growled.

"I know, I know, I just saw Regina speed down Main Street like Cruella De Vil."

"Popcorn says Mary Margaret brings him home like a stray puppy."

"Oh no, dearie, that's not gonna happen. I've got a tub of Rocky Road on Regina throwing a wrench in the works."

"Always the pessimist," Belle chided. She could practically feel him smiling through the phone.

"One of us has to be."

III

Belle didn't even feel like complaining; Rumplestiltskin was far too pissed off. Neither of them wanted to stay overnight but, alas, Regina wasn't making the matter short.

"Nothing about this is going to be quick," he grumbled, "I understand that more than she knows. But her hesitance is troublesome."

He hardly slept, and Belle knew this because she hardly slept. She hadn't seen him since breakfast and, despite his warnings to stay in the room, she was getting restless. He had Regina tied up; what danger would a walk be? Promising she wouldn't be gone long, she slipped out to explore.

She was examining what looked like a very lifelike stone statue of a horrified young man when she was startled by a voice.

"It was a person once, if that's what you're wondering," she jumped, and the man gave an apologetic smile. Belle bit her lip.

"That's what I figured." Morbid entombments of the living were something she was getting used to recognizing.

He took a few steps closer and she turned to him, that mystery man of Regina's with emotionless eyes. She couldn't resist, the question slipping out before her filter could kick in.

"You know who I am…but I don't know who you are…" He smirked.

"Names are a human thing," he murmured, looking over the statue, "…she calls me her Huntsman."

"Huntsman?" Belle tried to keep color in her face, "So you're her assassin?" He gave a rough chuckle.

"She tried to make me a killer…but I failed. I wasn't heartless like her." He snorted, "Well, now I am. Quite literally."

"Heartless?" The Huntsman nodded.
He took her hand and placed it over his chest. Belle spread her fingers out, pressing lightly, but there was nothing. Not a single beat to announce the status of its body. Belle stared up at him in horror.

"She did this to you?" He nodded. She recoiled as though it were contagious, "How…?"

"Ripped it out, held it captive… Hoping it would endear me to her somehow, knowing I'm as trapped as a bird in a cage, subject to her every whim and desire…"

Belle's eyes brimmed with tears at the emphasis on "desire", feeling as though it were a vision of how things could've been if Rumplestiltskin had not come for her. To never feel her pulse again, to never have it race in excitement or terror…

"You're crying. For me," The Huntsman stated. Belle bowed her head.

"I just…can't imagine…" He shook his head, agreeing with her.

He frowned, looking down at the ground.

"So many people say that they wish they didn't have a heart… But what they really mean is they wish they didn't have pain. You can't just cut out the bad; you have to take it with the good, or else have nothing at all."

Belle hissed as her arm suddenly flared up in pain.

"Are you alright?" He asked. Belle winced.

"Yes, he's just…calling me." She hoped that it wouldn't always hurt, that it was just because of how new the cut was, "I should go."

She started off back down the corridor, a sense of dread curling up in her stomach. Maybe he wasn't in the room yet, she thought hopefully, maybe he was just warning her he was coming back…

"Belle?" She stopped, turning back to the Huntsman. He stood with his hands clenched, jaw set, "You're an honorable woman." The statement threw her for a loop, and she wasn't sure how she was supposed to respond.

She settled with a quick curtsy.

"Thank you," she murmured, before hurrying back to the room.

All hope vanished when she saw him sitting cross-legged in one of the reading chairs. His fingertips were steepled, eyes cold.

"Was I too vague when I told you not to leave this room under any circumstances?" He inquired. Belle frowned.

"No."

"Then why on earth did you do just that?" She took in a deep breath.

"You had Regina occupied-"

"And you don't think anyone else has the power to overtake you?" The question came from right behind her ear and she shivered, "That her little Huntsman wouldn't whisk you away to another
tower and hold you there until Regina figures out a suitable ransom?!

Belle’s hands curled into fists.

"You can't just command me to do things anymore," she growled, "I'm your wife."

She suddenly felt a finger press into her chest.

"Wife or not, you are still my property." Belle thought she'd explode at the words, but instead slapped his hand away and headed for the door.

As she reached for the doorknob, she saw his scaly hand was already there.

"...I'm sorry, Belle. I didn't mean it," he murmured. She sighed before looking at him.

"I just don't have the emotional stamina to get into one of our fights right now," she admitted. He gave a half-hearted smile.

"Neither do I."

Belle backed away from the door and Rumplestiltskin followed, advancing carefully towards her. She didn't reject him as he put his arms around her, resting her chin on his shoulder.

"I worry about you. All the time."

"I know."

"I think I've made progress if I agreed to let you anywhere near Regina."

"You have," she closed her eyes, trying not to tremble; "Do you know what she did to him?"

"She tore his heart clean out of his chest." His hand gently ran up and down her spine, "Apparently she thought doing the same to you would be a kindness."

"I'd rather have a lifetime of pain than going without a heart."

"Yes, of course, because you're the brave one."

His fingers twisted into her curls, his thumb running over them as though he were spinning them into gold. She nestled her face into his neck, feeling so safe, so content in his arms. She knew rather than felt that nothing could ever harm her so long as she was curled up to him.

The spying had started out being exactly what Regina thought she'd see; a fight. His maid no longer did what he said, which frustrated Rumplestiltskin because that meant he couldn't guarantee her safety. The girl had a habit of wandering off, as Regina had discovered the day Rumple chased her away. Unfortunately because they were so "newlywed", the fight dissolved into holding one another; there hadn't been much steam to it to begin with, in her opinion.

He was first to pull away, cradling her face so she looked up at him. He made a lewd comment about working out his frustrations and the girl blushed like a young girl who just learned about sex. The color in her cheeks made Regina want to puke; her innocence wasn't fooling anyone. If she was canoodling with the Dark One, there was something impure deep down.

It all went downhill from there.

Regina convinced herself not to turn away by insisting she was curious; foreplay was mainly
kisses, was it not? How would they avoid that little conundrum, or would he accidentally lose his powers halfway through? She watched Rumplestiltskin maneuver her towards the bed, kissing her along her jaw line and down her neck. The girl pouted, presumably because she wasn't the one with the curse and therefore could not kiss him. She complained of the cold and so they slipped under the covers. Thank the gods.

She should've looked away. She should've dissolved the mirror's image so that it did its normal job and reflect. But Regina continued to stare, her mouth going dry and her waist getting heated. A desire began to well up in her, one so powerful it brought tears to her eyes. The way the girl looked at Rumplestiltskin was the way she had once looked at Daniel. Every touch, every kiss, she wanted it to be Daniel's on her body. She wanted to be the one moaning, feeling like she was coming apart at the seams. She wanted to hold onto Daniel for dear life, feel him inside of her, reach the ultimate pleasure with her one true love, someone she would never be with ever again...

She wanted it to be her and Daniel, not Rumplestiltskin and his pet, and she wanted Daniel to scream out her name just the way Rumplestiltskin called out that little slut's.

One arm was around Rumplestiltskin's shoulders while she propped herself up on her elbow. Her eyes were drunk with pleasure, gazing over his shoulder as she started to spiral back down from her high. She glanced over at the vanity…and her eyes met Regina's. Her jaw dropped in horror and Regina felt an odd mix of shame and smugness. Yes, she had caught them doing the deed in her castle. It was her castle after all; if she wanted to watch all night long she was free to.

"Something the matter, dearie?" Rumplestiltskin asked breathily. The girl turned back to him, and shook her head.

Regina dismissed the image.

III

Belle was already on the couch by the time Mr. Gold came through the door, 9:15 on the dot. She turned…but her smile instantly vanished when she saw what he had in his hand.

"...what?" She said. Mr. Gold sighed.

"Can't win them all, dearie," he said, setting the pint of Rocky Road on the coffee table. He looked at Belle's bewildered expression, "You forgot about Abigail."

Belle let out a long groan, collapsing back against the couch.

"Really?!"

"David's wife Kathryn Nolan suddenly materialized with a questionable story," he pointed his cane at her, "What have I told you about underestimating Regina's depravity?"

"I can't help it. I actually have faith in the goodness of people." Mr. Gold smirked.

"Ah yes. That trait that's both your strength and your weakness." He disappeared into the kitchen and Belle turned on the DVD player.

He returned with two spoons and a blanket, shrugging the blanket onto Belle before he sat down.

"I don't know why you hate this movie," Belle said, shaking the blanket out to cover her. Once Mr. Gold was situated, she lay down with her head in his lap, "It's a story about a young girl who falls in love with a dangerous sparkling man that's much older than her and is targeted by various
people because of her love for him. If you were a vegetarian this would pretty much be our story."
"It's not the story, Belle, the story's fine."
"The acting is a little wooden-"
"Pinocchio's jealous, but not that either," he pulled the coffee table closer so neither of them had to reach far for a bite of ice cream, "I hate watching this movie because of you." She craned her neck up.
"Because of me?"
"Because of you," he repeated unapologetically, "Because you complain the entire time about how Book Edward's hotter and Book Jacob's less hot, and Book Emmett and Book Jasper are much more prevalent, and how they cut out so much of that Port Angeles part…"
"I can't help it if the book was better than the movie…" She muttered, scooping up a bite.
"You always think the book is better than the movie, and so many movies are based off of books-"
"I don't always think the book is better."
"Name one, just one movie that you liked better than the book."
Belle went silent.

They enjoyed their evening of ice cream for dinner, trying not to dribble on each other. Belle kept her criticism to herself and Mr. Gold silently agreed that there were a couple of parallels between the love interest and himself (Belle was much more fascinating than Bella, and therefore her "Twilight" theory in general was invalid). Such was true love; the ability of compromise for the sake of mutual happiness.

III

Rumplestiltskin was leaving tonight. Regina wanted him to stay longer, to go over every little detail one more time, but she wasn't sure she could risk it after this afternoon's incident.

There was no knock preceding her; she just strolled in as though she owned the place. Regina scowled at the reflection in her vanity.
"It's usually polite to warn a lady before entering her chambers," she muttered.
"And it's usually polite not to spy on two lovers in their chambers," The girl countered.
"My chambers," Regina corrected, "And how was I supposed to know you two would be so bold?"
"You shouldn't have been spying in the first place," she insisted.

The girl stood beside her, her little outraged expression amusing. Regina could see why Cora never took her seriously when she was younger. The girl took a deep breath.
"I forgive you, though." Regina smirked.
"Forgive me?"
"Yes, because I know exactly why you were staring." Regina lost a little bit of her haughtiness.
The girl folded her arms, taking a few steps to the side.

"You're jealous of us." Regina snorted.

"Jealous? Of an imp and his plaything?"

"You know it's more than that. You knew from the moment I met you how he felt about me, that I wasn't just a maid to him… You knew before we ever said a word about it to each other," she turned slowly on her heels, facing Regina again, "I don't know your story, Your Majesty, but you've either had true love and lost it or you've never had it to begin with. I know longing, and that's what I saw when I caught your stare."

Regina was on her feet in an instant.

"Don't you dare presume to know my feelings!" Belle stood her ground.

"That's why you went after me, isn't it? Because you can't stand to see your rival happy when you can't be."

"I did it to make him weak!"

"You did it to hurt him! And now you try to fill the void by using the Huntsman-"

"Enough!"

"Forcing him to love yo-"

"ENOUGH!" Belle flew back, slamming against the far wall. Stars spun in her vision, and she tried to squirm out of the hold.

Regina gave a cold laugh, storming towards the frightened girl.

"So you bind your soul to a man and suddenly you think you can talk back to me? Get a little magic and think you can take me on?" She snarled, "You're all talk..." She halted right before she would run into the trapped girl. She stared at her heaving bosom, a nightingale beating itself against its cage, "...and Rumple's not here to save you now."

Her hand curving into a claw, she dove for her chest. She met something that felt like a steel door, nearly breaking her hand against it. She growled like a feral cat and stared in horror. A thin layer of swirling purple encircled the area above Belle's heart, a barrier between Regina's nails and Belle's flesh.

Belle laughed, hysterical with relief at first, then slowly growing malicious.

"You missed your chance for your trick to work on me," she said.

Humiliated and furious, Regina considered just tearing her throat out instead… But killing the girl would bring on a war Regina wasn't sure she could win. So she let her slide back down to her feet, releasing her from her magic's hold.

"Go run back to your hubby, girlie, and let him know what mean ol' Regina did to poor widdle you." She turned her back on the girl.

A few steps later, Belle spoke her other purpose for coming to the Queen's chambers, "I want to make a deal with you. For the Huntsman's heart."
Regina sneered.  
"Then do what I’ve always told you to do. Kiss Rumplestiltskin."

III

"Mrs. Gold, can I talk to you for a minute?" Belle looked up from her purse and smiled.  

"Of course, Henry, but you really don’t have to call me Mrs. Gold. We’re not strangers, you can call me Rose." All of the other story time kids had been picked up, but Henry had lagged behind while Rose gathered her things.

He found a kiddy chair and pulled it up to face her, looking particularly grown-up with his serious expression. His eyes were so much like Charming's when he was stern, but most of his looks came from Snow, in her opinion. Funny how genetics could pick up even a few generations later.

"I just wanted to thank you again for that book."

"'Once Upon a Time'? I knew that you really enjoyed it. It was no big deal."

"It means a lot to me…" He clasped his hands and leaned forward, "…and I think I know why you gave it to me."

Belle smiled, mimicking his posture.  

"And why did I give it to you?"

"Because you knew I was a believer," he whispered, "You knew that I’d understand, and that I’d bring the savior to free us all."

Belle's heart double-timed, feeling even more like she was sitting across from Charming now. It took everything in her to maintain a poker face.  

"I'm not following."

"You know about the curse, don't you?" Belle tilted her head.  

"What curse?"

"The one where you all are storybook characters trapped in another world." She arched an eyebrow.  

"If I was part of the curse, then I wouldn't know, would I?"

Henry grinned.  

"And if you didn't know about the curse, then you wouldn't know that people don't remember who they are." Crap. She couldn't backpedal or lie to him, so the only thing to do (Rumplestiltskin was going to kill her) was surrender.

She sighed, shoulders caving in.

"What are the chances of me buying you a cone and you magically forgetting this discussion?"

"Slim to none," he chirped, then went back to being serious, "I won't tell anyone. They think I'm crazy anyway," he shrugged. Belle reached out and squeezed his shoulder lightly.
"They'll come around. Geniuses are never appreciated in their time," she assured him.

Oh yes, this son of Emma's was smart, smarter than even she had reckoned. He'd have to be careful with such a large secret...but she felt that they could trust him. He wanted the curse broken just as badly as they did.

"You're Belle, aren't you?" The question jolted her, quite literally.

"How…?" She trailed off, then glanced down into her purse, "The books."

"And the guts," he added, "You're not afraid."

"Oh I'm plenty afraid. I just never let it stop me."

They glanced up at the same time to see Regina making a bee-line for them.

"So, if you know who I am, does that mean I can be a part of Operation Cobra?" Belle asked, "I know the book as well as you do; I could be a profiler."

Henry got to his feet, sparing Belle the wrath of the mother bear.

"No," he decided.

"No?"

He started walking away, calling over his shoulder, "You're married to Mr. Gold!"

"I can keep secrets!" Belle whined, but Henry's mind was made up. Regina shot her a glare, wrapping a protective arm around her son's shoulders as if Belle was plotting to steal him away.

She gave him the damn book, she sulked mentally. The least he could do was let her be a double agent for Operation Cobra.

Chapter End Notes

Fluuuuff, so much fluuuuuff...it's fluffier than one of Grace's tea parties. But, yanno, at least there's substance to help swallow it down, like vague smut and a hinted dark ceremony. There are a lot of things I could go off about this chapter, but I'll keep it short. Thank you for your continued support; I seriously CANNOT believe the love this story's getting. You guys are gonna make me cry…
Mr. and Mrs. Gold eagerly anticipate the arrival of Ashley's baby.

Belle tries to cope with Rumplestiltskin's absence, and the visit of a new princess who doesn't seem to understand the balancing act of contracts.

Some things had not been touched by the curse; Rumplestiltskin's ritualizing, for example. For being so unpredictable, Mr. Gold sure had a number of constants he never wavered from. Tuesdays were pasta nights. He only wore black socks. He counted everything three times, even if he came up with the same number each time. And, through rain snow sleet hail unruly customer one last thing, he always arrived home at 9:15 on the dot. Belle had no idea how he managed to arrive at that exact minute, but he did.

She stared at the cold dinner set out on the table, sitting alone in the silent dining room. He would've called, she knew, he would've called and he was never caught with a dead or missing phone. Gold's fretting went both ways; he wanted to be able to reach her, so he remained constantly available. She had already left messages both on his cell and on the pawn shop's answering machine. Concern was rapidly spiraling downwards into dread and foreboding.

She glanced up at the clock. 9:45. He could tease her for a lifetime about this, she thought as she went for her keys and shoes. She'd rather endure his jabs about her being silly than have anything happen to him.

His Cadillac was still in the alley beside the shop. She parked her blue Chevy next to it, but he wasn't inside the car. She pulled out her keys, singling one out and hopped out of the truck.

The window was smashed in and Belle cursed Gold's lack of a security system. Maybe Graham would've gotten tired of coming over every time Belle forgot the code, but for every hundred innocent instances, there was one serious threat. She swung the door open.

"Gold?" No answer. She held onto her singled out key like it was a dagger.

One of the picture vaults was open, one with some very old documents translated from contracts made in their old world. One of which was the notebook of the Dark Curse, and Regina's deal pertaining to their lives. Belle rounded the counter and screamed.

"Rumplestiltskin!"

It took maybe a minute for Belle to notice the details. His pistol and cane dropped. His ring of keys tossed aside. King Leopold's gold chess set scattered, a bit of blood on the corner of the counter it rested on. And finally him, flat on his back with a nasty gash near his temple.

Reason left her as she collapsed at her husband's side, shaking his shoulder.

"Rumplestiltskin! Rumplestiltskin wake up! Please!" Her sobs came fast and hard, and she leaned her ear down to his chest.
She felt his heart beat. She heard his lungs fill and empty like small bellows. Tears of relief mixed with tears of fear. Pure instinctive fear.

When Mr. Gold finally opened his eyes, they were bloodshot. They wandered, before settling on her.

"Belle?" She sniffed, sitting back up.

"What's my other name?" She choked out.

"Rosaline French Gold," he murmured, "And I'm Rumplestiltskin and Mr. Gold."

"You're alright, then," she said. He tried to nod, but cringed. Belle started to cry again.

"Shhh, shhh, shhh," he eased himself up, "There's no need to cry, dearie. I'm fine."

"We need to get you to a hospital, you might have a concu-"

"No." He cupped her face in his hand, her chin quivering in an attempt to hold back tears, "We can't go to any authorities."

"Because it's about the curse?"

"Because you can't just trade babies for money here." Belle stared, "It was Ashley."

"Ashley?"

"She said something about changing her life when I caught her and she sprayed me with mace," he gestured towards the countertop, "I did the rest."

"What did she want?"

Mr. Gold frowned.

"I think we know exactly what she wanted."

If Rumplestiltskin had to list the top ten worst blows he had ever received, knocking himself out against the counter after being maced wouldn't even be in the top twenty. However Belle was acting as though he'd been sawed in two. Yes, she had always been more sensitive than him, but this was the woman who hadn't shed a tear when she offered herself to save her people or batted an eyelash whenever her husband decided to get a little dirty with his work. She drove him home without a word, fighting back tears even as they readied for bed.

"I'm taking tomorrow off," he told her, setting his cane against the nightstand, "If you're really that worried about a concussion, I'll stay up all night."

"It's not about the concussion," she murmured, tugging out her hair tie. He watched in undisguised awe as she shook out those lovely long curls, letting them fall freely over her shoulders. He was quite confident no one looked as sexy as his Belle in her cotton nightgown.

She eased down onto the bed beside him, rubbing his thigh.

"Until tonight, I never really thought about how…human you've become." He smirked.

"I thought you wanted me to be just an ordinary man, dearie."
"I was…naïve. Sheltered. Untouched by magic or the grand scheme of things. I knew about good
and I knew about evil…but no one explained the thousands of shades of gray in between," she
rested her head on his shoulder, "You have so many who have a reason to be upset with you…"

"Belle, don't you dare start worrying about me," he warned, "I am the protector and you are the
protected; this is how it goes."

"We protect each other," she insisted, "Especially when we're both so vulnerable."

He wrapped an arm around her and she snuggled further into him. He leaned down to whisper in
her ear.

"If the hitch in my walk makes them think I'm defenseless…then they get what they have coming
to them."

Bless her pretty pink lips, she laughed at that, as though it were a joke. Sometimes he wondered if
he had really fooled her that well that she couldn't see the monster…or she just chose not to.

III

Belle was used to her master bringing home a myriad assortment of things whenever he went out.
Sometimes it was small, a piece of jewelry or a vial of something. Sometimes it was too large to
move without magic; she particularly recalled the time he accepted a giant's hairbrush and spent
the better part of an afternoon trying to get it through the front door. There had even been live
things; a goose that laid golden eggs but tried to peck Belle's eyes out whenever she went to collect.
She hated that thing.

Even with the rumors she had heard as a girl, it was still a shock when Rumplestiltskin strolled into
the castle cradling something wrapped up in a blanket.

"Is that…a baby?" She couldn't help but ask, setting down her feather duster.

"No, it's a mandrake. Cover your ears," he said dryly. She shook her head at him, before drawing
closer to have a look.

It was a newborn, a few days old at most. It didn't seem to be aware of the darkness of the creature
holding it, snoozing contently. Rumplestiltskin held it with model perfection, head properly
supported.

"I won't require you to care for the child in the brief time it will be in my possession," he said,
continuing to stroll, "It wasn't part of our deal." Belle jogged to catch up.

"You know how to take care of a baby?"

Rumplestiltskin shot her a look, and she realized the question sounded less curious and more
condescending outside of her head.

"Yes, dearie, not every male's a careless neandralthal when it comes to children. You should know
better, what with being raised by your father and all." It stung a little, but she deserved the verbal
slap. He wrinkled his nose, "Besides, it's not like it's alchemy. If it cries, smell its rump to check its
potency, try to feed it and when all else fails, make funny faces." He flicked his wrist and one of
the many rooms of the hallways opened, revealing a nursery.

There were eight cribs evenly spaced from each other, four on each side. There was a sharp divide
of colors to separate them, one side various shades of blue and the other all sorts of pinks.
Rumplestiltskin moved towards the first crib of the blue side, laying the infant down with the tenderness of a new mother.

"Don't get attached, Belle," he warned, snapping her out of her observation, "There's a list a mile long of couples who want children. He'll be here for a couple of days at most; just until I can strike a deal." Belle nodded.

"I understand."

The next few days were the most intriguing of Belle's career as a maid (thus far). She watched in fascination as the monster feared by all the realms bathed, rocked, changed, and fed at all hours of the night a baby he would use as a bargaining tool. The only time he shirked his duties was when he needed to go talk to potential parents, at which time he asked Belle to keep an eye on the babe. Belle gladly accepted and more, sneaking some time in between chores to hold and play with the little one. He was a well-tempered boy and would grow up to be quite the man, she was sure.

Rumplestiltskin returned that third day, a little heavy-hearted as the deal was struck. He wasn't sure how to break it to Belle, who fawned over the babe as though it were hers. He approached the nursery, pausing in the doorway as he heard her singing and the child squealing in delight.

"I know you; I walked with you once upon a dream. I know you; the gleam in your eyes is so familiar a gleam."

She was waltzing around the room with him in her arms, skirt and curls spinning out as she twirled. He was struck with a sense of jealousy towards the child, wanting to be the one to waltz with her.

"Yes, I know it's true, that visions are seldom all they seem. But if I know you, I know what you'll do, you'll love me at once the way you did once upon a-" 

Rumplestiltskin blinked as she stopped, frozen mid-spin. She flushed and ducked her chin, readjusting the baby as she cleared her throat.

Oh. He had caught her dancing and singing. Apparently he wasn't supposed to know she did that.

"Old song," he remarked. Belle nodded.

"It's one of the few I remember my nurse maid singing…"

An awkward silence followed. Rumplestiltskin tried not to look at her too much; just seeing her hold the infant made him want to break off the deal and let her have it. But before he could do something so foolish, he spoke.

"It's time for the boy to go." Belle blinked and then nodded.

"Alright."

Damn. And he had been prepared for tearful begging and having to pry it out of her arms like he had to do with half the mothers he collected from.

She kissed the child's brow.

"You be a good boy for your family, okay? Grow up big and strong and smart." She then offered the bundle to him. He took it cautiously, not trusting her calm demeanor. That much bonding and no attachment? Blasphemy.
He turned to leave again and paused.

"...did you ever want children?"

Belle was surprised at the question, as always when he asked personal things about her. She figured he didn't care about her past, only her present.

"Yes," she said, then quickly added, "Eventually, after seeing the world and all that. And not many, maybe a boy and a girl. But yes, I did."

"I see," he murmured, and then vanished into thin air as he was prone to.

Belle wanted children. Three words swirling in Rumplestiltskin's mind, slowly forming into a fantasy. Of Belle, her stomach swollen with his child, smiling and glowing as only she could. Of course this fantasy was beyond impossible, first of all him going sterile from the Dark One's curse; at best he could offer her a babe from a deal and she'd accept it happily.

He could settle for that.

III

Today was a day for Operation Cobra; Henry could feel it in his young bones. So far so good; the savior was in Storybrooke, the Evil Queen didn't seem to realize it, and he already had a confession from Belle that his storybook was real.

But how was she awake when almost everyone else was asleep? Was Mr. Gold awake too? Why was it Belle and not Snow White, or Rumplestiltskin? It was a lot for one ten-year-old to take, but he had been entrusted with the book, and he would help Emma break the curse, insubordination be darned!

So he slipped out of the house while the Evil Queen was at a council meeting and ran to Miss Blanchard's apartment, stumbling through the door in his eagerness.

"Hey, Emma, I was thinking we..."

He trailed off as he saw who his birth mother was talking to. Mr. Gold. The Beast. He froze as Mr. Gold's eyes met his.

"Hey, Henry," Mr. Gold smiled, "How are you?"

Was he nervous? He seemed nervous. Did he know? Did Belle go home and tell him? Was Mr. Gold mad that his secret had been uncovered? Would he lock him up in a basement, since there weren't any dungeons in Storybrooke that Henry knew of? He looked away.

"O...kay," he forced a smile. Mr. Gold shrugged.

"Good," he started moving towards Henry, "Give my regards to your mother."

He sounded friendly enough, but it was so hard to tell. He could've just been acting; he wouldn't make a scene in front of Emma, would he? Or maybe Belle hadn't told him, wanting the secret to stay a secret.

Mr. Gold paused.

"Good luck, Miss Swan," he said, before looking at Henry. It was hard to figure out if he just had a guilty conscious or if there was something knowing in Mr. Gold's eyes.
He reached around Henry to shut the door as he left.

"Do you know who that is?" He stage-whispered, hardly letting the door close before he spoke.


"You think he's Rumplestiltskin?"

"No, I meant...nevermind. What's up?"

As Emma filled him in on the day's mission, Henry couldn't help but wonder if his mom was on to something. But Belle had to be married to the Beast; who else would she be married to? Mr. Gold didn't seem like Gaston at all. There were oddly no pictures of the Beast to go by, or none clear enough to identify him. Mr. Gold did kind of have Rumplestiltskin's nose...

Could someone in Storybrooke actually be two different characters? He'd have to talk to Belle about this.

III

"...say something, Belle. Anything."

She turned to him, sky blue eyes watery.

"You're going to spend our last months of freedom and power locked up in some magical prison. What the hell am I supposed to say?"

Rumplestiltskin hated blunt honesty. Did he lie? Rarely, but he didn't tell the whole truth either. However he had promised Belle that he would give her the full truth no matter what, because it was the only way he could keep her. So he had taken her out to the gardens, sat her down on the bench by the koi pond, and told her what he had foreseen in regards to Ella and their "ingenious" plan to ensnare Rumplestiltskin instead of paying up like decent folk.

Belle stared down into the depths of the water, as though she might find a different future there.

"I don't understand..." She shook her head, "It's not going to help us that much, to let them think you can be tricked. Not enough to justify four months of solitude."

"It will. We can't see it now, but it will." He reached hesitantly for her hands and they slipped into his, smooth against rough, "I wouldn't leave you unless I was positive you'd be alright."

"It's a long list," she said.

"I was being thorough. It's not like we can come back if I forgot something." She looked up into his eyes.

He knew the game; it wasn't the first time they had played it. She wanted to beg him not to go, to stay and let the world know he couldn't be tricked, to lock themselves up until the curse came for them. He wanted to scream that he didn't want to go, that he couldn't leave her, that he'd help her get ready for the end of their world. But they stayed silent, because if one broke then they'd both break and then they'd both lose. Being strong was the hardest game, especially when they could see each other's bluff, but it was necessary.

"When is the rendezvous?" She asked.

"Tomorrow night." Belle closed her eyes.
"…we'll survive. We always do."

Belle…his sweet beautiful brave little Belle… How in the world would he last four months without her?

She pressed into his chest, arms wrapping tightly around him as if Ella was right around the corner, waiting to take him away. He ran his hand over her long brown hair…and sobbed uncontrollably.

III

There was one thing Belle loved about having the shop to herself; music. When Gold was there, it was silent, unless Belle worked in the backroom, in which case she could listen to it very quietly. Mr. Gold felt it made the shop more respectable, easier to concentrate, and overall better with less auditory chatter. Belle thought it was grave-like and dull without music.

So the first thing she had done, besides worry about what Mr. Gold was up to today about the Ashley incident, was bring out the radio and plug in her iPod. Besides changing the locks and replacing the window, it had been a slow day.

The opening notes made Belle perk up as she dashed over to turn up the volume as loud as it would go. She belted out the lyrics as she swayed to the beat. She skipped around the shop placing out new items, unable to sit still with the catchy tune in the air. She hopped over a stool, snatched up Rapunzel's hairbrush and sang with everything in her.

"BEFORE YOU CAME INTO MY LIFE I MISSED YOU SO BAD, I MISSED YOU SO BAD, I MISSED YOU SO SO BAD! AND YOU SHOULD KNOW THAT, I MISSED YOU SO SO BAD! HEY I JUST MET YOU AND THIS IS CRAZY, BUT HERE'S MY NUMBER, SO-" A car honked twice. Belle jumped and felt sick when she saw the black Cadillac stalling outside the shop.

She sprinted over to the radio, turned it off and for a precaution, tossed Little Red Riding Hood's cloak over it. She jogged out the door and nearly ran into the side of the car, struggling to catch her breath. Mr. Gold rolled the window down and she leaned in, giving him her best I've-been-a-perfect-angel-since-the-master's-been-gone smile.

Mr. Gold took in her disheveled appearance, her ragged breath, her pink cheeks.

"Exercising?" He asked casually. She shook her head.

"Just putting out stock." He smirked, then pointed to the window.

At first, she couldn't tell what he was pointing at. The cloaked radio wasn't visible from here, and she hadn't knocked anything over (this time). Then she looked at the window itself…and noticed the shades were open. Anyone coming by could've looked in and watched Belle's little performance.

She groaned, pressing her forehead against the top of the car.

"You did a spectacular job of the high notes, dearie," he snickered. She glanced down at him.

"What do you want? To fire me?"

"No, I'm pretty sure you're the only one who would take this job," he grinned, "Go lock up and then get in the car."
"Why?"

"Not telling until you do as I ask." She narrowed her eyes.

"How about you tell me and then I do as you ask?"

"It's non-negotiable, dearie. Go."

There was an excitement radiating off of him, bordering on madness. He looked so much like his old self she expected one of those trilling giggles to slip out. With a little reluctance, she went back to lock up the store and then returned to her rightful place in the passenger's seat.

"I hate the Not-Telling game," she complained, buckling up, "Now will you tell me what you're up to, O Mysterious One?" He smiled at her, then reached over and gently squeezed her knee.

"Ashley's in labor," he murmured.

As usual, Rumplestiltskin knew her too well. Locking up the pawn shop after hearing the news would've seemed trivial, and she'd've just gotten into the car and demanded he floor it. She beamed, practically shaking in excitement.

"We need to stop by the house, the-"

"Already got it," he pointed at the glove compartment. She dug into it, and pulled out the item along with a book Mr. Gold had so thoughtfully grabbed for her.

He pulled away from the curb and glanced at her. The smile was always as he imagined it, brilliant and blinding. She met his gaze and by the gods, even if she wasn't the pregnant one, she was glowing.

"We're going to have a baby," she said. He smiled back at her, determined not to cry at any point during this.

"We're going to have a baby."

III

Ella trembled as she approached the castle's doors. Despite Charming being only a few steps behind, she felt alone and vulnerable on the threshold of the greatest enemy she had ever encountered. She looked back at James again.

"It's going to be alright, Ella," he reassured her, "The Caretaker's much more reasonable than her husband." Ella hoped so.

She raised her hand to knock, but the doors flew open of their own accord. Ella stared at Charming as though he had the answers, but he just nodded her on.

A fire was going in the hearth of what looked like a banquet hall, a table long enough for dozens of chairs in the center of it. There was a large master chair and two simplistic chairs to the left of it, a tea set spread out in front of the trio. They heard a cup being poured, and a disembodied gloved hand attached to the kettle.

"You don't have to stay back," A female voice called to them, "I don't bite. Usually."

The travelers exchanged a glance and then took their seats, Ella closer to the Caretaker.
She was surprised to see the face of Rumplestiltskin's other half; she honestly was expecting a feminine version of the Dark One, glittering skin, terrifying eyes and all. The Caretaker was quite lovely, the crimson gown and elbow-length gloves adorned with gold. There was a frilled collar that wasn't quite as showy as the Evil Queen's, but still garnered the connection.

Those eyes. Those blue blue eyes were cold as ice, and as soulless as Ella imagined the Devil's Bride would be.

"You were expecting us," Ella croaked. Belle nodded.

"Of course," she smiled emotionlessly, "It's one of the perks of living up in the mountains; you can see for miles around." She gestured towards the tea set, "Please, help yourselves."

Ella looked at the metallic set and felt apprehensive. She had learned not to take help or things from strangers since her move to the palace...especially from someone with magic.

Charming didn't waver too long, picking up a lemon tart before pouring himself a cup of tea. Belle sipped at her cup.

"It's very good," James said after he took a bite, being honest. Belle smiled.

"Thanks. It took me the longest time to get the recipe right," she set her cup down, "Alright; you've paid your civilities. Seeing how late you've come I take this isn't just a friendly visit?"


"And what makes you think I have the power to bring him back?"

"You're married to the monster who took him." Belle tilted her head back against the chair.

"Ah yes, the power of feminine persuasion... Perhaps the greatest of all political power," she shook her head, "I do not alter Rumplestiltskin's deals."

"Why not?" James asked.

"Why don't you let a toddler rule a kingdom?" Belle retorted, "Because the toddler doesn't know what the hell its doing. It's the same with him and I; I don't see the future. He does. He sees all the gears in the clockwork while I only have a spring or two to work with."

Belle took another drink of her tea before directing her next question to Ella.

"Were you literate before you went to the ball?" Ella furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

"What?"

"Were you literate before you went to the ball, the one where you wooed Prince Thomas and received your happily ever after?"

"Of course I was," Ella mumbled, "My real mother taught me to read before she died."

"Then why on earth would you sign a contract without reading the fine print?"

Belle reached under the table and pulled out a contract...a contract that looked suspiciously like the one from nearly six months ago that Ella signed to rid herself of her wretched life. She set it in front of her, pointing to a line about halfway down the page.
"Please read this out loud," she said. Ella glanced up at her, then back down at the parchment, reciting the document.

"In exchange, the victim will receive all of the aforementioned benefits, so long as she bequeaths the following: her firstborn child (detailed in Article Three of this document) or, if she remains barren, a favor." Ella stared up at Belle in horror, "He actually-

"And down here," Belle pointed at Article Four of the document. Ella cleared her throat and continued in a shaky voice.

"If the beneficiary does not receive his payment in due time, or is refused his payment for whatever reason, the magical collateral will be…" Ella grimaced, "…her husband, or next of kin."

"Thank you," Belle tucked the contract away without further ado.

Ella's eyes welled up with tears, mouth hanging open in shock.

"I didn't know…"

"Because you couldn't be bothered to read the contract before you signed away your first born."

"My life was-"

"Horrible, yes, being an unpaid maid in a house that should be your home." Venom dripped from Belle's words. Her fingers tightened around the arms of the chair, knuckles now clearly defined beneath the silk of her glove, "So in order for your life to be better, you enlisted the help of a powerful man, who gave you the life that so many girls dreamed of."

"But."

"And all he asked for was your first born child. What did you do when you learned his price?" Belle frowned, "You imprisoned him. You imprisoned him because you didn't want to pay up."

"The emotional toll of giving up a child for comfort is…devastating," Charming spoke up, eyes pleading with Belle, "It haunts a person for life."

"Then maybe they should think twice before accepting help from a man who looks like a beast," Belle hissed. She glared at Ella, "If you want something bad enough, you have to be prepared to pay the cost. Rumplestiltskin doesn't trick people; most of the time their heads are so narrow-minded they won't stop to think about why he'd help them, what could possibly be in it for him?"

Ella grit her teeth.

"It's easy for you to say! It's not your child you're giving away!"

"No, I've never been in your particular circumstance, but I like to think I know a thing or two about sacrifice."

"You've probably never made a deal with him!"

"I promised my eternal servitude for the safety of my loved ones!" Belle roared.

The silence hung in the air, both of the guests shocked at the admission. Perhaps the Chosen One was as trapped as everyone else Rumplestiltskin had ensnared; maybe their marriage was just a product of the deal she had made. Belle seemed to realize what she had said, and relaxed her hands.
"That story, however, isn't for the likes of you," she murmured, glaring at Ella, "But don't you dare think I've had it easy, or that I have no idea what it's like to be on the other end of a deal. I have felt the desperation that now courses through your veins, and I succumbed. But I did not back out just because I didn't like my end of the bargain."

Ella bit her lip, a few silent tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Please..." She squeaked, "Please let me have my husband back." Her request was met with a stony silence and so with a deep breath, Ella took it further, "Give me my husband back...and I'll set Rumplestiltskin free."

"Ella, no!" Charming exclaimed.

Belle stared at Ella, and Ella could see the flickers of humanity returning to those icy blue eyes. She spoke as though she had measured out the words beforehand.

"I will...give you back your husband...if you give me back mine... And let us take the baby when it arrives."

Ella clenched her jaw.

"It's the only way," Belle said, her tone softer than it had been their entire visit, "If I just get Rumplestiltskin back then the deal is not resolved. You can't get something for nothing with magic like this; your child is the only way to set this right."

Ella set a protective hand over her swollen stomach, rubbing the baby growing inside of her.

"...I'll find some other way to get Thomas back," she decided, "I can't give up the first child we've created together...he'd understand."

The iciness returned to the Caretaker's eyes.

"...you could always have more children," she growled, throwing Ella's own words back at her. Ella jerked back as though she had been slapped, then rose and quickly fled the room.

Charming stayed seated, watching as Belle started to organize a little tray of tea and lemon tarts.

"There is no way to alter the deal? No way to resolve it so everyone's happy?"

Belle met Charming's eyes, and her chin trembled for a moment before she turned away.

"No. There is no other way."

James remained for a moment, not sure with which of his wife's friends his loyalties laid. Eventually, the threat of the Dark One and the thought of Ella going through what his mother went through made him leave the castle.

Belle stood, sniffed her tears back, smoothed her dress, then picked up the tray and made her way to the east wing.

It was a wing that Rumplestiltskin seldom used, save for the nursery and Belle's room before she had moved to his bedchambers. She followed the never-ending hallway until she got to the last door, the door swinging open to let her in.

Her captive straightened and tensed at her arrival. She bit her lip.
"You didn't touch your supper… I thought you might want something before you went to sleep," she explained, setting the tray down on the table by his bed.

He glared at her with that same mix of betrayal and understanding he had worn since he was teleported to this room. He could see what his wife couldn't; they had tried to beat Rumplestiltskin at his own game and, though they put him in checkmate, he had managed to steal their queen. Belle stood for a moment, hoping that he'd be the one to start the conversation. He just stared blankly at her dress.

"…she came for you," Belle admitted and his head jerked up, "Her and James…"

"Why didn't you let me see her?" He growled.

"Because sometimes it's harder to look a prisoner in the eyes instead of just knowing you can't get to them…especially with a spouse." The captive looked her up and down.

"She didn't offer to release Rumplestiltskin?" Belle shook her head sadly.

"She did, but the deal's been struck already. We can't turn back time and change that."

Without anything more to tell him, Belle turned towards the door.

"If you need anything, Prince Thomas, please let me know." Thomas gave a bemused snort.

"Aren't you a little too complimentary to be a jail keeper?" He asked. Belle gave her first genuine smile since Rumplestiltskin had left her.

"What can I say? My old maid habits die hard."

III

"Henry, what are you doing here?" The boy in question was jerked out of his train of thought, turning to the speaker.

"Hey, Mrs. Gold!" She took the seat next to him, tucking one leg up underneath her.

She was all smiles, practically glowing. He wondered if this was because of Cinderella's baby; he had figured out the baby had been sold to Mr. Gold, mostly through eavesdropping on his mom.

"Emma drove Ashley here… I was in the car." Belle arched an eyebrow.

"And what about Regina? Does she know?"


He swung his legs, toes just barely brushing the floor with each swing.

"So I need to ask you something…for Operation Cobra." Belle stiffened, jutting her chin up defiantly.

"Why should I tell you anything if you won't let me be in it?"

"Because it's obstruction of justice if you don't tell me," he jutted his chin up as well. Belle narrowed her eyes.

"Big words for a little man…" She opened her book, "What's your question?"
"Can a person in Storybrooke actually be two characters in the book?"

"It's possible," she confessed, eyes scanning the page casually.

"Is Mr. Gold two different characters in the book?"

"I plead the fifth."

"He is, isn't he?"

"Learn your Bill of Rights, Henry. The fifth means I'm not talking for fear of incriminating myself." She pretended to read for a minute, "...if you were to guess...?"

"First one is the Beast."

"Naturally," she agreed, nodding her head. He leaned closer to her, whispering.

"And the second one is Rumplestiltskin." Belle tensed, glancing at Henry warily.

"Was it the last name? Regina ran out of originality early on." Henry grinned.

"Actually it was the whole baby-stealing thing."

Belle pouted, leaning back in her seat, "That's a common misconception; we don't steal babies."

"Sorry," Henry murmured. Belle turned the page, "Did you tell Mr. Gold that I know?"

"Of course not; it's our little secret," she looked at him, "Right?"

"Right."

"Good," she nodded, before fully devoting herself to her book.

Henry craned his neck to see what she was reading. "Your Baby's First Year". And then he saw the item in her lap. Oh no... This baby wasn't meant for a trade... They were going to-

Belle jumped violently and spun around to see who the hand on her shoulder belonged to. There was a flicker of apology in his eyes, and then pain and remorse.

"We need to talk, Rose." The very words made Belle's heart sink.

Emma tried to watch without staring as Mr. Gold pulled his wife aside, apparently to give her the news. Why her husband's illegal activity was Rose's business was beyond Emma's comprehension. Rose already looked plenty worried, book forgotten back with Henry.

Mr. Gold kept his hand on her shoulder, looking earnestly at her. Rose kept his gaze until he fell silent. She shook her head in disbelief, looking down the hall and then back at him, then back down the hall as though the problem was somewhere over there, waiting to pounce. He cupped her chin, hair shaking as he spoke emphatically. He released her and she looked down, then at Emma. She started towards Emma, and Emma prepared for trouble.

Rose stopped a foot away from her, folding her arms.

"...can I see her?" The voice was timid, fragile. Emma took a minute to step off the defensive.

"Of course."
Anger. Rage. Betrayal. Hurt. Pain. Sadness. Humiliation. Belle was experiencing every shade of negative emotion. She could be mad at Rumplestiltskin, she supposed; choosing a favor over their child. But Emma had them backed into a corner with that contract that would not hold up in this world's court. No, most of her emotion was directed towards Ella/Ashley. How could she get everything, her true love her child her freedom, when she had stuck her middle finger up at going through with her end of the bargain that gave her all of this? Where was the justice?!

Belle tentatively entered the room and saw her holding her child, the child she was supposed to be taking home to their nursery. Ashley looked up nervously as she approached the bed, and Belle commanded herself to behave.

"Congratulations," she said.

"Thank you," Ashley said. Belle gazed down at the baby…that beautiful perfect little girl.

"What's her name?"

"Alexandra." Not a name; a prison sentence.

Belle looked down at the item in her hand, rolling it back and forth.

"I…got her something," she said, offering it towards them.

It was a purple terrycloth elephant, big enough so she couldn't choke on any of the parts but still relatively small. Its ears were disproportionately large in comparison to the rest of it, and they were floppy like a basset hound's.

"I saw it one day at a boutique and thought of her," Belle explained, "It made me laugh, its ears, but then I thought it was cute, like a reminder that nobody's perfect."

Ashley freed a hand and took it.

"Thank you… I'm sure she'll love it." Belle caught Ashley's eyes.

"If you need anything…anything at all…" Ashley bowed her head, gazing down at Alexandra. She set the elephant down in her lap and then ran her fingers carefully over the baby's fine hair.

"No offense, Mrs. Gold…but your husband tried to take my baby from me. I don't really want anything to do with either one of you anymore."

Belle's nails dug into the flesh of her palms.

"Fair enough. Goodbye Ashley."

"Goodbye Mrs. Gold." Belle turned on her heels and left.

Emma had kept an eye on Rose; desperate women did desperate things. But there had been no raised voices, no tearful pleas. Just an exchange of an elephant. Rose stopped alongside Emma, looking back at the mother-daughter pair.

"We were going to name her Isabella," she said. Emma's head whipped towards her, and she saw Rose's eyes water. She shook her head, "I didn't particularly like the name, but Mr. Gold won the bet and guessed it would be a girl," she bent her head, "We went through a lot of names; he insisted that "bel" had to be in there in any form. I agreed to Isabella because I thought it would grow on me." She met Emma's eyes, "I just thought you should know that."
Emma went from feeling like a hero to feeling like a villain in the course of 64 words. Helping Ashley had been a little self-serving, a chance for redemption about giving up Henry. She had assumed Mr. Gold would pass the baby on to the next highest bidder. It had never even entered her mind that he might be adopting it himself.

Was it fair for the birth mother to change her mind about keeping her kid?

Mr. Gold stood in the lobby, stone-faced. He turned his head at the approaching footsteps, and saw his Belle being impossibly strong. How could she keep the tears back when he could scarcely manage? This was her first time losing a child and he had experience. She came up to him and silently took his hand, weaving her fingers with his. He gave a soft squeeze and then they walked; out of the lobby, out of the hospital, and to the car.

That was where Belle lost the strength game.

She was trembling when he slipped into the driver's seat, lips curling back in a snarl. Without warning, she slammed her arms against the dash once, twice, a third time.

"NO NO NO!" She screeched, doubling over.

Her sobs were loud, open-mouthed wails and shrieks, fingernails clawing at the dash board as though trying to rip it apart...or hold on for dear life.

Rumplestiltskin felt as though his heart had been pierced by his own dagger, raw and bleeding and screaming with pain. The human part of him started to cry quietly, nauseous at Belle's distress. The other side, the dark nearly hidden side, demanded blood for whoever hurt his little Belle, the only thing he really had that was worth anything. The only action he was capable of was rubbing her back, promising that he was there, always.

He wasn't sure how long they grieved, but Belle was finally starting to breathe, her calmed crying punctuated by sniffs.

"...it was so much easier when I knew they weren't mine, when I could tell myself it was only for a short while," she said, wiping at her nose as she sat up. She looked at him, his shining eyes, his wet cheeks, "I was stupid, wasn't I? I should've been just as detached until she was safe in our home."

"Hope is a double-edged sword," he murmured, "It makes life worth living...but it also makes the suffering that much worse."

He started the car and they left the hospital behind, empty-handed.

Mr. Gold was just coming up on the pawn shop when Belle spoke.

"Please drop me off." Mr. Gold smirked bitterly.

"I think you have a pretty good excuse for taking the rest of the night off."

"Please," she repeated, closing her eyes, "...I don't want to go home right now." Mr. Gold understood.

He pulled over to the spot where, just hours ago, they were ecstatic at the thought that they would be parents. Belle opened her door.

"I love you," Mr. Gold said.
"I love you too," Mrs. Gold said.

They embraced, holding onto each other for dear life. When they were in danger of relapsing into tears they parted, and Mr. Gold snuck a kiss to her forehead before she left.

He hesitated, hating to leave her when she was going through this hell, but he knew that sometimes pain was best dealt with on one's own. He pulled away and started for home.

It took all of Belle's concentration to figure out which was the correct key, and then to try and fit it in the lock.

"I didn't see a car seat." Belle glanced up. Regina could smell misery like a bloodhound, couldn't she?

She was grinning, painted lips declaring that yes she knew what was going on, but she wanted to hear the person admit it.

"I heard Miss Boyd went into labor… Did Mr. Gold really force you to go back to work with your new baby coming home soon?" Rot in hell, Regina.

Belle calmly turned to her.

"Ashley changed her mind. She decided to keep her baby." Regina's eyebrows rose.

"And Mr. Gold allowed her to break their deal?" Belle shook her head.

"This isn't a fairy tale, Mayor Mills. You can't just buy babies from people." Regina squinted as if to see how accidental her words were. Belle kept her face innocent.

She unlocked the store, swinging the door open before turning back to the woman.

"No matter how I feel about you, I'm glad Emma didn't change her mind about Henry." Regina's smugness faded to something close to sincerity.

"…really?" Belle nodded.

"When you prepare for a child…you make room for them. In every area of your life you now figure in this new person, this incredible person that though you don't know them, you are already absolutely in love with them. You wait and you plan and you dream…and then something happens. For whatever reason that incredible person you love isn't coming into your life anymore. And that room you made for them? It's just a gigantic hole in your heart, a void that you know can't be filled," Belle shook her head slowly, "We may have our differences, Regina…but I would never wish that pain on you."

Mr. Gold arrived at the house and started proofing it for Belle's eventual return. He took the car seat out of the front hallway. He took the high chair out of the dining room. He took the little swing out of the parlor, and the play pen, and the baby monitor from Belle's nightstand. He took all of those things into the room directly across from theirs.

Foggy fake memories came back of them setting up the nursery for the adoption. Belle had painted the room sky blue with clouds on the ceiling. That crib he had found at a garage sale. Everything was so carefully unisex…except for the doll castle he had hidden behind the mountain of stuffed animals. He knew it had to be a girl, even in the thralls of the curse. He looked over the carpet. He had been so careful not to clutter the room, so that Belle may sing and twirl their little girl to her heart's content.
That was the last straw, surrendering that lovely vision to the realm of "not gonna happen".

With a roar he knocked the crib over, spinning around to smash his cane against the shelf of picture books. He grabbed the rocking chair from the corner and hurled it at the stuffed animal mountain. With tears blurring his vision, he brought his cane down on the castle, smashing it further in with each blow. Once it was unrecognizable, he collapsed, sobbing hysterically.

All he wanted was a child for him and Belle to call their own. Surely that wasn't an unreasonable request...was it?

III

Ruby didn't go into Gold's Pawn Shop; it was a law of nature. The sun rose in the east, the force of gravity kept them from floating from place to place, and Ruby stayed the hell away from Rose's spouse if at all possible. In most places he couldn't sneak up on her, but in his shop...

Plus, it reeked from all the old stuff, and no matter how awesome the vintage was it wasn't worth that smell.

But Rose had been hit hard yesterday, and hadn't come in for even her tea this morning. So Ruby did the friend thing and braved the spooky shop.

Belle glanced up from her book as Ruby set off the bell. Ruby smiled. Belle didn't.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"I didn't see you this morning."

"That's because I wasn't at Granny's." Ruby hesitantly approached the counter.

"I brought you your tea. On the house."

"Thank you." She didn't make a motion to take the cup. Ruby frowned.

"C'mon Rose!" She hit the counter with the heel of her hand, "Don't ice me out like this!"

Belle set her book down, sighing.

"Ruby I know you're friends with both Ashley and me. I don't want you to feel conflicted."

"I'm not asking you to defend yourself; I just wanna know why you skipped out this morning."

"Because I just couldn't handle it."

Belle slowly pulled the tea towards her, taking a sip. If it was cold from the walk over, she didn't act like it. "I know what people say about us; I've known from the first time we met how others would see it. Gold digger, cradle robber, sugar daddy, daddy issues, I realize them all...and no one would believe me if I insisted on the truth, that I love him for him."

She stared down at the lid. The waitress shifted uncomfortably.

"The wound's too fresh, Ruby; I can't sit there knowing they're gossiping about what we were doing with Ashley's baby, and how she defied the fearsome Golds. I'll wait until their loose lips find another target before returning to my normal routine." Ruby leaned on the counter.
"It's not you, Rose," she insisted, "It's your husband."

"And that's what you people just don't understand." Belle's head rose, and Ruby saw the rawness of her eyes, the pain she went through by association, "The minute we exchanged vows and rings was the minute we became two parts of one whole instead of staying two individuals. When someone hurts me, it hurts him. When someone calls him names then they call me that as well. Yes, we have our distinct personalities, methods, likes and dislikes, but no one should mistake that as us playing two solo games."

She folded her hands around the cup, radiating confidence.

"We're a team, partners, the way marriage was always intended to be."

Despite her less than stellar feelings about Mr. Gold, Ruby couldn't help but admire their relationship.
Mrs. Gold adopts a new member into their family, and Mr. Gold is less than thrilled.

Belle insists upon aiding Rumplestiltskin with his job as the Dark One. He takes her on a unicorn hunt.

Mr. Gold was starting to remember why he didn't bring his wife along on errands.

It had been a pain at best in their old world, lethal peril at worst. If Belle wasn't taking part in a deal in progress, her curiosity would kick in and she'd venture off into the great wide somewhere. Unfortunately in the great wide somewhere, there were dragons, ogres, highwaymen, chimeras, assassins, magic-wielders, Regina and more, and Belle had stumbled across them all in the few years she had been with him.

At least the worst case scenario in this town was Regina, whom they could handle, or her dragon friend, but Belle had already explored the mines so she wouldn't be going back there.

He had only been talking to Marco for maybe ten minutes, discussing the things Mr. Gold had brought for him to fix. He turned to ask Belle if there was something he'd forgotten, only to find her gone. A quick glance at the car told him she hadn't just curled up to read.

He wished, not for the first time, her mark worked here so he could summon her ass back here.

"She's probably in the garage," Marco offered, noticing Mr. Gold's gaze, "Duchess just had a litter of kittens… If I ever get my hands on that alley cat…"

"I'll check there, if you don't mind."

Mr. Gold's life flashed before his eyes; a vision of clawed-up furniture, pissed-on carpets and non-stop mewling whenever Belle was gone. A sense of doom washed over him, and he hoped feebly Belle hadn't found the litter.

No such luck.

He could hear her, crooning over the fleabags and marveling at the cuteness of each one. He made his way over to the dimly-lit corner, Belle sitting in the midst of the hoard. The mother, a sleek white beauty, seemed content to let Belle play with her kids while she took a break. There was already one in her arms and he prepared his very-sensible argument against having a kitten.

Belle turned and he was blinded by her smile. He hadn't seen it since the ill-fated trip to the hospital, and he missed it so. She looked like her old self holding the tiny thing to her cheek.

"Isn't he adorable?!" She exclaimed. Mr. Gold examined it.

Yellow eyes examined him right back, the thing so small it could sit in the palm of his hand. It was black save for its belly, chest, and mouth, as well as the paws and tail-tip that made it look like it had walked through wet white paint. It was cute, Mr. Gold conceded, but so were fairies, and those
brought nothing but trouble.

"I can't keep all of them," Marco said, coming up beside him, "If I can't find owners on my own I'll have to take them to the shelter."

Belle gasped as though this was a huge plot twist.

"We can't let him go into the system! Look at this face!"

Mr. Gold gazed evenly at the cat. Belle was the only one he knew who thought animals were equal to people; not greater, not lesser, but one hundred percent equal. He had tried to point out her insanity then of eating them at dinner one night, and all he got for his trouble was a little roasted dragon flung at his face.

That smile...he had suffered greater indignities than this for that wicked little weapon. He frowned.

"Will you care for it?"

Belle stared at him, "What?"

"Will you feed it, clean its box, give it something to scratch up besides my upholstery, take it to the vet's dutifully, and otherwise ensure I never have to deal with it?"

Belle lit up as she realized he was, in his own way, saying she could keep it.

"Yes, of course!" She leapt to her feet, hugging the kitten so tight Mr. Gold feared she'd break it already, "Oh thank you!" She kissed his cheek before dashing off to the car, presumably so he couldn't change his mind.

Mr. Gold sighed and Marco snickered.

"The love of a woman, eh? What a man wouldn't do for it."

"You speak of this to no one and your rent will be mysteriously low next month."

The kitten was in Belle's lap when he got into the car, hunkered down like a deer in the headlights. Belle stroked it and murmured reassurances.

"I think we should exchange it. This one's a scaredy cat." Belle shot him a glare.

"He's going away from the only home he's ever known with two strangers. Of course he's scared." Mr. Gold backed out of the gravel driveway, "What do you have against cats?"

"Nothing, but I have nothing for them, either," he pursed his lips, "I've only liked one cat in my life, dearie, and she was only partially cat."

"So you like dogs?"

"Not particularly," he cocked his head, "I've never understood that duality, like you have to like either cats or dogs. Some people like both and some, like me, don't prefer either of them."

Belle scratched the kitten's chin.

"Then what is your preference?"

"I like sheep," he said plainly, "They're useful, and listen a lot better than a cat."
"You shouldn't talk that way around Figaro; you'll hurt his feelings."

Mr. Gold whipped his head towards her, jaw slacked.

"We've had it maybe five minutes and you've already named it?!"

"Of course I have!" Belle reached over to steady the steering wheel and keep them in the right lane, "It suits him."

Mr. Gold took possession of the wheel again, shaking his head. How was she supposed to know if the name suited it when she barely knew it?

"Don't worry, Figgy," she cooed to the lightly shivering ball of fur, "You'll grow on him. You just have to accept the fact he's a jerk."

III

Marrying Belle might've been a mistake, Rumplestiltskin realized early on. Most women settled down into their homes once they had a husband, and Rumplestiltskin fooled himself into believing Belle would be content in the Dark Castle, brewing potions and keeping careful notes of his deals. It was like he believed he could change her or something.

He knew he was in trouble when he came up to his tower and saw her sitting on one of the work benches, legs swinging, hands on her lap. He froze and she smiled sinisterly.

"What are you up to tomorrow?" She asked cheerily. Rumplestiltskin's stomach prickled uncomfortably and he grinned, striding towards her.

"Nothing interesting," he insisted, fingertips pressed together. She tilted her head.

"I don't believe you."

"That's because you find *everything* interesting," he paused in front of her, one foot in front of the other, "If you reeeeeeally want to know…"

"I do."

"There's a town near a valley. A valley infested with unicorns," he wrinkled her nose. Belle perked up, "Have to exterminate them."

Belle looked like he had said he was going to launch infants from catapults just to watch them splat.

"Why would you do that?!" She exclaimed. He splayed his hands.

"Because unicorns are a menace."

"No they aren't! We had a glory of them near our finishing school; the other girls and I used to sneak out to feed them sugar cubes after tea. They were the most gentle, beautiful things I have ever seen."

Rumplestiltskin snickered and Belle fumed, tempted to smack him.

"What's wrong with that picture, Belle?" Belle's eyes rolled towards the ceiling as though the answer was up there.
"…we were all girls."

"You were all _pure_," he raised his pointer finger, "Unicorns are the exact opposite of most beasties; they exalt purity and detest corruption. They will destroy whatever impurities exist, no matter how minor the fault." He sneered, "They're lovely and kind to children…everyone else gets the horn."

Belle felt the finger poke her in the ribs, and bit back a laugh.

"So they're really that bad?"

"Oh yes. Blade-sharp horn, diamond-hard hooves, hallucinogenic bites… They seem innocent, but there's a hidden darkness to them," his fingers started to prod at her, moving around her middle and trying to find a soft spot, "Like you!"

She giggled and squirmed as he continued to tickle her, waiting until she cried "uncle!" before stopping. She caught her breath before asking.

"Will you teach me how to kill them?"

The question made Rumplestiltskin pause, staring down at her. She tried to read him, to tell what he was thinking, but his eyes were as still as an unbroken pool.

He sighed, "…what's the harm?"

**III**

Belle and Rumplestiltskin had engaged in many glorious battles with each other, taking turns claiming victories. The Golds had been too cursed to give much more than bitter hints, but that was bound to change now that they were remembering how their other lives went.

Mr. Gold had the sense that this wasn't going to be a battle. No, this was going to be a full-fledged war.

Even the black coffee barely stirred the fog around his head. There had been little sleep last night, and in hindsight he realized turning in early had been his undoing.

He had been slightly conscious of Belle coming in an hour or two after he had gotten under the covers, his mind in the delicious haze of being half-awake and half asleep. There was suddenly pressure on his chest, and something kneading into him. His first thought was that Belle needed to trim her nails. The second, somewhat more rationally, was that Katja was messing with him. He opened his eyes with a great effort, ready to tell her off.

Two yellow eyes stared back at him, and Mr. Gold realized it was just Belle's new pet. The thing was breathing hard, rumbling against his chest. He wasn't sure how it had confused him for Belle, with the lack of padding and all. He picked it up and placed it on the proper chest, its owner grunting in complaint.

Thirty seconds later, he felt it back on his chest. His hand slipped off the edge of the bed and felt for his cane, rising carefully. The cat slid down into his hand and he hobbled towards the door, sticking the kitten out into the hallway.

No sooner was he comfortably back in bed than the mewling started. What cruel god had put such an insufferable frequency into an animal?

"Go get him," Belle's words were muffled by the pillow she was face-down in.
"It's your cat," he reminded her.

"I didn't shut it out," she insisted.

He lay there for a minute, trying to ignore the noise. It was as if the cries were burrowing into his flesh, making it shoot needles of irritation throughout his body. He started to pray that Belle would lose her resolve and go to it…but Belle also had that nasty skill she picked up from reading whenever wherever of blocking noise out. So he rose again, and let the cat back in.

The cat seemed spited by his peaceable efforts to get it to leave him alone, and continued trying to curl up on his chest. He spent the majority of the night shifting around to displace the cat, only to have it find somewhere else on him to lie on. The bed wasn't especially large, so his endless tossing and turning kept his wife up and made her growl like a dragon. He finally nodded off for a few hours before Belle's alarm went off.

He was aware of something between his legs and was justifiably concerned since it was far too small to be Belle. He propped himself up and looked down to see the cat, its head on his crotch.

"I don't mean to disturb you, but I believe your cat's coming on to me," he said.

"Don't be a pervert," she snapped, "It's warm down there, and cats like warmth."

It didn't make him feel any better about the situation, and he nudged the cat lower with his good leg.

Belle graciously took the thing with her when she left, and Mr. Gold gave a solid hour and a half effort to try and regain sleep. One point to the cat, he thought dimly as he finished his coffee, but he'd rather sleep on the couch than with that thing again.

He ran a few errands before making his way to the shop for lunch. The first thing he noticed was the cat on the counter.

"This isn't a daycare," he grumbled, moving towards her.

"He would've been lonely in the house all day," she insisted, passing him his sandwich.

"He should get used to it; we're gone most of the time."

"He's a baby; he needs to have us around for a couple of weeks for security."

"It'll be fine, it's an animal."

"It's a pet!"

"That doesn't need to be sleeping with us!"

"He's in a new place and he's scared!"

Mr. Gold's eyes wandered to the thing in question. Belle had poured it a cup of milk and it lapped casually at it, unperturbed by their rather heated discussion. But that cup wasn't normal. It wasn't whole. There was a chip on the side it was drinking out of. Mr. Gold's knuckles went white as he strangled his cane, using his few shreds of restraint to keep from killing it.


Belle glanced down, and her eyes widened.
"I'm so sorry… I didn't think… It was the first one I grabbed."

"That's my cup, and that thing is drinking out of it." Belle shrugged helplessly at him.

"It's just a cup."

Yes, it had been just a cup when he had used those words to her that first night. But it became more than that. It became the first thing she had changed in his life, the first ripple; she had chipped something of his and he hadn't thrown a fit (he blamed those eyes). When he thought she had died it was really all he had left to prove she existed, the only thing she had given to him besides an ill-fated kiss.

And now the damned cat was drinking out of it.

Was it back to being just a cup now? His rational side said "yes"… But his rational side was not always in control.

As if the universe decided to save Mr. Gold from something he'd regret in five minutes, a tremor shook the ground beneath them. Bicycles swung. Chess pieces rolled. A book landed on the ground with a dull thud. With one hand he grabbed for Belle and with the other he kept his cup from being knocked over.

The tremor lasted less than a minute, but Belle continued to shake, staring at Mr. Gold.

"Earthquake?" She asked. He shook his head.

"Doubtful."

Belle bolted for the door and he bit back a cry. What if it happened again? That boat wasn't as secure as it should be and if something fell on her… She was gone before he could rationalize warning her. Mr. Gold picked up his cane, lines appearing on his creased forehead.

It wasn't natural… In fact it almost felt like magic.

The cat had disappeared, he noticed. That would worry Belle. He rounded the counter. It was down there, cowering in an opened cabinet. He gave a wistful smile.

"Come on out, boy, no one likes a coward."

He eased himself down onto his good knee, offering a hand to the cat. The cat sniffed at it, then rubbed his face against it and purred. Mr. Gold recalled hearing somewhere that cats didn't just purr when they were happy; they also purred when they were anxious. He patted its head.

"It's alright; I don't think it's gonna happen again," he bapped its nose with a finger, "That's what happens when you drink out of my cup you little nuisance." The way he said nuisance made it almost sound like a term of endearment.

He straightened and went around the shop, assessing the damage. Surprisingly there was none; just many things that needed to be set up-right again. He glanced at the door as the bell tinkled.

"The old mines caved in," Belle announced, eyes wide. Mr. Gold frowned.

"Natural or forced?"

"Natural, from what anyone could gather. Regina looked pretty surprised and unnerved for it to be of her doing."
Mr. Gold took a few strides, setting up the metallic tea set.

"Plenty of magic down there…hidden, inaccessible to most."

"If it wasn't you, and it wasn't Regina… Emma did something," Belle concluded. Mr. Gold nodded his agreement.

She went for the counter and grabbed her purse.

"Alright, I'll go play detective while you babysit Figgy." Mr. Gold looked offended.

"Why can't I play detective and you handle your cat?"

"Because being a detective requires you to be a people person," she flashed a smile at him, "And we both know you're not the social butterfly." She glanced down at his ankle and "awww"ed. Mr. Gold glanced down.

The cat was sitting right beside him, like a heeled dog. He scowled.

"You two have fun bonding!" Belle called before disappearing out the door.

Mr. Gold's eyes narrowed as the animal looked up at him, yellow eyes deceivingly innocent.

"You're her cat, not mine," he reminded it. It rubbed its shoulder against his leg, and he was glad that his slacks coincided with the black fur on the beast.

III

Rumplestiltskin loved the way Belle looked when she was being taught. Bright-eyed, straight as an arrow, he'd seen playful puppies less eager than her. Even if it was the knowledge of how to kill something, it was still knowledge, and he was sure even if he rattled off everything he knew, she would still be hungry for more.

So they stood in the gardens, near a life-size-but-otherwise-shoddy-excuse-for-a unicorn unicorn. It might've been a rocking horse at some point, or a bench with a mop attached to it, but now it had a champagne bottle on its forehead, christening it a unicorn.

He handed her something that looked like a sickle, black as charcoal and polished as a wave-worn pebble.

"Dragonbone is the only thing that can sever the horn from the unicorn," he said. Belle tried not to look too squeamish, "It's the best deathblow you can give unless you somehow have the strength to bash its skull in." Belle shook her head.

Part of him hoped his bluntness would turn her off to the ordeal. Part of him hoped she'd prove herself as fearless and undaunted as she had always been towards him.

"Second best are the neck arteries…here and here," he tapped each side of the unicorn's throat, and Belle translated it to where they'd be on an actual unicorn.

He circled it and she followed him, getting a feel for her weapon.

"Never get behind one, always in front… A hit to the flank will wound but not kill them… You can try for the ribcage if you're underneath one, but a punctured lung is a horrible death… Cutting a leg is a waste of your time…"
"You've done this a lot," she remarked. He shrugged.

"Enough. You learn fast after the first few impalements."

Belle thought she was going to be sick.

They returned to the head and he began demonstrating the proper swiping method to de-horn the beast. Belle copied a few times and Rumplestiltskin nodded approvingly. He stepped back to allow her room to kill the unicorn, and she took a good swing. The glass stayed attached.

"You're going to have to put in a little more effort, dearie," he chided, "You're slaughtering it, not playing a game of tag."

She tried again and again, a knot forming in the back of her throat. She didn't want to kill unicorns...but she wanted to prove that she was tough enough to be a partner to the Dark One. She loved unicorns; their wise eyes, their warmth, the tickling sensation as they ate sweets from her open palm. She didn't want Rumplestiltskin to be right, to taint those memories that helped her survive finishing school.

But that wasn't the main reason why she didn't want to go along with this, she admitted to herself. She didn't want Rumplestiltskin to be right because, apart from stick sparring when she was little, she had no fighting experience. The only weapon she had held was Gaston's, and that was only for a moment while he bragged about the craftsmanship. She should tell him these things before she was gored to death...but she couldn't form the words.

III

Belle hung back from the crowd, leaning up against a tree as she took in the scene. She tuned in to different conversations, but mostly watched the two power players; Emma and Regina. Emma was working with Graham and at first Belle thought it was just habit. But then the sun caught her hip.

Emma was now Deputy Swan. She had become part of the community, and that was what had caused the collapse. Score one for the good guys.

Speaking of things Regina hated, she was heading right towards Belle. Belle inclined her head.

"Afternoon, Mayor Mills."

"Shouldn't you be working, Miss French?" Apparently her patience was already fried. Belle grinned.

"It's one of the perks of sleeping with the boss; flexible hours," she winked. Regina didn't seem to find it amusing. She sighed, "Mr. Gold was curious about the tunnels collapsing, so he sent me to investigate."

"I'm sure he is," The other woman muttered under her breath.

Regina pursed her lips and Belle watched as she shifted from irritated...to devious.

"You call your husband Mr. Gold," she stated. Belle shrugged.

"Everyone calls him Mr. Gold."

"Even his own wife? Surely you know his first name," she purred, blood red lips curling back.

Regina had purposely not given him one, and had it so no one thought it odd that his first name
was a mystery. Not even his significant other.

Belle glanced away, fidgeting with her purse strap.

"Of course I know his first name…"

"Then what is it?"

"Don't you know?"

"I want to hear you say it." There was menace in Regina's tone, trying to bully her into a misstep. Belle was already dancing on the edge, one slip of the tongue away from giving up their advantage.

Belle bit her lip.

"He hates it… It's long and unique, and it's just easier to go by Mr. Gold."

Regina's hand snaked down to Belle's throat, forcing the girl to look at her.

"What. Is. His. Name?"

Belle swallowed, then cleared her throat.

"…Spindleshanks."

Regina pushed her away disgustedly and Belle smirked.

"No, that's not right. Threadwhistle maybe? No, it's Hobblefoot, definitely Hobblefoot."

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" Regina sneered. Belle tried not to giggle, "You think you're brave and heroic, defying the mayor. Let me assure you, Rosaline… You're not. You're just foolish, thinking that hiding behind your lover's reputation will save you," Regina leaned closer, "I'm not afraid of that little man."

"Oh really?" Belle grinned, "I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that."

She tried to take her leave, but Regina blocked her path.

"Could you move?"

"In such a hurry to leave?" Regina jeered.

"Let me go…" Belle met her eyes, "…please."

Regina's eyes bulged and this time when Belle stepped around, Regina didn't follow. Before this conversation she suspected Belle was awake…now she was positive.

Belle smiled to herself, feeling guilty at her indulgence. Mr. Gold had warned her not to overuse the magic word lest Regina try to squirm out of the deal, but the Evil Queen needed to be put in her place today.

Meanwhile at Gold's Pawnbroker, Mr. Gold continued his self-proclaimed war against Belle's cat. His moment of kindness had convinced the furball that it meant Mr. Gold cared for it, and now it was costing him his peace.
Wherever he went, the cat went. If he rearranged or stocked items, the cat would bat at them. If he sat down to do paperwork, the cat sprawled out on top of it and wouldn't move. If he just stood at the counter and stared at the door, it would either rub up against him or sit on the counter, staring at the door as well.

He was contemplating driving the thing home to drop it off when his cell phone rang. He glanced at the screen. She must have sensed a disturbance in the force.

He answered it, "Come back and take your cat with you."

"Having that must fun with Figaro, huh?" She asked, not missing a beat.

"It won't leave me alone or let me work…it's like an annoying version of you." She giggled.

"He's just bonding with you."

"He's supposed to be bonding with you," he complained. Belle sighed.

"Cats are like people; you can't force them to fall in love. They attach to whoever they attach to, and that's the end of that." Mr. Gold thought that was nonsense, but he didn't tell her so.

As though hearing her voice, the cat popped out of whatever crevice it had been hiding in, watching his master thoughtfully.

"Anyway, Emma's become the deputy."

"...aaah."

"Exactly. Regina's planning on paving over the mines, so if you want anything…"

"GRAH!"

Sixteen little hooks were embedded in Mr. Gold's leg without warning, before launching up towards his hip.

"Yes, it's unfortunate, but what would we do with a glass coffin?"

"No, it's your damn cat," he hissed, the kitten hopping onto the counter innocently, "He's too small to jump up on the counter so he uses me as a ladder! At this rate he'll ruin my suit…"

"Oh hush. You have more suits than I have dresses. Why don't you just pick him up and set him on the counter?"

"Because I don't want him on the counter. No one should be on the counter, but apparently I can't stop either of you without it being considered abusive."

"Hang on, Ruby's on the other line." He was unceremoniously ditched.

Mr. Gold eyed the cat. It was now contently curled up next to the register, because apparently it didn't get enough sleep already.

Belle's voice clicked on, coming out in a rush.

"Henry's missing." Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow.

"Isn't that just status quo?"
"Dr. Hopper thinks he went down into the mines." Oh… Well yes that was worth worrying about. Regina was going to be in hysterics what with her ex-friend being down there and all.

Mr. Gold grinned morbidly, "A new suit says Maleficent eats Henry."

"RUMPLESTILTSKIN!" He smothered a giggle as she shrieked.

"Calm down, dearie, I'm sure he won't get that far through the tunnels. He'd have to cross half the town to get there." Belle took a deep breath.

"I'm going to join the rescue team."

"As you wish, but-" The line went dead. Mr. Gold half-heartedly finished anyway, "...take your cat."

**III**

Belle was highly uncomfortable with her lack of armor, wearing only some sort of vest under her dress and a wide steel necklace (more like a collar, she thought darkly). Her arms were bare and she was in a comfortable dress, as though she was just a maid again about to do chores. She certainly didn't feel like she was going into a battle, even with the sickle.

"You have an advantage, dearie; you don't look corrupted," Rumplestiltskin said, hand on the small of her back as he guided her into a clearing, "If they so much as get a whiff of me they start charging like minotaurs. You will have time as they approach you; use it. But don't make the first move unless you're sure of yourself. Divide and conquer. Use the trees. Here," he indicated a patch of clover. She eased herself down, "Keep your mark hidden… put your skirts over the blade. You will be stabbed; don't be surprised, just keep fighting."

Fingertips gently touched her chin and she looked up at him. Sometimes Rumplestiltskin was as readable as a locked diary, but right now he was open. He was concerned. He didn't want her in danger. He'd rather she be in the castle, curled up in front of a window or in the gardens… But he loved and respected her far too much to coddle her. If she wanted to be his partner instead of a stay-at-home wife, she'd have to do what needed to be done. Killing unicorns was just one of the beginning steps.

"I won't be far," he promised, pulling away. She continued to look at him until he turned his back, then she opened her book.

She couldn't concentrate on reading, not when she was busy being bait. So she stared at the words on the page, her senses on edge as she waited, and waited.

There was a disruption of white in the green scenery and she glanced up, the breath stolen from her lips. It wasn't just the few she had seen on the school's property; it was a much larger glory, maybe a dozen or more. Their golden horns gleamed in the light, heads turned to consider her. One of the larger ones, probably their leader, flicked his silvery tail and they started up the hill towards her.

The old sensations of wonder and awe filled her, and she wished she had brought taffy or mints or something to give to them. Tears filled her eyes as she saw a foal near the back, beautiful despite its gawkiness with a little stub of a horn. They continued their approach and Belle forgot her book, the sickle, everything. She extended her hand palm-up in a sign of goodwill towards them.

Their heads jerked back, eyes rolling as they squealed, and she realized she had offered her marked arm towards them.
They branched out, circling her with frantic snorts. Their cloven hooves beat at the ground and Belle scrambled to her feet. The circle was tightening, and Belle's terror blossomed at the sight of their coordination. Before she could react, the attacks began.

She screamed as a horn ripped through her arm, then her opposite shoulder, and she fell to the ground as one tried to pierce her vest. She felt around for her sickle, hooves raining down on her as if to smash her into the earth. She grasped it and struck out blindly, hitting nothing. She thrust upwards and cut into flesh. She thrust again and again with few results. She needed to get out, to get away. Rumplestiltskin, Rumplestiltskin!

She crawled on her hands and knees, breaking through the circle, and ran for dear life towards the trees. The ground thundered behind her as they followed, squealing and snorting as though they had gone mad. She ducked behind a tree, and heard a crunch as a horn drove into it. The unicorn gave an almost human shriek as it realized it was trapped. Belle spun around and slashed through its horn. It crumpled to the ground.

Another horn seared through her hip and she twirled towards the attacker, slitting its artery. Sunset pink blood spurted out at her and she screamed, horror and relief never so strong a combo. She felt as though she were swimming in her own mind, heart thudding against her skull as she faced the other unicorns. The only thought she had was of survival. If it was her or them, then she had to choose herself.

It was a blur of white, pink, black and green as she fought, better than she thought possible, as though the little practice had given her everything she needed. One by one she took down the unicorns, even the pain of their horns forgotten. Finally, all that was left was the foal. Nothing that young should be that enraged, she thought vaguely as she raised her sickle.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. It whinnied and charged, and Belle cut into its throat.

As a last act of defiance, it bit her hand, and Belle let it hold on until it went slack.

Chest heaving, she kept taking in ragged breaths, licking her lips. She tasted their blood and it tasted like...strawberry syrup. She closed her eyes and cringed. What a mix this whole fiasco was; pure beings possessed with the need to kill, their blood beautiful and delicious, a young woman turning into a warrior in the face of danger.

"Very good dearie."

Belle opened her eyes and looked over to see Rumplestiltskin a few steps away. His eyes flicked over her, examining her, testing the waters to see how welcome he'd be. Belle looked down at herself, expecting to be as riddled with holes as a termite-infested log.

There was little to show for the pain she had endured; even as she stared a lethal gash on her arm sealed and shrunk until it vanished. She looked up at Rumplestiltskin in confusion.

"They're healers, not that you'd know it from the way they went after you," he said, picking his way through the massacre towards her. He cocked his head in false astonishment, "What, did you think I'd send you out in just a pretty dress and a couple of charmed accessories if they could actually kill you? I may not be a very good husband, but I'd like to think I wouldn't go so far as to send you out on a suicide mission."

Belle felt a little buzz growing in the back of her skull, and she felt a giggle rise in her throat. It slipped out, growing into a laugh, and then a hysterical laugh.
"…you got bitten, didn't you?" Rumplestiltskin grumbled, which seemed absolutely hilarious for some reason.

The world began to tilt and sway; things that were right beside her becoming small as if they were in the distance. She fell flat on her back and laughed until she was gasping for air, the sky turning purple and Rumplestiltskin's skin started to rise and fall like waves.

Somewhere in the back of her head, she realized that this wasn't right.

III

He had spent nearly all of the day with Belle's cat. When he had made it crystal clear that it would be her sole responsibility if he let her have it. He should've gotten her a lamb...

The cat still wasn't fond of riding in the car, hunkered down in the passenger seat like it was a bomb shelter. Mr. Gold briefly wondered what he would think if he had come to this world memory intact. He might've been just as scared of the moving vehicle. Carrying the cat, he made his way up the steps and inside the house at 9:15.

"I'm assuming Henry turned up, then?" He called.

"Yeah, Dr. Hopper found him and Emma pulled them out."

He lumbered towards the dining room, "Would've been nice to know…"

"I didn't want to hear you whine about my cat again," she said simply. Mr. Gold's mood significantly improved as he smelled the intoxicating mixture of lasagna and garlic bread.

Belle glanced up and when she saw her cat, her eyes widened in horror.

"Rumplestiltskin, what are you doing?!" Mr. Gold raised the kitten higher, inspecting it.

"…holding the cat?" He offered.

"By his neck!" Belle jumped to her dear Figaro's rescue, prying him loose from a confused Mr. Gold.

"It was just by the scruff; I wasn't hurting him. Mother cats do it all the time."

"Are you a mother cat?!" She yelled, cuddling the thing to her chest. It gave a low purr in greeting.

Mr. Gold found the question silly and an illogical defense. He obviously wasn't a mother cat, but if it had hurt the cat it would have let him know, no doubt about that. Belle stormed back to her seat, shooting him a glare. He took his own seat uneasily, considering that maybe something else had happened during the rescue of Henry that was putting her on edge…or perhaps Belle was experiencing her monthly and he just needed to be sympathetic and sensitive.

She did eventually set the cat down and they had a pleasant dinner, mostly composed of what gossip she had picked up. Apparently Mary Margaret had suddenly resigned from her long-time volunteering at the hospital. Many theorized it had to do with a date-gone-wrong with Dr. Whale, but Mr. nor Mrs. Gold believed that.

"David'll be coming home from the hospital in a few days," she informed him, clearing the table while he made his way to the sink, "It'll be interesting to see how his amnesia works with his supposed relationship with Kathryn."
"Walk on the beach during sunset says he'll leave her for Mary Margaret in... a week, two tops."

Belle shook her head, "Charming might've done that... but David seems confused. Night out at the movie theater says a secret affair will occur."

Mr. Gold glanced up from the plate he was washing, "That's pretty negative for you." Belle shrugged.

"We're not supposed to be happy, remember? Besides," she leaned on the counter, "We haven't had a night out together in Storybrooke."

"And for good reason," he grinned at her, "They can't handle us."

III

"I want to die," Belle decided, staring up at the alchemy tower's ceiling. She hadn't moved from the table Rumplestiltskin had laid her out on; just the thought of moving brought more pain than was already in her.

The wounds may have healed, but the flesh that had been shredded now throbbed inside of her, making every inch of her ache. She tried to ignore the pain by finding constellations in the mock night sky, so real above her she could've sworn there wasn't a ceiling.

"No you don't. You just want the pain to go away," Rumplestiltskin replied flippantly from not too far off.

"Please kill me."

"After all you've put me through? No, you're an investment now."

"Do you really hate me that much, to keep me alive?"

"I hate you so much it could be mistaken for love."

She closed her eyes and followed him with her hearing, letting the familiar clink of vials and pouring of ingredients soothe her.

"I think I understand why unicorns could be considered monsters now..." She confessed. She was sure he was smirking.

"What? Didn't they offer you a ride on their back as they frolicked through the meadows?"

"Fraid not," she grumbled, sighing, "I can't make myself hate them though, no matter their nature."

The tinkering paused and bootsteps came towards her.

"That's because you have this odd... affinity with the light inside of people." They stopped next to her, his fingers brushing a curl back from her forehead, "No matter how small, no matter how dim... You see it, and you cling to it."

She opened her eyes, gazing up at him. She knew what she was supposed to see; a towering beast, scraggly hair framing a hideous face. But all she could see were those eyes, flickers of a man dancing in their darkness. The flickers had caught her like a moth, drawn to something she should run very fast and very far from.

They always made her wonder why she seemed to be the only one to see them.
It was a foolish thing to do, when all of his attention was on her to begin with, but even that gaze couldn't make her pain go away. She had never tried it but he had told her she was capable of it… She concentrated on her mark, tracing the vein of magic that ran through it. She then imagined the magic drawing more of itself from outside, beckoning the darkness to grow…

Belle winced as she felt a slap on her wrist.

"Bad dearie," Rumplestiltskin scolded, "No siphoning magic from me. You can barely handle what you've got."

Belle let out a long groan in protest. Rumplestiltskin shook his head.

"So impatient..." He muttered, going back to his work, "You're lookin' at three to four days of bed rest, so I suggest you get comfortable in your misery," he turned back to her, grinning, "You'll be better just in time to help me with a dragon!"

She cringed and rolled her head away in disgust while he giggled. She was glad he thought he was funny, because she certainly didn't think so. A dragon… She better get more armor this time or she was going to accuse him of abuse.

He returned, weaving an arm under her shoulders.

"Come on, up you go." Belle stifled a scream as he helped her sit up, having to rest her weight against him. She looked down at his hand and saw a tube of lightly glowing blue liquid.

"What is that?" She asked.

"Medicine," he said, "A reward for your hard work today."

She looked up at him, and saw the corners of his mouth fighting down a smile. She narrowed her eyes.

"What is it?" She asked. He shrugged.

"Medicine," he repeated innocently, "You'll have to be throwing this back three times a day if you want to get better."

She studied his face, but it was closed to her, keeping its secrets to itself. She slowly reached for it as he undid the stopper. The ring on her finger made her doubt he'd poison her, but Rumplestiltskin didn't like having every detail out in the open.

"Every last drop," he insisted as she put it to her lips. She poured it down her throat and nearly coughed at its bitter taste. She shook her head and shivered.

It took maybe a minute for the effect of the drink to start. Her eyelids were becoming heavy… everything felt heavy, especially her mind. Rumplestiltskin pulled her closer to him.

"Alright, you caught me... I might've mixed the medicine in with a sleeping draught," he confessed with a trill. Belle was feeling too exhausted to have any emotion, be it gratefulness or anger, "Have a nice death-like twelve hours devoid of pain!"

Belle's head fell slack against his chest as she slipped into unconscious. He could never be sure of her reaction to his help; even if she had been begging for death she might've rejected the drink had he said it was a sleeping draught. She really was a funny girl, his Belle. He scooped her up bridal-style and hopped off the table, carrying her down to tuck her into bed. He had long gotten used to
the ache the unicorn's healing/damaging blows dealt, which meant he'd be alone in preparing the unicorn carcasses for magical uses. Oh well; he wasn't sure how much more Belle's psyche could take about those awful things.

III

After a few days, Mr. Gold finally had to admit it wasn't Belle's fault. She did clean the litter box, and made sure the cat was fed, and played with it, and let it curl up in her lap while she read, stroking it. Hell, Mr. Gold was jealous of how many kisses that little thing was getting, and he wouldn't mind resting his head in her lap and letting her stroke his hair.

Alas, the feline had chosen, and its favorite parent was the one who didn't want anything to do with it. Such was the way of the cat.

He had kept his distance, but the kitten was persistent, and watching their little dance Belle had accused him of pushing everyone that loved him away. It was a cat. He did not see how that related to any of his failed relationships, because it was an animal. But to keep Belle's psychiatric musings at bay, he tolerated the cat's advances. It was still Belle's cat, though.

"Where the hell did you hide my pens?" Mr. Gold muttered as he looked around the counter for one. The cat had a fascination with batting small rolling objects around until it got stuck under some piece of furniture, thus hiding them until Belle started crawling around on her hands and knees.

The cat didn't respond obviously, deeply immersed in a nap at its post by the register. He looked almost like a guard cat, if there was such a thing, protecting the symbol of wealth. Mr. Gold eventually dug into his breast pocket and pulled one out.

Suddenly, the cat tensed, eyes opening to slits. It emitted a demonic growl that made Mr. Gold nervous. He had never heard the cat give anything close to that noise before, only purrs or mewls.

A few seconds later, the bell rang and heels clicked against the hardwood floor.

"I couldn't believe it unless I saw it myself," Regina snickered.

Mr. Gold glanced at her questioningly. The cat unfurled, stretching out and glaring at Regina as she approached them.

She shook her head, "You get a kitten for a six-year-old who realizes they're not going to have a younger sibling, not for your wife when an adoption agreement falls through."

"It's not a patch, Mayor Mills," he corrected her, "Marco was getting rid of kittens and Rose got to them before I could stop her," he shrugged, "I can't say "no" to her."

"Yes, she's always been your weakness, hasn't she?" Regina glanced at the cat and smiled, "It is cute, though…" The cat glared at her, tail whipping behind it. She reached down, "Hey kitty, how are-"

The cat moved before Mr. Gold could even register it, lunging at Regina's face. The former queen screamed bloody murder as the cat latched on, clawing and biting at her in rage. Mr. Gold stared, wondering if he was imagining it…then, when he realized he wasn't, he started to snicker.

It was at that moment he knew for certain that they were going to keep the cat…and that he might actually grow to care for it.
The Shepherd

Chapter Summary

Moe French is in the hospital in dire need of a kidney transplant; unfortunately the only match is his estranged daughter Rosaline Gold, of whom he hasn't spoken to since her marriage to Mr. Gold.

Belle visits her village only to find that her association with Rumplestiltskin has made her a pariah. Acceptance comes from an unexpected source.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Gold."

"Hey, Ezzie, how are you?"

"I'm fine. Picking something up for the Nolans' party tonight?"

"Yes…but don't tell anyone I got it from the store."

"Your secret's safe with me, Rose."

Belle fished out her debit card and handed it to the cashier, a young dark-skinned woman named Esperanza Danseur. She was embarrassed about going to the grocery store an hour before the "welcome home" party, but Mr. Gold had forced her hand. That man had, somehow, found where she had hidden the cookies and had confiscated them for himself. She was convinced she lived with a shark that scented desperation and baked goods instead of blood.

She picked up the box of cookies and started towards the door. Normally she'd just throw her debit card into her purse and put it inside her wallet later but by some twist of fate, she decided to actually put it where it belonged the first time.

"Have a nice day, Mr. French."

The name made Belle freeze up, and she glanced towards the voice. Her father was coming out of another check-out line, picking up a couple of bags. Belle's heart ached dully and she mirrored his movements towards the door, cutting in front of him.

Mr. French carefully avoided her gaze, trying to find another exit. Belle was blocking the only one.

"Hey Papa," she said softly. His gaze focused somewhere above her shoulder.

"Excuse me," he murmured. Belle's throat tightened.

"How are you?"

He met her eyes briefly before looking away again.

"I don't want to talk to you," he said. Belle bent her head and stepped aside, letting her father pass by her as though she were a stranger.

Tears pricked her eyes as she watched him walk to his truck, the truck he had taught her to drive in
the Rose part of her mind informed her. It had been years since they had had a real conversation, Rose to Moe or Belle to Maurice. Both times she had been shut out for about the same reason.

I don't want to talk to you. As though she were a Jehovah's Witness on his porch ready to preach the Good Word, or a petitioner moving towards him for a signature. Belle glanced away to see several people watching her, as well as Ezzie's sympathetic face. She turned and walked out of the store, no longer in the party mood.

III

Today was going to be a miserable day, Belle suspected as she watched Rumplestiltskin. There was no mirth in his actions, no giggle or hint of a smile. He actually looked as old as he was, haggard before noon.

"This deal's a bit of a private matter," he finally spoke. Belle paused on their stroll through the countryside, eyeing him. He shook his head in a "you don't want to know" way.

She sighed.

"Why'd you bring me, then?"

"Besides the fact it's a lovely day for a walk through the fields? There's a little town up the road I thought you might want to check out." It was the first smile he'd given her all day, mischievous and secretive. She arched an eyebrow.

He nudged her further down the road and made a shooing gesture. She rolled her eyes but complied, knowing she wasn't going to get anything more out of him.

The walk was primarily uphill and Belle had to hike up her skirts to keep from treading on them. It was the trees that she recognized first, the tall greens standing like soldiers and perfect for climbing. Then it was the road, almost golden with its yellow tint, and the cottage just on the crest of the hill with a waterwheel. She gasped as she looked down.

Below her was her beloved village, the village she had grown up in, dreamed of leaving, and then thought she'd never return to. Her eyes welled up with tears and it was all she could do to simply walk down the path. That bastard. That wonderful, frustrating, amazing bastard.

People looked up and Belle beamed, fighting the urge to wave wildly and shout "I'm home! I've missed you all so much! I am alive and I'm so happy!". Her pace quickened and she stumbled, thankfully recovering instead of falling flat on her face. The streets should be much busier for this time of day, though. Hadn't there been more people a second ago?

Belle stood in the middle of the main street and felt as though she were in a nightmare. Shops were closing. People were locking their doors. Children were being hurried along by wide-eyed mothers. She turned, but Rumplestiltskin hadn't joined her. The reaction was due to her.

Belle tip-toed as though that would ease their minds. What had they been told? Did they think she was a ghost? Did they think he had changed her, perverted her into some twisted version of her old self? She rubbed her bare arms and automatically started for the manor. If no one else would accept her, then at least her papa would.

The gates were abandoned. Belle kept looking for the guards, but no one was around. She tried them, but they were locked. They must be expecting Rumplestiltskin or maybe something worse. No matter, she thought as she circled around. This wasn't the first time she'd snuck in or out of the manor.
She found the old cracks she had formed into foot holes in the garden's wall and started the climb. It had been awhile since she had scaled anything more treacherous than a ladder, but she was delighted to find that it came back to her easily. She ascended to the top, spotted the battered patch of clover to cushion her fall, and swung herself down. She winced at the pain in her ankles but walked it off, staring in horror all around her.

Her garden was practically dead. The flowers looked little more than weeds, leaves brittle and branches mere twigs. She went to her prized rose bush and cradled a wilted bud, biting her lip. For some reason she had thought it would have lived on without her tender affections; maybe someone else would have cared for it, or maybe it would have survived without her.

How long had she been gone? A year, maybe two? She had stopped keeping track a few months in; time was so irrelevant in the Dark Castle, especially with its immortal master. Maybe the garden was too painful a reminder to her father to bother with. She let herself in from the courtyard, making her way down the familiar corridors and trying to find someone to ask where he might be.

There weren't any servants or guards. It didn't feel like the building was empty…they just were avoiding her like the villagers.

She tried his study, his chambers, the dining room, and the various sitting rooms. She was wondering if he was avoiding her too when she remembered one room she hadn't tried.

It felt as though time had turned back as she made her way to the war room, or that it had stopped in her old home. She wasn't being escorted to by Gaston, or escorted from by Rumplestiltskin. She was on her own, and it was her own hand that pushed the door open.

She recognized almost every face around the table; the advisors, captains, diplomats and other influential officials she had grown up knowing. She knew which ones hated her attending meetings, which tolerated her, and which ones advocated her being the only active female in the decisions of the realm. And at the head of the table was the one man who had always been there for her, who did the best he could to raise a daughter on his own, who did all the wrong things for all the right reasons.

Belle smiled, barely holding herself back.

"I know you hate it when I interrupt your meetings, but hopefully you'll forgive me this time," she murmured. He stared at her in disbelief.

"Belle?" He croaked. She nodded.

"Hello, Papa."

She couldn't hold back anymore, moving towards him. She was ready to feel him hold her, to be his daughter again and to let him know that the initial contract between her and Rumplestiltskin had changed, and that this visit was proof. But he didn't open his arms to her; he made no move towards her. He took a step back instead, but he might as well have run.

Belle stared at him in horror, then took in the rest of the group. They were wary of her, the girl who had spent her life with them, grown up amongst them. She turned back to her father.

"What is going on?" Her voice shook, "Are people…afraid of me?"

Maurice frowned, "…we didn't know what to expect."

She narrowed her eyes, "What do you mean?"
"Regina-" Belle's eyebrows raised.

"Regina? She talked to you?"

"She told us that he had...corrupted you. Turned you into something like him."

Belle couldn't help herself. She laughed, shaking her head at the absurdity of it.

"Considering she's the one who abducted me, locked me up in a tower, and tortured me to within an inch of my life... I wouldn't put much stock into what she says."

The assembly glanced at each other, surprised and unnerved by this information. Maurice squinted.

"Then how did you escape?"

"Same way I got into that mess; Rumplestiltskin." Her father flinched at the name, "We had a long, long discussion about honesty after that debacle, but now he's been better about giving me the full truth before my ignorance comes around and bites the both of us."

"So you didn't escape," Maurice said flatly. Belle smiled wistfully.

"By the time I was about to, it was too late."

He watched her for a moment, the truth slowly dawning on him. His eyes became glossy.

"Oh Belle...no..."

"He's good to me, Papa, and that's all you need to know."

She was aware of the looks she was receiving; disgust, horror, pity. When her father's gaze drifted to her left hand, she did not hide her engagement ring.

"Do you know what he did to Gaston?" He growled.

"Who do you think was the one to convince him to turn Gaston back?" She challenged.

"He's addled your brain; you don't know what you're doing."

"No, I know exactly what I'm doing," she looked him in the eye, begging for support, for understanding, for unconditional love from the father she knew, "Daddy, I love him," she whispered.

There was a moment in Maurice's eyes of utter pain and misery, and she realized that all he saw was his precious baby girl falling for a predatory monster. She could not convince him that there was still a man deep down inside Rumplestiltskin; he chose not to believe his own daughter in favor of the rumors. Then his eyes went cold as stone.

"You are not my Belle."

"Actually, Papa," she said softly, "I am more Belle than I ever dared to be before."

"He killed my Belle," he continued hollowly, "And I never want to see this sorry excuse for her again."

She stared at him as though he had slapped her, "Papa..."
"Leave," he snarled. Guards straightened, ready to force her out.

The tears finally came, from sadness instead of happiness.

"You've made your choice, then," she said, balling her hands into fists, "And now you're going to regret it." She turned around, walking away from the one person who had always been there for her, ignoring the officials who now all despised her, despite how they felt about her before.

Before Belle closed the door on the horrid reunion, Sir Maurice yelled his last words to her.

"I would rather you die than marry that beast!"

Belle gradually picked up speed until she was sprinting down the corridor. Her vision blurred as she choked out sobs. It was a nightmare, everything was a nightmare, but she was living it instead of simply imagining it. Her own father no longer wanted anything to do with her…because she had fallen in love with an enigma.

She was out in the streets by the time her lungs started to give, holding on to the corner of a building for dear life. She was shaking, gasping, tears slowly relenting because she was running out of ones to shed. She was vaguely aware of her dirtied skirts and shoes, her disheveled hair hanging into her face and losing its curl. It was while she wallowed in self pity that her name was called out like a question.

"Belle?" She looked up, eyes finally settling on a man in a wheelchair across the street.

Even though he looked exactly the same as the last time she saw him, when he had held her back like a possessive spoiled brat and stated his claim to her to Rumplestiltskin, it still took a moment to recognize Gaston. It was because he was sitting, she realized; his towering frame seemed so much a part of him. Her eyes wandered down to his legs and stared where they ended just above his knees. What had Rumplestiltskin done to him?

Then she was reminded of a bright almost spring day, the one where she had left the castle for the first time. When Rumplestiltskin offered her a rose after returning from a knock at the door. The scissors she pulled out. The snip as she trimmed the rose's stem.

Belle turned and bent over, retching into the alleyway until there was nothing more that could come up.

**III**

Belle absentmindedly chewed on a nail, completely absorbed by the book in her hand. She had started the first one last night, finished it, started the second one over breakfast, finished it around noon, and immediately launched into the third one, which she was over halfway through. Her eyes hadn't left the printed word in hours, and Mr. Gold graciously left food within reach so she wouldn't starve.

Gale and Peeta were both so sweet; how could one pick between them? Perhaps they could have a polygamous relationship…

"Rose!"

Belle felt like she had been shot with the sudden noise in the shop. She recovered enough to bookmark her place and then stared.

"Gas…pard?" She managed to squeak out the proper name. She hadn't seen him since she started
remembering, and between trying to absorb his sudden presence and remind herself she was in Storybrooke not Panem, she was completely disoriented.

"It's your father," he continued without giving her time to process, "We need to go, now."

"Father" and "now" clicked in her head and she abandoned her book, jogging to Gaspard. He pushed the door open for her and they both ran to his red Monte Carlo which he had left running.

Belle struggled with the seat belt while Gaspard slid into the driver's seat.

"What happened? Where is he?"

"The E.R. He collapsed in the back room and I called 911. When the ambulance came for him I drove to find you." Belle's head reeled, going almost as fast as the petal-to-metal car.

"I just saw him yesterday…" She insisted weakly.

"He hasn't been feeling well for awhile," Gaspard confessed.

They were at Storybrooke General faster than Belle would've thought possible, Gaspard stopping long enough for Belle to get out at the entrance. She went straight for the front desk, where a nurse took one look at her, gave her a sympathetic frown, and told her that she'd keep her updated on her father's status.

She supposed small town life had its advantages.

It was only when she saw Gaspard coming in demanding information that the absurdity of what she had done was revealed to her. She had left their pawn shop unattended and unlocked to leave with her ex because her estranged father was in the E.R. Hopefully Regina hadn't spotted them.

As luck would have it Belle's cell phone was in her pocket and she immediately typed out a text: "Had to go Papa in hospital". She paused before adding "Please come". It took a minute of weaving around before she got a strong enough signal to send the message.

An arm settled on her shoulders and, for an absurd second, she thought Rumplestiltskin had teleported to her side.

"There's nothing we can do right now," Gaspard said, steering her towards the waiting room, "All that's left is to hope and pray."

Belle squirmed under the arm, appalled at the gesture. First of all, they had barely spoken in either world since their engagement broke off. Second, she was married, and people were looking. Finally and most importantly, she felt like a little girl who needed to be reassured when he did something like that.

Why was it both present and past love interests were so protective? Did she really look that pathetic?

Gaspard seemed oblivious to her silent protests, but released her as they sat down. Belle glanced over the reading materials presented to her. Even if she was in the frame of mind to read, she wasn't too into Good Housekeeping, or a pamphlet on depression in teens.

Belle jumped at the hand on her knee.

"It's going to be alright," Gaspard murmured. She nodded, even though she didn't feel like it would
be. The hand lingered a minute, then retreated.

Belle kept checking her phone, placing it in the best position for the most bars. She glanced periodically at the door, hoping she'd see a well-dressed man with a cane hurrying towards her.

"How are you?" The question was soft, gentle, like he was trying to be sensitive. Belle smiled, then nodded.

"I'm good," she decided, "Been some bumps, but overall...life's pretty good."

"I'm glad," he murmured, looking sincere. Belle bit her lip.

"What about you? How are you doing?"

He smirked, "Oh you know, another day another dollar at the flower shop," he leaned back in his chair, propping his feet up on the coffee table. Belle refused to look as his jeans started to ride up, "...I'm training for a triathlon," he said offhandedly.

The news startled Belle and she gave a nervous smile, "That's great. I know you've always been into athletics."

He looked at her, smirking smugly.

"Go on, Rosie. I know you're dying to ask." Belle's heart thudded, ignoring that loathsome nickname.

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come on; it's the same question everyone else wonders. I don't mind if you ask it." Belle stared at him blankly and he sighed, "Isn't it cheating if the guy doesn't have real legs?"

Belle's heart plummeted. She had wondered how he could run but she hadn't dared ask...

"Don't worry; I get exhausted just like everyone else. I even get phantom shin splints sometimes."

She glanced at the metallic prosthetic peeking out from his drawn-up pantsleg, and she was filled with the old guilt and disgust she always had when she was reminded of what she had done to him. For once, Gaspard seemed to sense her feelings, clapping a hand on her back as gently as a bear.

"It's been years, Rosie. I'm used to it," he paused, looking slightly ashamed, "...and I don't blame you anymore."

He should blame her, because it was her fault. Unfortunately the Storybrooke version of him losing his legs was a bit more...open to interpretation as to who was at fault. Belle checked her phone again, then the door. Her knight in silk tie was still nowhere to be seen.

The nurse kept them updated on each test, assuring them that he wasn't at death's door. The longer it took, the more Belle worried, and the more uncomfortable she felt sitting with Gaspard.

Finally, she saw Dr. Whale come out, heading towards them. She took a deep breath, preparing for the worst. Gaspard looked like he was going to punch the doctor out if he said anything less than positive, and Dr. Whale looked concerned that Gaspard would do just that.

"What's wrong?" Belle asked softly. Dr. Whale cleared his throat.

"It's renal failure," he said, "Probably chronic, almost certainly end-stage."
Belle winced and Gaspard stared blankly at him. Dr. Whale turned to Belle, "He's most likely going to need a transplant, or go on dialysis."

"Test me," Belle said immediately.

"Wait, what's going on?" Gaspard glanced between the two of them, "What's wrong with his renal?"

"His kidneys are shutting down," Belle explained, "So either a live donor offers their kidney…or he's put on a waiting list and has to suffer dialysis several times a week." Dr. Whale nodded his agreement to Belle's summary.

Gaspard stared at her, "So why are you being tested? You need your kidneys to live."

"You only need one," she said. Gaspard straightened.

"Then test me too."

"We can test you as well, Mr. LeFleur," Dr. Whale said carefully, "But usually the best match is a biological relative," he gestured towards Belle.

Belle's mind raced as Dr. Whale continued to explain the situation. Sir Maurice had been the only surviving child of two deceased grandparents; she was the only blood relative to him in Storybrooke. There probably weren't a ton of fresh cadavers in a town trapped in time, but maybe by luck Gaspard would match. It would have to be a miracle to keep her father off of dialysis…and his best chance was a daughter he didn't speak to.

Belle didn't object when Gaspard offered her a ride home, giving up on her knight in silk tie. Dr. Whale said it would take a few days for the results to come in; a few days of fretting and stressing over this mess. The ride home was silent since they had already exhausted all of their possible topics.

"I'll walk you to the door," he said when they pulled up. Belle opened her mouth to object, but he was already out of the car.

Their paces fought against each others'; Belle tried to hurry while Gaspard dawdled. She cursed her lady upbringing, how it didn't allow her to get too far ahead of her guest, forcing her to slow. Some unconscious Gaston part of his mind probably realized this, and had she been with Gaston he would be smirking at his own cleverness.

They hesitated on the porch step, Belle fighting the urge to bolt inside. She flinched as Gaspard set his hand on her shoulder.

"It's going to be alright, Rose," he said again, "We're going to have this sorted out soon."

Sorted out… Like it was a misunderstanding and not a terrible illness.

The hand moved to cup her chin. It wasn't the light touch of Rumplestiltskin, the gentle request to have her look at him. It was rough, forceful, a command.

"If you need anything, even if it's just to talk… I'm here for you," he insisted. She pulled back from the hand.

"Thank you…and for the ride as well."
"Anytime, Rosie."

He gave her a wistful smile before pounding back down the steps towards his car. Belle shook her head like a wet dog trying to rid itself of water before going inside the security of her house.

Figaro mewed, padding towards her. She smiled and bent down, scooping the kitten up and holding him close. She kissed his head and buried her face briefly in his fur before carrying him towards the living room.

Mr. Gold glanced up from his seat on the couch, concern creasing his face. A mug of hot chocolate was set by some heated-up dinner.

"Are you alright?" He asked.

"No," she said bluntly, setting Figaro down, "I needed you."

"I figured since you already had company you didn't need mine," he said, nodding towards the window. Belle snorted.

"Right, because I'd turn to Gaston for support," she shook her head, rounding the coffee table.

"The last thing you needed was drama, so I kept my distance."

"Coward," she hissed. He squeezed his eyes shut, pausing a moment before reaching for his cane.

"Right. I'll just…leave you be, then." He got to his feet.

He was almost out of the living room when she spoke.

"…I still need you." The admission was close to a whimper. Mr. Gold paused, then made his way back to the couch.

Belle's face contorted as he sat next to her and he offered his arm. She immediately curled into his side and the arm wrapped securely around her. Her body convulsed as the tears she had been holding back finally surfaced, feeling safe and secure enough to let it go.

Mr. Gold had never been a huge fan of Belle's father; actually any parent that rejected their child wasn't placed too highly in his regard. But Maurice had caused her so much heartache and grief, just because he didn't approve of her choice of mate. Each rejection of her tore at Mr. Gold like a harpy's talons, and every time he faced Moe French it took everything in him not to kill the man who dared not accept his precious Belle's love. Actually, the thought of Belle finding out if he did do something to her father was the only thing holding him back.

Even with such venom and hatred towards Maurice/Moe, Mr. Gold started to cry. Not because of his pain…but because of the pain Belle felt over his.

III

Belle was taken aback when she realized she had never been in Gaston's home before. Most of their meetings had taken place in the manor, not once visiting the house she was decided to share with him. But it looked exactly how she imagined it, a rustic woodsy feel to it as though it were a cabin in the woods. The walls were lined with his various trophies; all three versions of a chimera's head, the horns of a minotaur, the claw of a dragon, the wing of a harpy and an impressive arrangement of ogre skulls in the corner.
Hunting had been Gaston's life, his passion, a kill as exhilarating to him as a new book was to her. And she had taken that from him.

"I'm sorry your homecoming wasn't as auspicious as it should have been," he broke the silence. It was the largest word she thought she had ever heard him speak…and wasn't sure if he used it right.

"I'm not sure I would have been too happy if I were greeted with fanfare and congratulations for escaping the beast, either," she muttered, her eyes drifting down towards what was left of his legs. Her lip quivered, "…I am so sorry, Gaston."

He shook his head, a wry smile crossing his face.

"Belle, how on earth were you supposed to know I was turned into an enchanted rose?"

"I don't know. It was suspicious, an old woman selling flowers to a remote castle in the middle of nowhere…"

He laughed, rolling closer to her. He took her hand and roughly squeezed it.

"Not even your little stories prepared you for real magic."

She stared at the fire, nauseous from her guilt. She had never hurt anyone before, and this seemed so incredibly violent for a first offense. It wasn't like a cut; he wouldn't just grow new legs in a week or two. She had crippled him for life… And he hadn't deserved it.

"I don't blame you," he murmured and she bit her lip.

"…do you blame him?"

"I do."

"Will you go after him?"

He grinned, "Not again."

Belle stared at him uncomprehendingly. The Gaston she knew wouldn't give up so easily; he'd keep going at a beast until he either won or lost completely. And a beast that had the nerve to take something of his? Surely he wouldn't rest until it was slain.

"Not even a sword can best a master of magic," Gaston remarked, "He's the cleverest monster I've ever faced…so clever he could easily be mistaken for a man."

"That's not it," Belle insisted, "I've never seen you back down from a challenge."

Gaston gave her a good-natured sneer, before turning to look at the fire.

"Let's just say my perspective changed a bit when I changed…" He stared into the flames, silent. If Belle didn't know any better, she might've accused him of being contemplative, "Did you know that flowers have senses? They can't see, or smell, or taste…but they can feel, and they can hear."

Belle tilted her head. He seemed lost somewhere within his mind, watching something other than what was in front of him.

"…I never made you laugh. Not like he did," he muttered, "You never spoke so candidly with me. You sounded…happy." He said the word as though it were foreign to him. Belle stared down at her lap, humiliated, "He spoke to you so gently…and then he let you go."
He turned back to her and she hesitantly met his gaze.

"He loves you, and you love him."

"Yes."

"Then I can't touch either one of you," he stated, "So long as he protects and cares for you...you deserve a chance at true love."

"...thank you," she murmured, touched at his words. Gaston had never shown it if he did care for her during their engagement, but now it was undeniable.

She reached out and took his hand, rubbing her thumb against the back of it.

"You deserve a chance at true love, too," she said, "A beautiful wife who wants nothing more than to give you a family and care for your home."

Gaston guffawed, "And who would want a crippled ex-knight who can't properly defend his loved ones?"

She squeezed his hand lightly, "There's another heart out there for everyone."

He shot her a playful grin, "Well, if there's a lady who could fall in love with Rumplestiltskin, I suppose there's hope for me." She laughed and pushed his hand away.

"Rumplestiltskin's an upgrade in comparison to you."

"Oh really?" He arched an eyebrow, "Well you weren't exactly Princess Charming yourself. You detested my prized hounds."

"I hate dogs!" She exclaimed with a giggle, and they shared a laugh.

It was the oddest thing, this unexpected balm for her broken heart. No one in all of the realms had shown any support towards her...until her ex-fiancé.

As the hours passed, Gaston invited her to spend the night. She accepted his offer and, as the clock chimed midnight, she took her leave. Having no nightgown to slip into, she simply fell back onto the bed, staring up at the ceiling. It only mildly surprised her when Rumplestiltskin appeared beside her, mimicking her posture as he drank from a flask.

"Long day?" She guessed. He nodded.

"Had to rip the second son away from the same mother after his twin brother was murdered, to do something he's utterly unprepared for."

"Ah," she sighed, "Well I just spent the day where I grew up with everyone hiding from me, only to have my father shun me and learn that I cut my ex's legs off."

"Yeesh," Rumplestiltskin muttered sympathetically.

He offered the flask to her and she accepted it, taking a long drag of the burning liquid before swallowing. Rumplestiltskin was astonished and awed when she didn't cough or sputter at his strongest concoction.

"I'm going to have nightmares about sentient roses tonight," she complained.
"I don't think my nightmares will change," he confessed, "Losing a son is something I'm used to seeing in all forms in my sleep."

They spent the night on top of the covers fully clothed, staring up at the ceiling and passing the flask between each other.

III

When one's husband is a coward, then one gets used to biting the bullet. Still, Belle winced at the thought of what she was about to do, each dialed number a task. Finally she pressed "send" and put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Gaspard, it's Rose."

"Hey Rosie...how are you doing?"

"Hanging in there," she admitted, her free hand swinging a chain in front of Figaro. He batted at it with the ferocity of a knight after a dragon, "Did you...hear back yet?"

"Yeah, I'm a goose egg. What about you?"

"I...haven't heard anything," she murmured. The other line was quiet for a moment.

"I'm sure he's going to tell you soon. I got the call last night."

Belle glanced at the clock. It was two in the afternoon.

"Alright, well, thank you."

"No problem." Belle hung up, scrolling through her contacts until she got to Dr. Whale.

On the third ring, he picked up.

"Hey, Rose..." That was not a comforting tone of voice.

"Hello Dr. Whale. I just got off the phone with Gaspard and he said the results were in...?"

There was hemming. There was hawing. Belle waited patiently for him to realize he had to tell her the truth.

"...you were a match."

"That's terrific! When can I-"

"He declined."

Belle felt as though she had been suckerpunched in the stomach.

"...what?"

"He declined having you donate your kidney," Dr. Whale sighed, "I'm sorry, Rose."

"Not as sorry as he's going to be," she hissed, hanging up on him.

The drive to the hospital calmed her down, but the anger gave way to pain. When she came
through the doors, the nurses pointed her down the hallway and to the proper room. Belle held onto her purse for dear life, took a deep breath, and then approached Moe French.

"This is ridiculous," Belle seethed, "Not talking to me is one thing, but choosing to have your body pumped weekly instead of accepting my help?"

Moe met her eyes, looking so pale and helpless in that bed, but his gaze was strong, defiant.

"I don't want anything from you," he said evenly.

"I don't expect anything in return; I just want to help you," she pleaded.

"And why do you suddenly care about me?" He asked softly, "You certainly didn't when you left."

Belle's mind scrambled, trying to find the right set of memories. It was hard to concentrate on them; they seemed so vague and slippery now that she realized it was an illusion.

"I just wanted my own life…"

"So you abandoned me, dumped your fiancé and moved in with the first man who took an interest in you?" He growled, "You left us, me and Gaspard. And for what? Comfort."

"Comfort? I'm with Mr. Gold because I love him," she exclaimed.

"Have you fooled yourself into believing that?" He murmured.

Belle clenched her teeth, "You think I'm a gold digger, just like everyone else."

"I raised you better than to sleep with a monster."

Belle raised her chin, "Then I guess this is all me, then. Following my heart and doing what makes me happy and such."

Moe rested his head back against the pillow, looking at her through half-lidded eyes. He was in pain, both physical and mental, and she longed to call the nurse in to ask her for some more painkillers. Watching him suffering was like driving slivers of wood under her fingernails.

"It hurts, is all," he murmured, "The fact that you'd rather suck off a man older than I am just to avoid working at your father's flower shop, that your definition of freedom is being some pervert's whore."

Belle recoiled at the blow, her eyes stinging. It was low, uncalled for, completely unfactual… And yet it still wrenched her nerves out to hear the man she loved so much say such derogatory things about her true love.

"I can't convince you of the truth," she murmured, staring at the ground, "But if you ever change your mind… Have Dr. Whale call me," she bit the inside of her cheek, fighting to keep her composure, "Despite what you do to me, I will always be here for you, waiting for any scraps you give me."

Out of words to say and out of strength to hear how much he hated her, she left.

III

Everything ached. Moe French closed his eyes, wishing sleep would take him. Even if he did fall asleep, a nurse would wake him up again to check his vitals soon. He felt like he was dying, even
though they insisted he wasn't.

The most painful part of this wasn't the testing, or the fact that he'd have to go in for hours each week so they could get the piss out of his blood. It was that this situation had brought Rose back into his life; not to stay, only to offer an organ and then disappear into that grand house of Gold's. Every time he saw her, she begged for his attention, pleaded to have him say a few words to her. But how could he give in to some imitation of what had once been his little girl?

It had been so out of the blue, as though she woke up and decided she hated "Game of Thrones", hated her high school sweetheart, hated everything about her life. And who was there to go in for the kill, to devour his little lamb and her innocence like an entrée? That man, the beast with a limp in his step and a gold tooth in his wolfish smile. She couldn't have been his first victim; he was too thorough in her brain-washing. He wouldn't be surprised if one day Rose's body was found dead in a ditch, mauled to shreds.

He opened his eyes, and saw that Mr. Gold was standing at the foot of his bed.

Moe started, staring in horror at the summoned devil. He stood calmly, hands resting on his cane, face smooth and eyes dark. Had he been any other man, Moe would venture to say he was just curious about the patient. Moe's hand hovered near the nurse's call button; a threat.

"What do you want?" He gasped. Mr. Gold blinked.

"Nothing much," he said casually, sizing the man up, "Just wondering a few things."

He stood like a wild cat lounged, completely unthreatened by what it observed in its absentminded gaze. Just because he didn't look ready to strike it didn't mean that he wouldn't.

"There are security cameras," Moe's voice came out higher than he wanted, "Staff on floor."

"Yes, well, the night staffs of any profession have a tendency to slack," Mr. Gold said dryly, "As for security cameras… I'm not doing anything that would warrant more than a slap on the wrist and an insistence to come back during visiting hours."

Mr. Gold readjusted his grip, continuing to watch the other man in silence. He seemed perfectly content to just stand there and stare.

"She told you what I said, didn't she?" Moe guessed, "She came running home to you to have you come here and threaten me."

Mr. Gold smirked.

"Rose is a big girl; she doesn't tattle," he said, grip tightening on the cane, "No, I can tell whenever she has a run in with you because of how upset she is. How the light in her eyes just seems to leave her…the way her shoulders cave in and the words don't come out of her like a bubbling brook." Moe could see the tendons in his hands, practically jumping out as he choked his cane, "Today she locked herself in the bathroom and sobbed. I don't think she recognizes that the fan can't drown her out as well as she thinks it does."

Mr. Gold's voice was even, but Moe could hear the drip of venom that crept into his words. He hated Moe French; that was crystal clear. Moe just hoped that the nurses would come quick enough if the wolf decided to pounce.

"So tell me, Mr. French," Mr. Gold rumbled, dark eyes meeting his as his upper lip curled, "Because I honestly cannot fathom it myself… How can you turn your daughter away? How can
you see her agony and refuse to do anything to help her? How can you look into those blue eyes so full of love for you…and shut her out?"

The cane was starting to shake from his grip. He looked ready to tear Moe's throat out. But he stayed rooted to his spot, while Moe was scared into silence.

"It must take a greater man than I am, because I can't for the life of me be content with watching her suffer. I mean, it's been a long time since I've been a father, but the very thought of shutting my own child whom I love out… Well I just couldn't do that. I'm weak like that," he shook his head, "She's willing to take a part of her out, go through the pain of surgery and recovery, just so that your life will be a little better… And you reject that gift, that selfless act of love…because you can't even man up enough to talk to her."

Moe stared at him, willing himself not to cry at this monster's words. He didn't understand… how could he understand the pain Rose had put them through? How her choice was so selfish and careless, leaving an aftermath that Gaspard and he still hadn't recovered from? Mr. Gold gave him one of those wolfish smiles.

"You want to know a secret, Mr. French?" He whispered. Moe remained still and, after a few seconds, Mr. Gold continued, "I have no idea why she married me either. It's like she sees something no one else does, a shadow of a heart in an empty chest. I'm grateful for every day I have her, and I try every single day to be good enough for her, which is an impossible task," he frowned, "Her happiness means everything to me… So I implore you to stop hurting her so I can do my job as a husband properly."

His piece said, Mr. Gold turned and walked out of the room as though it weren't two in the morning and he hadn't just chewed out his father-in-law.

III

"Cat, if you don't leave me alone I will cut you up and put you in the chili as well," Mr. Gold threatened, "People will say "god that's good chili, what's your secret?" and I will say "Belle's cat, or really any cat dumb enough to lay down on a cutting board will suffice"."

The cat considered him for a moment, staring with those yellow eyes, before reaching over and batting at the knife Mr. Gold was using to chop up the green onions. Mr. Gold sighed and shook his head mournfully.

"Belle should be informed of your suicidal tendencies. Maybe you need to be put on anti-depressants."

On cue, Belle came through the door.

"Rumplestiltskin!"

"I wasn't serious!" He objected, "He's too small to justify butchering him!"

The cat lazily rolled off the cutting board, looking up as his mother stormed into the kitchen. Mr. Gold quickly analyzed her mood; Level 3, highly irritated but not quite mad at him yet.

"What did you do to him?"

"Nothing! See, he's fine!" Mr. Gold pointed the knife at the lightly purring kitten.

"Not Figaro, my father! I swear to the gods if I find any marks that look like they were made by a
"Believe it or not, Belle, I am not always the reason behind someone's change of heart."

She planted her hands on the counter, ruthlessly scrutinizing him, "And how would you know if he had a change of heart?"

Mr. Gold shrugged, "Some people are easy to read."

"Right…" She sighed, reaching out to stroke the cat, "Anyway, I'm going to need a couple of weeks off for surgery; apparently Papa changed his mind for some indeterminable reason."

Mr. Gold ignored her emphasis, "A couple of weeks?"

"I haven't had vacation in twenty-eight years. I'm due."

"Well it's not like you do anything but read at the counter, so it won't be a staggering loss."

"Maybe I should just quit then."

"Only to have me hire you again in a few weeks?" He wrinkled his nose, "Sounds like a lot of paperwork."

"Who says I'd come back?"

"For some reason you always do."

She smirked, then leaned over and kissed him, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For changing his mind," she scooped the cat up, "C'mon, Figgy, we have to finish our book."

She started out the kitchen.

"You can't prove I did anything, dearie!" He called after her.

The best she had on him was if she got a hold of the security footage…but who was to say a late night son-in-law to father-in-law chat made him decide to accept Belle's kidney? He went back to preparing dinner, convinced all he had done was made the thick-headed man see the facts.

III

Belle almost laughed when she and Rumplestiltskin came down the staircase the next morning and Gaston was already moving around. The two men sized each other up, not really sure what to make of the other. On one hand he had turned Gaston into an enchanted rose. On the other hand, Rumplestiltskin had stolen his fiancé. Were they even, or did Gaston's loss of legs constitute a rebuttal?

It was Rumplestiltskin who made the first move; a bow, to be precise.

"Thank you for taking Belle in last night," he said before straightening. Gaston inclined his head.

"It was my pleasure…beast."

Rumplestiltskin's lips twitched into a smile, "And now…" He said, trailing off as he reached for his
scabbard. He unsheathed his dagger and Belle tensed, worried she had underestimated the situation.

Rumplestiltskin sliced through his belt, caught it, then tossed it into the man's lap. Gaston stared at him in confusion.

"Tell them you attacked me, that you stood toe-to-toe with the Dark One for the integrity of a lady and not only lived, but took a trophy of your victory. Make up whatever details you want," he said with a twirl of his fingers, "But I wouldn't suggest telling them that you killed me...because then it'll be obvious that you're a big fat liar."

He placed his arm around Belle's waist. Gaston shook his head.

"What... But...why?" Rumplestiltskin didn't respond, just spirited them both away without so much as a goodbye.

They materialized in the Dark Castle's foyer and Rumplestiltskin started off as if nothing unusual had just happened. Belle stared at him, rooted to the spot.

"You...told him to tell others that he bested you..."

"Yes," he agreed.

"Why?"

Rumplestiltskin paused, turning on his heel with his hands clasped together.

"I don't like to be in another man's debt; it makes me uncomfortable." He looked her up and down, "After all, I do get to have you. So I gave him something he lost with his legs, a "thank you" present if you will."

"...his pride," she murmured.

"Yes, that bane of most men and some women. And he sure had a lot of it as an esteemed hunter," he shrugged, "What better pub tale than one of making the Dark One run like a dog with its tail between its legs?"

Belle smiled, making her way towards him, "That was kind of you."

Rumplestiltskin sneered at the word, "It wasn't kind, it was practical. Even if people don't think it, I like to keep my trades even."

She wrapped her arms around one of his, nuzzling his neck, "Admit it; deep down inside of you there's a good man in hiding."

It was very, very easy to argue against that when she was right next to him, holding onto him, making him think of very depraved things to do to her. But he supposed there was a little of his old self buried deep within him, or else Belle's dress would be clawed off by now.

III

Gaspard LeFleur was like so many other high school athletes, loaded to the brim with talent and potential. He had done lacrosse, wrestling, basketball, archery, fencing, boxing, track and field, and even a season of swim team during his glory days of high school. He was in love with his homecoming queen, head of the debate team, constant volunteer and the valedictorian of their
class. It looked like they were going to ride off into the sunset together, the brain and the brawn, taking on the world. He had even given her a diamond ring with an honest-to-god diamond instead of some cheap fake.

But something changed after graduation. *She* changed. She broke up with him, left her father and lived in her car until the vulture descended and seduced her. He had watched Rose carefully, but she didn't seem abused or mistreated. She even looked…happy. So Gaspard let her go with the help of an unhealthy amount of alcohol night after night, until he drove head-on into a tree and lost his scholarship-earning legs.

He had finally forgiven Rose for what she had done; her father was another story. He wasn't sure if shutting-down kidneys was a blessing or a curse, but Mr. French taking Rose's seemed like the beginning of a healing relationship.

Gaspard sat by her hospital bed, wondering how much of a creep he was being watching his ex sleep. She was so beautiful; her long dark hair, her soft features, those small pink lips. Her chest rose and fell slowly, lost in the blank sleep of drugs. He thought he was over Rose, but seeing her again, he was sure he wasn't. Rose was his soul mate, had been his everything, but apparently he meant nothing to her. He hated Gold, hated him with every part of his being.

Rose's eyelids fluttered, a warning before they slowly opened. It didn't seem right that someone's eyes could be that *blue*. They settled on him and his heart stopped as she smiled.

"Gaston, you came." He didn't bother to correct her.

"Of course I did," he murmured.

"Shouldn't you be working the store, with Papa here?" He shrugged.

"I let Leonard cover for me."

Rose smirked, "Leonard? A monkey would've been a better choice," she teased. He chuckled.

"Be nice; he's my best friend."

She looked over at the table beside her bed. The way she lit up made Gaspard want to explode.

"He got me a rose."

"He", not "you". Rose thought it was from her husband, a husband he hadn't seen a helluva lot of for his wife being in the hospital.

"Actually, that's from me," he admitted, smiling bashfully, "A rose for Rose."

She burst into laughter, and he was afraid she'd rip her stitches wide open. It wasn't that funny of a pun…

"I'm sorry," she said after she recovered, "It just brought back a memory…"

"Well, try not to think of it if it causes that much of a reaction," he murmured, picking at a scab on his hand, "Is there anything I can get for you, Rosie?"

"I'm fine, but thank you."

He met her eyes, "You know I'd do anything for you, right?" He said.
Rose nodded, "You're a good friend, Gaspard."

Was it just him, or was there extra emphasis on the word "friend"?

Oh god. That smile…he'd never seen it so bright. It made him weak in the knees and he felt his hope start to rise again.

It was squashed under the sound of a cane on tile.

"How are you feeling, Rose?" Mr. Gold asked as he came around to the other side of her.

"Pretty good," she said, tilting her head up. The kiss was quick, but it sent volts of jealousy through Gaspard, "This morphine stuff is amazing."

"So I've heard," Mr. Gold pulled up a chair, "Your father's doing alright; his body doesn't seem to be rejecting your kidney," he informed her.

"That's great," she murmured. He glanced at Gaspard.

"And how are you doing, Mr. LeFleur? Keeping our little Rose company?" Our… What a strange way to put it. He nodded.

"Of course."

Rose struggled to sit up and Mr. Gold helped prop some pillows behind her, setting a messenger bag by her leg. Rose tilted her head in curiosity.

"I brought you some things, since you're going to be in here a couple more days." Rose scowled and Mr. Gold smirked, pulling them out one by one, "A blanket, in case you get cold. A teddy bear, because I know you like to snuggle when you feel under the weather. A puzzle book to keep you occupied… Some new books for you to plow through. And, of course, your sick book."

Rose beamed at the book in her lap, and she caressed its cover in a way that made Gaspard wish he were a book. It looked older, and he glanced at the title. "The Princess Bride"… wasn't that a cheesy 90's movie? She grinned at Mr. Gold.

"Can we watch it when we get home?" She asked hopefully. He went into a deep flamboyant bow.

"As you wish." Rose giggled. "Now, I don't know if you're supposed to have this…" he cautioned, pulling out a small container and a spoon. His words only served to perk Rose up more, "But I'm sure it won't kill you…"

She took it from him and opened the lid. It was pink ice cream, with what looked like pieces of strawberry in it. She smiled at him, "You spoil me."

"You deserve to be spoiled," Mr. Gold insisted.

Rose looked at Gaspard again, "I'm sorry," she offered the cup to him, "Do you want some?"

"No thanks. I should get going." He stood up, hoping she'd beg for him to stay.

She pouted, "Alright then. Have fun and try not to let Leonard kill too many flowers."

"I won't. See you, Rose." He nodded to Mr. Gold before leaving the couple alone.

Once he was safely out of sight, he did the only logical thing to assuage his anger; punch the
vending machine. Repeatedly. And yell incoherently at it. Because that vending machine had a reputation for thievery, no one batted an eyelash at his tantrum. Gaspard felt humiliated, bested, put down like a Little League boy trying out for varsity. He was in a much higher weight class than he ought to be in…and yet he wanted to win so badly.

How could she not see he was charming as a cobra with all the danger of one?

"Lost something?" Gaspard turned to see Mr. Gold standing a few feet away, "I generally find it easier to chalk it up to a loss…unless that particular dollar had a lot of meaning to you."

Gaspard wasn't good with subtlety, and wasn't sure if there was another meaning to his words or not. Mr. Gold walked over to him, the older man only about to his chest.

The words bubbled out of him, as stoppable as a flash flood, "Why did she choose you?"

Gaspard expected surprise or outrage at the question; instead he got a calm, obviously prepared answer.

"I don't know. The heart's a mystery, and it wants what it wants. All I can do is be grateful, and try to be worthy of her," he turned his head in the direction of the room, his dark eyes softening, "She's so selfless…it's always amazed me the extent her heart reaches. It was one of the first things I noticed about her, that and the fact she didn't shy away from me." He turned to Gaspard, "How about we make a deal?"

Gaspard had heard of Mr. Gold's infamous "deals", but found himself nodding anyway.

"If she ever leaves me, and chooses you, then you have my blessing…so long as you treat her right." His words were a threat and a promise, benign but with a sting behind them.

He'd treat her a lot better than that vulture, that was for sure.

At least that was what Gaspard told himself.

III

There was no time for warning; the minute Gaston summoned the Caretaker and told her the state her father was in, she was in the manor heading towards Sir Maurice's chambers.

Guards came at her with their drawn weapons, but they spun out of her way with a flick of her wrist. The doors flew open as she approached and she all but ran to his side.

"Papa…" She sobbed, legs buckling at his bedside. His face was ashen and when she took his hand, it was ice cold.

He was dying. Her new staggering amount of power told her that. She wept like the child she was to him.

"Please Papa, let me heal you. I have his power right now, all of it; we don't have to involve him. I can make you better, but you have to let me. Please Papa, just let me save you!"

The guards cringed as they heard their former lady; a few even shed tears. Now it was painfully obvious that it was their Belle in there, that all of this Caretaker and Devil's Bride and Harlot of Hell nonsense was a rouse. She had never changed deep down. She would never change.

"Papa… Papa please… Let me help you…"
Sir Maurice kept his face turned away from her, his only acknowledgement of his daughter. He didn't speak to her. His hand did not touch her. His eyes stared at some spot on the wall and he didn't seem to hear her desperate pleading or cries.

"...I love you, Papa... I don't want to lose you..."

It seemed like every bit of Belle was screaming in agony. What was the point of having power if you couldn't protect the ones you loved?
The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter

Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold tries to keep Graham's suspicions at bay as his memories start to surface.

Belle aids the Huntsman in clearing his wolf family's name and protect a village against a werewolf.

"Do you even know all of these people?" Mr. Gold wondered out loud. Belle had been in the hospital for three days recuperating as they waited to see how Mr. French reacted. Thankfully, her sacrifice wasn't in vain, and his body accepted the transfer.

It was impossible to get to her bed without pushing a bouquet of flowers or stuffed animal aside, the small space that was claimed as hers crammed with sentiment. Things had to be piled on top of each other, and still it threatened to spill over into the next patient's area. It seemed the tragedy was good business for "Game of Thorns" at least, and Mr. Gold felt a little vindicated that Moe only had a couple of cards on his nightstand.

Belle grinned up at him from her spot on the bed, which was highly populated by little cuddly toys, "Of course I do. I'm the one who builds the bridges before you burn them down, remember?"

"Still…" He wondered how the hell he was going to fit all of this in the car…maybe he should've brought the truck.

He wasn't sure Belle really cared about the flowers or toys; she had been ecstatic just changing out of her hospital gown. That smile alone made her pair of sweatpants and old baggy t-shirt look as beautiful as the dress he had first seen her in.

"I think I'll have to make more than one trip," he decided, "Flora first, then assorted plushies."

"No, wife first," she pouted, "I'm sick of this place; I want to go home."

"But don't you want to return to a room filled with dying and cheesy mementos of your acquaintanceships?"

Belle scowled, "I want to come home to a husband who doesn't feel the need to poke at me every second of the day."

"That sounds very boring," Mr. Gold complained.

They were informed a short time later that everything was in order for them to leave. Had Belle been her usual self she would've bounced to her feet and started skipping for the door. Alas, she would not be doing any skipping or bouncing for a bit, and the idea of her fragile state saddened him.

He was gathering up her books into a bag when he felt her hand slide into his, Belle tentatively getting to her feet. It probably wasn't a smart idea for a cripple to be used for support, but the thought of Belle relying on him filled him with a sense of duty and purpose. He would keep her steady even if he had to fall in the process.
He led her all the way down to the lobby, until Belle spotted an old friend heading towards them.

"Graham!" She greeted cheerfully. He smiled.

"Hello, Rose. How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, but that might change when the painkiller wears off," she joked.

Mr. Gold had never been completely comfortable with Belle's fondness for the Huntsman; even if he was imprisoned he still belonged to Regina. It wasn't likely that the Huntsman would turn on his friend... but he couldn't be too careful when it came to Belle.

"I heard you two might need some help," he said, "Especially with that mob out there."

Rumplestiltskin was all too familiar with mobs. He had quieted them and caused them; sometimes he was even the target. They were loud crowds of chaos, senseless and bloodthirsty. He did not relish facing one here, with both of them so weak.

He forgot that sometimes a mob was just a poorly chosen synonym for "large cheering crowd".

They were bombarded with applause when they emerged from the hospital, people cheering and waving signs towards them. Mr. Gold's first instinct was to shield Belle and he positioned himself slightly in front of her. This looked ridiculous as he started to read the signs; "THANK YOU ROSE", "GET WELL SOON ROSE", "YOUR OUR HERO MRS. GOLD" (he hoped that last one wasn't a student of Miss Blanchard's). He saw Ruby, Henry, Mary Margaret, Kathryn... Practically the whole town. No longer worried for her but still intimidated, he shrank back, letting her soak in her moment.

She held on to his hand, clutching it as though afraid he'd leave. She looked back at him and he almost sensed panic.

"Don't worry, Rose. I already warned them to leave you be," Graham said light-heartedly, resting a hand on her shoulder. He glanced at Mr. Gold, "Why don't I take her home and you can gather her things?"

Why don't I just knee you in the groin and beat you senseless for that stupid suggestion, the Rumplestiltskin part of his mind jeered. Instead of giving in to that instinct, Mr. Gold gave a half-hearted smile.

"Of course," he leaned in to kiss her cheek. "I'll see you in a bit, dearie." Belle bit her lip and he started back towards the hospital.

She didn't let go when he did, lingering for a moment before surrendering. That small gesture was more comforting than any words she could have said right then.

Belle hated being the center of attention. She loved being social, and she should be used to people staring at her... But whenever she was the focus, it felt like she was suddenly covered with the chicken pox. This sudden over-the-top positive attention threw her off.

"You don't have to sit in the back. I'm not arresting you," Graham insisted as they approached his police car. Belle laughed, embarrassed, before moving away from the back and opening the passenger's door.

She waved goodbye to the crowd, still not sure how to react. A few weeks ago they had been villains...
"It's not that big of a deal," she muttered under her breath as he slid in.

"You saved a life. That is a big deal."

"He's my father-"

"Whom you haven't spoken to in years."

"Is this town really so small that nothing's private?" She rested her head back, "I suppose news travels fast."

"Not as fast as The Daily Mirror."

Graham grabbed something off the dash and passed it to her. Belle glanced down and saw a black-and-white picture of herself beaming at the camera, a bold headline above it.

"'Thicker Than Blood: Beloved Businesswoman Donates Kidney To Estranged Father'," she read out loud. She shot Graham a disbelieving look. Who deemed this front page news?

She glanced at the by-line.

"...I'm going to kill Sidney," she growled.

"You'd be surprised how often I hear that...mostly from Regina," he admitted, shaking his head, "You probably shouldn't read the article, then; it has Sidney's classic exaggeration. Good news is that he painted you as some sinless maiden without a flaw."

Belle guffawed, "Oh that's me alright." She rolled her eyes, not completely surprised by Sidney's interpretation. He had always seemed to see her as a damsel in distress, angelic and holy. First impressions, she supposed, were everything.

Belle expected them to turn left onto their street. Instead, Graham kept going straight, frowning.

"Rose... We're close friends, aren't we?" He asked. Belle cocked her head to the side.

"I thought we were, why?" Perhaps this was less of a favor to them and more of a temporary kidnapping...

Graham sighed, raking his fingers through his hair, "So you won't call me crazy, even if what I say does sound crazy?"

"I've dealt with my fair share of crazy things; I doubt you can top them."

Graham took in a deep breath, "I'm starting to...see things. Like, flashbacks, but they don't make any sense because they're things that haven't happened to me. Like they're from another life."

Belle's heart stopped as she held her breath. She forced her body to start working again.

"When did they start?"

Graham winced, "...when I kissed Emma."

"You kissed Emma?"

"It was an impulse," he rubbed at his eyes, "She's so upset about me and Regina... It wound me up and I just..." He waved his hand.
"Went for it," Belle finished.

"Regina would kill me if she found out."

Belle pursed her lips, "That does sound like a rock and a hard place situation…if it continues to escalate." As happy as Belle was about the prospects of Emma and Graham (so cute!), she couldn't quite approve of him cheating, prisoner or not.

Graham sighed.

"I don't feel anything, Rose. Not happiness, not sadness, not even anger…when I express them it's just an act."

Belle stared out the window, biting her cheek until she tasted copper. She had so many emotions and feelings…she was sure she could share some of her heart with him and still have enough for herself.

"What do you see in those flashbacks?" She murmured.

"Woods, mostly, or a wolf. Sometimes Mary Margaret with long hair. They come and go so fast I can't focus on any of them. I don't know what any of it means."

Graham was circling through the neighborhoods now, rounding back towards their street. He couldn't sit still, as though the mystery made him restless, uncomfortable.

"…you're not crazy, Graham," Belle murmured, "No matter what happens or what anyone says, you're not crazy."

She said it with such self-assurance… Did Rose know something? How would he ask her what she meant without accusing her of being in on whatever was going on? He was starting to sound paranoid…

He pulled into the driveway and Belle frowned when she failed to see the Cadillac. She was hoping she wouldn't have to wait for him… She had barely unbuckled when her door sprang open, Graham grinning like a maniac at her.

"Wait, what are you doing? Graham… Graham!" She squealed as the sheriff scooped her up and started to carry her bridal-style towards the front door, "Put me down! I mean it, Graham!"

"You need to eat more, you barely weigh anything," he protested. Belle squirmed as he went up the front porch steps, testing the lock, "Where's your spare key?"

"In the mailbox."

"You're kidding me…" He groaned, swinging around and starting back down the sidewalk.

By the time Graham managed to obtain the key while balancing a wriggling Belle, Mr. Gold had pulled up. She caught sight of his face before he masked it; shame and self-loathing. This was the way he had once held her, carrying her when she was too weak. She tried even harder to get down.

"Alright, sir, where shall I put her?" Graham called to him as he got out of the car. Mr. Gold gestured towards the front door.

"There's a guest room at the end of the hall, to the right."

Belle frowned, "I've been demoted to the guest room?"
"It'll be easier if we take the stairs out of the equation, dearie," he insisted. Belle sulked as Mr. Gold opened the door for Graham and he carried her through the house, following his instructions. Her objections ended when she saw what he had added to the side tables in the guest room. The shelves underneath the tops on either side were filled; the left side table were all her favorite comfort books, and the right side table were a physical portion of her wish list.

"Oh Gold…" She murmured as Graham set her down gently.

"It's your fault," Mr. Gold said defensively, "You didn't sign out of your Barnes & Noble account." There was a sharp "mrawr" before the patter of paws, then Figaro jumped up onto the bed.

"Oh Figgy, I missed you!" She exclaimed, scratching his ears.

"You got a cat?" Graham asked, staring in disbelief.

"It's Belle's," Mr. Gold insisted. His body trembled from his purring, and Belle kissed his nose, "Well thank you, Sheriff."

"Of course. Call if you need anything," Graham said, looking at Belle.

A knowing glance passed between them before Graham saw himself out.

Mr. Gold arched an inquiring eyebrow at Belle, "What was that about?"

Belle sighed, pulling Figaro up onto her chest, "Just Emma being Emma." She patted the spot beside her. Mr. Gold obediently lay down beside her and she rested her head on his shoulder, "… The Huntsman's starting to remember," she confessed.

"Did you tell him anything?"

She shook her head, "It's too soon. He seems open to the truth, though."

Mr. Gold turned his head to her. She looked up at him.

"You must tread very carefully around him, Belle; don't help him remember. Regina still has his heart, and we don't know if he'll come to as a friend or foe."

"It's not like he wants to be with the Evil Queen," she mumbled defensively.

"I know, but everything's a liability until Emma accepts her destiny. We are walking a very fine line, doing but not doing, helping only when it's convenient for us." Belle groaned and Mr. Gold smirked, "They have their goals, we have ours."

"I know. I just wished they overlapped more," she muttered, "I'd like to help with the fall of the wicked witch."

"We will, just…very very subtly." Belle rolled her eyes and snuggled closer to him.

All she wanted right now was this bed, her husband, and her cat. The Grand Scheme could wait just a little bit longer.

III

The Evil Queen's gardens seemed vastly less intimidating to Belle, now that she had spent so much
time in them. She might have even dared to call them beautiful.

Usually her visits with the Huntsman were when their masters had to convene for one plot or another and, like children when their parents were busy doing grown-up things, they spent their idle time together. She loved to hear his stories, about how he was raised by wolves in the forest and how he survived. The Huntsman had become quite talkative with her and, when Regina came to collect him, she sensed the other woman's resentment. Perhaps if she had tried to earn his affections instead of stealing them, he would talk to her openly as well.

The Huntsman stood under the apple tree, turning to her as she approached. She smiled at him.

"I believe this is the first time you've ever called on me," she teased. The Huntsman's forehead creased.

"I've never needed your help before either."

Belle got the sense that this wasn't just a social visit.

Her face flattened as she put on her business persona, "What's wrong?"

The Huntsman turned to her, eyes haunted, "It's my brothers. They're being blamed for crimes they didn't commit."

Belle frowned, "I thought the Queen outlawed the hunting of wolves; they should be safe."

"I have a feeling it's not one of her stricter rulings," The Huntsman reached out and held onto her forearms, squeezing them emphatically, "I need to know that they're safe."

"Well what are they being accused of?"

The Huntsman let his hands drop to his sides, shaking his head, "There have been murders in the countryside, animal herders found with their throats ripped out," he clenched his jaw, "My brothers would not do this; they kill only what they need to survive, and know better than to attack humans. Humans are ruthless in their vengeance."

Belle drew in a long breath, "I will help you..." She trailed off.

"For a price," he finished. She bit her lip guiltily and he smirked, "You think I wasn't prepared to play his way?" He stared at her, "I will pay anything that is mine to give to save my brothers."

Belle nodded, the deal struck.

"I'll be on my way, then."

III

Belle was bored, or lonely, or restless, she couldn't really figure out which one. But there was an itch that needed scratching and she was trying to figure out how.

The pain in her lower torso was ebbing, which meant less pain medication, which meant less napping to occupy the time alone. She was in that irritating state where she wasn't completely recovered, nor was she flat on her back. With Mr. Gold at work and no one scheduled to check up on her for an hour (yes, that control freak had penciled visitors in on a schedule to see her), she wandered aimlessly, doing light housework or amusing herself with various things.

She was "busy" watching a fly beat itself senseless trying to get inside when there was a knock at
the back door. Her first instinct was to run for the bed and insist she had been there all day like a good little girl…but Mr. Gold wouldn't knock. She went to the sliding glass door and found a shifty-eyed boy standing on the other side.

He brightened when she opened the door, "Are we alone?" He asked urgently.

Belle blinked, "We are, why?"

"Good," he brushed past her, "Then we don't have to use code."

He tossed his backpack onto the table and opened it up, pulling out the book.

"I wanted to cheer you up, so I came to read your story to you."

Belle beamed, "That's so sweet of you, Henry," she motioned towards the living room, "I'll be right there." Henry went to go make himself as comfortable as he could be in the lair of the Beast.

She returned with a blanket and a tray, setting it down on the table. Henry's eyes lit up hopefully.

"Are those-

"Granny's Famous Chocolate Chip Cookies? She brought them over this morning," Belle poured herself a glass of milk, grabbed a cookie, tucked herself under the blanket and snuggled into the couch.

Henry took a cookie, careful not to get anything on the book.

"So we have the book…and no one knows about this meeting…” Belle began. Henry wrinkled his nose and shook his head.

"You're still not a part of Operation Cobra."

"What?! But, but-"

"You could be a secret agent!" He insisted, "Rumplestiltskin is known for his tricks."

"But I'm Belle," she whined, "I gave up my freedom to save my homeland… That has to count for something, right?"

"You're still married to the Dark One!" Henry exclaimed. Belle huffed, narrowing her eyes.

"Maybe I should take my cookies back…"

She had to admire the kid; he only wavered slightly as she threatened to revoke the best baked goods in all of Storybrooke. He cleared his throat and opened the book.

"There once was a girl with eyes like the sky and hair like brown silk. She was so beautiful that even her name meant "beauty", and her name was Belle…"

III

"We cannot be faint of heart now!" Fenris bellowed from his stage in the town square, "We cannot be fearful when our wives and children are in danger! What is time in prison compared to the safety of our loved ones?!"

A red hood moved through the crowd, apologizing softly as she moved closer to the platform. The
color was odd in the sea of peasant brown, but it was just as shabby as their own. Perhaps the girl had used lamb's blood to make the wool cloak appear more impressive than it was.

"These wolves are a menace, and will destroy everything we hold dear if we don't do something! Even a pack of wolves is no match for a hunting party!"

The girl snorted derisively.

Fenris paused in his ramblings, glancing down, "You think this is funny, little girl?" He hissed.

The cloaked figure shrugged, "Depends on what you're referring to. Do I think your delusion that men can beat wolves so easily is humorous? A little. But I'm mostly laughing at your continued insistence that these are ordinary wolves you're hunting."

His eyes narrowed, "Brave words for a girl hiding beneath a hood."

She reached up and lowered her hood, surprised by the lack of recognition from the crowd. So this really was a small isolated village…

Fenris studied her for a long moment and she stared back, unflinching, "I know everyone in my town, and yet I've never seen you around. What's your name, stranger?"

"I go by a lot of names," Belle told him, "But I prefer to keep my anonymity this time. I don't want my titles getting in the way of this investigation."

"Fine then, stranger," he leaned forward, "What do you think you know about our problems?"

She shook her head, "Not a lot yet, but enough to know that ordinary wolves aren't to blame," she glanced at the man's boots, "True predators would never leave perfectly good meat behind, and wild animals are shy of humans for the most part."

"So what are you suggesting?" Fenris growled.

"That you have a wolf in human clothing hidden in plain sight. Where I come from they're known as the loup-garoux. Shapeshifters."

"Werewolves?" He said incredulously. Belle nodded. "Everyone knows that they're bedtime stories, nothing but myths."

"Believe me, I was just as skeptical as you for nearly all my life," he said, her voice dropping into a murmur, "But then one attacked me, and when you come toe-to-claw with one there is no longer any doubt in your mind what you're dealing with."

Belle turned to face the crowd, "The seven goat farmers that were killed last month died over the course of three days. And what moon was out during those nights?"

"The full one," A woman murmured.

"And what moon will tonight be?"

"A full one," A few other villagers murmured. Belle nodded, turning back to Fenris.

"Allow me free reign of your town and I promise you that your "wolf" problem will be solved by dawn," she glared at him, "No more lives need to be sacrificed."

Fenris smirked, "Alright…if you want adventure little girl, you can have it," he sneered.
Belle put her hood back up, "I'll expect a reward when I finish the deed," she warned.

III

"...the Beast looked upon the Evil Queen and his heart filled with rage at what she had done to him and his beloved. He fetched the iron fire poker from her hearth and advanced, the Evil Queen immobilized by his magic," Henry gripped the book so tight Belle feared he would bend the hardcover, "With the last of her strength Belle threw herself at the Beast, standing between him and the Evil Queen. She screamed his name and begged for him not to kill the Queen, to not stoop to her level. As always the Beast could not deny his Beauty and with a threat that if she ever dare touch Belle again he would destroy her, they left the palace."

Henry turned the page, "Too weak to stand on her own, the Beast gathered Belle up into his arms, holding her as close to him as he could. He walked home that night, and as he walked he told her every secret of his heart, finally allowing her to know him completely."

He closed the book and stared at Belle contemplatively, "...you saved my mom's life."

Belle sighed.

"There are times I almost regret it..."

"Why did you do it? I mean, she tricked you into making your true love doubt you, kidnapped you and beat you to try and make you take away his power."

Belle closed her eyes, "Henry, here's a bit of wisdom for you; fairy tales should be taken at face value. They're too short and simple to explain their characters; you have no idea why your mother did the things she did," she shrugged, "If she wrote the story then I would be the villain, refusing to help her defeat the Dark One."

Henry chewed over her words for a minute.

"I guess you're right... I still like you being the good guy though."

Belle smiled and bowed her head, "Well thank you. I like being the good guy, if I can help it."

Henry set the book aside, helping himself to another cookie, "So how long was it between this and the curse starting?"

Belle pursed her lips thoughtfully, "A few years, I guess."

"So your story with the Beast didn't end there."

"Oh no. In a lot of ways that's where the next chapter of our story started."

Henry looked at her with a sort of reverence, "You must have so many stories, living with Rumplestiltskin and all."

Belle laughed, "I could fill a library."

"Will you tell me some, please?" He begged. Belle sighed.

"I'm a lot better at reading stories than telling them," she murmured, "Rumplestiltskin's pretty good at storytelling, though."

Henry grimaced, "I'd rather you tell them." Belle giggled.
Alright," she conceded, "I'll start with how I gained magic."

Henry's eyes widened, "You could do magic?"

Belle smirked, "Only a little. I couldn't throw fireballs or spin straw into gold or anything. More… practical things, like teleporting or changing my clothes," she wrinkled her nose, "I left the more elaborate things to true magic-wielders, like your mother or Maleficent. Magic is for those who want power… I never sought it out."

"Is that why so few good guys have magic?"

Belle considered it.

"You know, I have no idea why good guys don't have magic… Power corrupts, I suppose."

Henry glanced up and froze like a deer in the headlights. Belle twisted around, only to see that they had been caught.

Sheriff Graham stood in the doorway, staring at Belle. She had lost track of time, forgotten it was his turn to check in on her…really, forgotten everything except for her short career in magic and Henry.

"Hey Graham," Belle smiled nonchalantly, "Tell Madame Mayor not to worry; I didn't steal her son. Henry and I were just talking…"

"About magic." His voice quivered, "As though you had experience with it. As though it was real."

"Don't be ridiculous," Belle laughed nervously, "We were just discussing his book."

Graham was starting to bear a resemblance to Jefferson, that same frustrated expression at being on the brink of something he could not reach.

"You know something, Rose," he said slowly. Belle squirmed.

"She's a believer in the curse," Henry blurted out, "That's it."

Graham turned to Henry, "The curse?"

"The one where we're all fairy tale characters from that book," Belle murmured absently.

"And me, am I in that book?" He asked.

"Probably," Henry said. Graham went to kneel by him as he opened the book again, "You're friends with Snow White and the Evil Queen… You're good at tracking people, and you like the woods…"

"There's a wolf," Graham added, "One eye blood red and the other black as night."

Henry thumbed through the pages, "Snow White's a main character, though. She's met lots of people…"

"He's the Huntsman," Belle murmured. Henry's eyes widened.

"You're right!" He flipped rapidly until he came to a picture, "The Huntsman was raised by wolves until the Evil Queen found him and had him kill Snow White," he told the sheriff.

"Snow White…" Graham turned his head, staring at the picture, "…Mary Margaret with long
"You saved her life," Henry informed him, turning the page. "If it wasn't for you Emma wouldn't be alive...and I guess neither would I."

"What is that?" Graham pointed. Belle squinted and sat up straighter, trying to make out what they were looking at.

"The Evil Queen's vault," Henry said matter-of-factly, "It's where she keeps all her hearts," he frowned sympathetically, "She has yours, because you let Snow White live..."

Graham laughed, grinning at Belle, "That's why I can't feel anything... I don't have a heart!"

"Graham..." she murmured. He got to his feet.

"I have to find the vault... I have to get my heart back..."

"Graham, just slow down a minute," Belle murmured. He paused, looking at her warily. She shook her head, "If you're believing this-"

"You believe it too," he said defensively.

"If you're going to believe this," Belle continued, "Then you have to be careful," she warned.

Henry stood up, clutching the book to his chest, "She's right. The Evil Queen doesn't want anyone to know the truth... Hence Operation Cobra."

"I will be careful," Graham assured them, leaning down to kiss Belle's forehead, "And you're not off the hook just yet."

Belle watched as Graham left, helpless to give a good reason why he should settle down without incriminating herself. She felt as though the gears in some clockwork were turning and she had no way to stop what was in motion.

III

Belle was perched on a rooftop a good distance from the schoolhouse, a red brick building on the outskirts of the town. A longbow rested on her knees, a silver-tipped arrow already knocked. She was grateful for the wind; it was keeping her scent upwind. After a day wandering around and eavesdropping on gossip, Belle had most of the story's pages in place.

Sieve was the daughter of a swine herder who had married Thorn, a young man she loved with all her heart. Their sod house had been torn to shreds the day before yesterday but both had managed to escape, taking shelter in his parents' log cabin the next night. Under the wolves' claws it had been torn to splinters, so now the young couple were holed up where Sieve's sister taught, praying the red and stone would keep the wolf away. Not likely.

After a visit with an old beggar woman (always the best source for useful information, in Belle's humble opinion), she learned that Sieve had been betrothed to the mayor to pay off her parent's debts. With both parents deceased and little to lose, Sieve broke it off with Fenris and married Thorn. The goat herders had also owed the mayor money, coincidentally.

The bootprints found in line with the wolf's tracks were roughly Fenris's size, and it would explain why he wanted to blame normal wolves; a scapegoat for his crimes. All those murder mysteries were finally coming in handy.
She glanced up as she saw a shape move, crouched low to the ground and approaching the schoolhouse. Belle made sure it was the werewolf before raising her bow and drawing back the string. Anything she had to project in order to hit was a combative weakness of hers, but she was positive she didn't want to get up close and personal with a werewolf ever again.

She released the arrow, and realized too late she hadn't accounted for the wind. The arrow dug into the ground at his paws. He whipped his head around, spotted Belle, and charged.

She pulled another arrow from her quiver, but he was moving too fast now for her to take aim. She rolled away as he jumped up onto the roof, tumbling down into a haystack. A moment after she had burrowed into it, claws started raking through the hay, searching for her. She swam through the mass and ran out the other side, reaching for another arrow. Her stomach dropped as she felt empty air, realizing she had lost her quiver in the stack.

The wolf sensed the loss of heat and whipped around to face her. Trying to hit him with the bow would be stupid; she needed silver. She reached into her boot as the wolf lunged, pulling out the dagger hidden there. It dove towards her and she slashed at its cheek.

The beast howled in pain, reeling from the surprise effectiveness of her weapon. She charged again and got its shoulder, then its flank. She rose the blade for the killing blow, and then saw his eyes.

Agony, pure unbridled agony of a man in the throes of lost control. Helpless to stop the monster from coming out, at the mercy of his other side. A prisoner of himself.

That night Rumplestiltskin threw her into the dungeon, believing she was Regina's spy.

Belle could not kill Fenris. She knew it even as he pounced on top of her, about to tear her throat out with his fangs.

Belle drew upon her mark and, with a gargantuan effort, siphoned magic through it and shoved the werewolf. Her arm throbbed as she collapsed back and when she looked up, Fenris was gone.

III

Had there been anyone in Gold's Pawnbroker, they might've been surprised and embarrassed to see Mr. Gold hobbling around shouting "CAT! CA-A-AT!". But no one was there, and so he looked foolish for no one.

Belle was going to kill him. Hopefully quickly, but definitely with a good yelling—at first. Stupid cat, hiding and shit… There was a soft mewl at the side door and Mr. Gold remembered he had let it out for its evening piss. Belle hated it when he did this (“He'll get hit by a car, or a hawk will eat him”…if that happened it was probably for the best, so the dumbass cat couldn't spawn more dumbass kittens), but he preferred his home and office to not smell like someone had just taken a dump.

He opened the door and the cat trotted in, dropping a sparrow at his feet. An offering to the gods who gave him a roof over his head, food in his dish, and a nice warm crotch to sleep in.

"It's about time you started pulling your weight around here," Mr. Gold grumbled, picking up the dead sparrow. The cat rubbed up against his leg, then bounded off to pounce dust particles.

A siren pierced Mr. Gold's thoughts and he glanced out the window just as an ambulance passed by. He set the sparrow down on the counter and made his way to the front.

It was heading towards the sheriff's station.
"Guard the shop, cat. I'll be right back," he said. The kitten flicked its tail in acknowledgement, watching Mr. Gold leave.

A hollow feeling settled in the pit of his stomach as he approached. The lights still flashed, but there was little hurry amongst the paramedics. Their fearless savior was off to one side, trying to hold back her sobs long enough to answer the medic's questions. A stretcher was being rolled out of the station, a white sheet over a body. He didn't need to see a face to know who it was underneath.

Mr. Gold closed his eyes and sent up an old prayer that the Huntsman's soul would not get lost on its way to paradise, nor hesitate at the cries of those left behind, but that it would find peace after all his suffering.

He knew what had happened, and who had done it, but not why. Was she jealous of Emma stealing his affections? Had he remembered and turned on her, or was she really so heartless she'd kill her own lover just for knowing? Maybe, in her own twisted way, she had tried to set him free.

There was more crying as the news spread amongst the by-standers and though he too was an on-looker, he was alone in the crowd. How the hell was he going to break this to Belle?

"What are you thinking so hard about, Rumple?" Mr. Gold ignored the shortened version of his true name, figuring Her Highness was testing him.

Her voice came closer with each high-heeled click and word, "Are you thinking about your little Belle, lying helpless in her bed, weak from her good deed?"

Her lips suddenly brushed his ear, "Game over, Rumplestiltskin; I know you two remember. She's not nearly as good at the game as we are," she pulled away, upper lip twitching in disgust, "You did a half-ass job in training her."

Belle was neither his apprentice nor his prodigy; she was his wife who needed only the bare minimum skills in order to survive their sinister game. He opened his eyes and turned to her.

"Well then we don't have to skirt around each other then… Your Majesty."

There was madness in her eyes, and a slight swell to her lower lip. She screamed of desperation, the worst kind, where a person would kill just to do something about it. He couldn't summon much sympathy for her; she had broken her own toy.

She grinned at him like a jack-o-lantern, "Be careful. You two have no power here."

"Maybe not the literal kind, but there are plenty of different other types of power," he remarked. Her posture straightened.

"Your partner is just a pawn waiting to be jumped."

Mr. Gold frowned, "I'll warn you once, and then whatever happens to you afterwards is your own fault. Don't underestimate Belle."

"Or what? You'll come after me?"

He laughed, "I wouldn't need to. She's quite capable of fighting when she wants to."

Belle stared out the guest room window, watching a branch sway in the wind. She had started reading a Gary Paulsen book, but it reminded her too much of the Huntsman. She had spent most of the rest of the day trying to figure out how to get Regina to pay up without losing more ground.
Belle had done her part of the bargain, giving Rumplestiltskin true love's kiss. It wasn't her fault it didn't do anything here but wake her up.

But even if she obtained Graham's heart, how would she put it back into his chest without magic? Surgery would raise questions…

She heard the front door open and she turned, waiting expectantly, "Is everything alright out there? I heard sirens earlier."

Mr. Gold appeared in the doorway, his face blank as he entered. Belle frowned, "Is something wrong?"

He sat down beside her and took her hand.

"The Sheriff's been released of his prison," he said. Belle's eyes widened.

"He has his heart back?"

Mr. Gold shook his head.

Belle had the sensation of falling, of tumbling from some semblance of okay into a void of being very not okay.

"No…" she murmured, shoulders shaking, "No… I was going to get his heart back, no!"

She had done her part of the deal, but she was too hesitant to demand Regina to pay up.

III

"No loup garoux pelt for me, dearie?" Rumplestiltskin quipped, spinning at his wheel. Belle was tempted to throw something at him.

She stormed through the grand hall, magicking the blood from her clothes. Rumplestiltskin set his thread down and turned towards her.

"Spare me your lecture," she hissed, "I know I should've killed him."

"Yet instead you sent him into the Infinite Forest, where he may feast on lost souls for as long as he lives."

"I didn't think!" She snapped, and in the firelight he saw her eyes fill with tears.

"You need to, if you're going to run around making deals," he insisted, squinting at her, "Do you even know what you're going to ask for from the Huntsman?"

"Leave me alone!" She shouted, slamming the door behind her.

Rumplestiltskin knew he'd pay for that. True words always were said at a price.

Belle scrubbed at her skin in the washroom, feeling disgusting. Would her hands ever be clean again? And what right did Rumplestiltskin have to criticize her deals? If she didn't want to kill, she didn't have to. And why should she ask anything from her friend? Friends were for helping each other.

The logical part of her mind reasoned that Rumplestiltskin had experience in this area, and he was just correcting her mistakes like any good teacher. The emotional part of her mind shut it up
quickly.

Her body scrubbed pink, she dressed into her nightgown and turned to the bloody dagger. Her anger softened as she took a clean cloth to it, caressing it as though it were a part of him. It protected her; it saved her life. It was a gift that promised she meant more to him than power.

She polished and sharpened the grooved dagger, the engraving gleaming dully. Rumplestilskin… a name that brought fear to everyone but her.

III

Grief was a lonely road, one that went single file without room for a companion. Mr. Gold watched Belle's suffering, wishing he could leech it from her and take it on himself. She blamed herself, even though he had pointed out that she hadn't been the one to rip out his heart and crush it. Sometimes blaming oneself was therapeutic, as long as it was short term.

He knew better than to talk her out of going to the funeral, just warned her to be careful.

Belle felt like a monster, standing back while he died because she didn't want to give up an advantage. It was something the Dark One would've done, and it disgusted her. She sat at the back of the church, not a dry eye in the place. Authority was universally hated due to Freudian associations with parents, and yet even with the badge Sheriff Graham Humbert had been a well-loved man.

Regina sat with Henry in the front row, rigid as a slab of marble. Even though she had killed him, Belle longed to comfort the pained woman. It was hard to lose someone even if you were the one to send them away. Belle's goal was to remain invisible, fly under the radar, and leave the memorial without a confrontation.

Emma was conspicuously absent from the gathering.

Belle waited until the initial rush had faded, then slipped into the viewing room. The casket was propped open and she approached hesitantly, as though afraid of waking him. He looked so much like the Huntsman she remembered, face taunt and serious. She was hoping he'd look like Graham, or at least peaceful.

She stared down at him for a long time, unsure what to say, whether to apologize or to condole. She took in a deep breath.

"I hope you are reunited with your family," she murmured finally, "That you get to run with the wolves again."

She brushed a curl back from his forehead.

"Regina will fall," she insisted, "I haven't forgotten our promise, and I will continue to make good on it."

She pressed three of her fingers to her lips, kissed them, then pressed the fingers to his chest, right over where his heart would've been. And then she left.

Something slammed into her in the hallway and Belle absurdly wondered if Regina had shrunk, or was trying to cut off circulation to her legs. She glanced down.

"Henry!"
He was sobbing into her shirt, holding onto her as if she'd disappear. She squirmed out of his grasp, crouching down and stroking his hair.

"You have to forget!" He begged, eyes red and puffy, "It'll come after you too, you have to forget Mrs. Gold!"

"Oh Henry…"

"Good loses, good always loses, and you're good!" His shoulders trembled, "I don't want you to die like Graham…"

Belle held onto his shoulders, "Listen to me," she murmured, "If I ignore this, if I crawl into my hole and forget, then the Huntsman's death will be in vain. I have to remember, for him, for all of us, no matter the consequences," she wiped at his cheeks as Henry's cries quieted, "I love him too much to do that… So I have to be brave and trust that good will win, because good does win in the end," she shook her head, "And believe me, being brave is the most terrifying thing in the world."

III

The Huntsman glanced up as Belle approached, looking more somber than usual.

"Your brothers have been cleared of all charges; it was a loup-garoux," she informed him.

"Thank you," he murmured, "And your price?"

"We'll barter later," she said, taking a seat on the bench. She rubbed at her forehead.

He eased himself down beside her, studying her face.

"You're so eager to help and yet when it comes time to collect, you're hesitant," he observed. Belle smirked.

"I've never been too comfortable with receiving," she admitted, then looked into his eyes, "…all I really want is your freedom." The Huntsman chuckled.

"It would figure that the only thing you want is what I can't give you."

They stared out at the gardens, a beautiful landscape that belonged to a woman whose heart was as ugly as the sins she committed. Beauty was such a vague thing, Belle thought. How could anyone decide what was beautiful and what was not? And did the source of that beauty matter if it itself was ugly?

"I don't think I'll ever be free again," The Huntsman said. Belle began to protest but he raised a glove to silence her, "It's just a fact, Belle."

He turned to her, "But you…you have love in your life. You have freedom. You have the things that I can't have," Belle took one of his hands into hers, holding it tightly. The Huntsman watched this with vague intrigue, "Will you promise me something, Belle?"

"Yes?"

"If you cannot free my heart…will you live for me? Will you love and hate and cry and laugh, be happy and sad and everything in between, until you can't possibly feel any more? Cherish each emotion because it's a gift?"

Belle nodded, "Of course I can do that."
"Good," he pulled his hand away, "In times like these we can't take anything for granted."

III

Mr. Gold tried to respect Belle's space but in that shop alone, Regina's words kept playing over and over in his head. He had put on a damn good front the other night in his opinion, but he had been terrified. He could not just appear at Belle's side if something were to go wrong; Belle couldn't just summon him if she was confronted. Their lives had become so fragile here, brief candles they were.

Life was but a walking shadow, a player that struts and frets their hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.

Signifying. Nothing.

Feeling he'd go mad cooped up alone, he ventured out, hurrying down the street towards the church. An appropriate drizzle had begun, drops clinging to his hair.

A figure was running down the sidewalk, clad in black with dark curls flying behind her. He picked up his pace, ignoring the objections in his bad leg and nearly jogging. He could hear her sobs, squeezing around her breathlessness.

They collided in front of the clock tower, and he was suddenly strong enough to take the blow of her running into his arms. Their lips met and parted, teeth scraping against flesh in their eagerness. There was no grace or gentleness to the kiss, only desperation and need.

Their arms wrapped around each other, practically one as they pressed as close as physically possible to each other. Their arms shook with exertion of holding on so tight, hot noisy breath panting onto the other's face. But they didn't stop, they couldn't stop, needing to remind each other just how much they meant to each other.
Desperate Souls

Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold reluctantly agrees to Mr. Gold's unconventional plan to get Emma into the sheriff's office.

The war council meeting was not the first time Belle had ever heard of Rumplestiltskin, nor was it the first time she ever thought about calling upon him.

All Hallow's Eve wasn't just a day to ward off evil by mocking it at Winter's Pass Finishing Academy for Young Ladies; it was initiation for the youngest students, eleven and twelve year old girls with varying degrees of boldness. For some just sneaking out of the dormitories after curfew was enough of a fright; others needed something stronger.

The old library was usually only somewhat occupied, its rows and rows of old musty textbooks decidedly less desirable compared to the gardens or sitting rooms. Tonight it was full; nearly a hundred young noblewomen circled around the study area. Candles flickered, giving the white-shrouded maidens a ghostly appearance. All ears were strained, but the only extraneous sound was whichever speaker was telling their tale.

Belle sat near the back, legs drawn to her chest, chin resting on her knees. It was her favorite tradition, listening to the tales of things that went bump in the night. Even in her first year she hadn't been scared; these were actual occurrences, unless the teller exaggerated too much. A tense sort of excitement curled in her stomach instead, like when she read an adventure story of heroes battling monsters.

She knew the stories, now that she had been here a few years. There was just one more left to tell.

Snow laughed as the other girl finished, getting to her feet.

"A witch that sold her soul? Please, that's not a scary story, that's what I go home to for the holidays." The other girl glowered, miffed that she hadn't told her tale frighteningly enough.

Snow picked her way towards the center, taking the other girl's place as she retreated. She pulled herself up to her full height, eyes scanning the room.

"Giants, wraiths, sirens? These are what give you nightmares?" She snickered, "They're nothing but dumb animals in comparison to the greatest monster there ever was."

All of the air was drawn out of the room as every girl sucked in a breath. Belle grinned, sensing that her friend would prove that she earned the right for the grand finale of All Hallow's Eve, even if she was the youngest to ever receive the honor. Snow's blood red lips pressed together tensely as she held the silence until it was unbearable.

"No..." She murmured, barely audible, "The greatest thing to fear, keener than an ogre, shrewder than a troll, and much cleverer than a human...is the Dark One."

It was easy to tell which of the new girls had heard of him; they cringed, a few looking around as if just his title would summon him. Snow smirked in contempt of their fear.
"His true name is just as ugly as he is… Rumplestiltskin."

"Rumplestiltskin?" Belle echoed. The girls turned towards her, "I think you just made that up."

Snow looked indignant, "I did not!"

"It's the silliest name I've ever heard, then."

"Well I was named after a weather condition so I can't judge," Snow muttered, smoothing her nightgown before continuing, "Eyes like a lizard's, with skin that glitters unnaturally. Tangled hair like a matted mane, black claws instead of nails, a high childish voice…small, with a large uncomfortable presence."

"How would you even know his name?" Belle asked, unable to let it go, "I mean, have you ever met him?"

Belle had received that look many times from her friend, a potent glare given because Snow hated it when people questioned her. Unfortunately Belle loved to question, and it had caused plenty of fights between them. She'd have to sleep with one eye open tonight for disturbing Snow's story.

The gears turned in Snow's eyes, trying to twist the interruption to her advantage. She smiled maliciously as something clicked into place.

"I know his name…because my stepmother was one of the many firstborns traded to him."

Whatever damage Belle's interruption had caused was more than fixed. The older girls, expecting the same old story, now straightened and became as attentive as the younger girls at the new details. Belle's forehead creased in concentration as she listened. Snow seemed to bask in the attention, pacing around her small stage.

"Somehow my step-grandmother got her daughter back…but I'm not sure the deal was completely voided," Snow made eye contact with several girls, some shivering at her gaze, others cringing or looking impossibly stoic, "He taught her his dark ways…how to rip a person's heart clear out of their chest."

The room's temperature suddenly dropped, many girls huddling into the blankets they brought. Belle leaned forward attentively.

"He is the most powerful man in the realms. Rumor has it nothing eludes the magic he wields," Snow glanced at Anastasia Tremaine, "He's also the richest man in all the land, spinning gold from ordinary straw." Anastasia's face was a mix of greedy delight and absolute revulsion and fear.

Why on earth would a man so almighty spend his time spinning straw into gold? Belle wondered. Wouldn't he rather use his powers to start plagues or cause famines, since he was the Dark One? Or couldn't he just pull gold out of thin air?

"Rumplestiltskin can smell desperation as acutely as some animals sense fear. He goes to those desperate souls and offers them a deal for their heart's desires," Snow shrugged, "The price range varies; sometimes he just wants a trinket of yours for some nefarious purpose. Other times…the price is much higher," she frowned gravely, "One of his favorite trades…is for your firstborn child."

There was a collective cringe from the group and even Belle shuddered at the notion. A small voice from a new girl piped up.
I hear he eats 'em. Raw, boiled, roast, it don't matter to 'im. Eats 'em like candy."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Snow confided, shaking her head, "Once you sign the contract or he tells you the deal is struck, it's over. Sometimes he'll accept a new trade…but usually you are trapped in the web he's spun."

The room fell silent, contemplating the horror of getting what you want only to lose something more precious in the future.

"I'd do it," A voice from one of the senior girls insisted, "Anything to escape."

"You say that now," Another replied, "But will you regret it in a year, five years, whenever he comes to collect?"

"No," The girl said confidently, "Nothing could be worse than the life I have now." That sounded like a challenge, Belle mused.

Snow grinned deviously, "Well then let's call on him, shall we?"

"You know how?"

"It's easy. Just say his name, and that you summon thee," she cleared her throat, "Ready?"

"Snow, don't!" Belle exclaimed, "Dark magic is not something to be played around with!"

"I'm not playing around," she insisted, "Odette wants to make a deal, right?"

"With all my heart," The girl said firmly.

"And you won't change your mind?"

"No."

"Then it's not wasting his time," Snow concluded, "Besides, he's probably busy… He might even sleep," she considered. Belle's gut clched uneasily. This was a horrible idea.

Snow straightened her shoulders, clasped her hands in front of her, sucked in a deep breath, and stood as though she were a guard on duty.

"Rumplestiltskin… I summon thee."

Every candle went out without a gust. The window panes rattled in their frames. The door that led to the patio was being knocked at deafeningly, but there was no one in sight. Books started flying off the shelves and chairs clattered to the ground. Belle found herself sitting in the midst of a stampede to escape the library.

She surged to her feet and caught sight of Snow, who was frozen in horror at what she'd done. Belle pushed her way to her, grabbing her hand.

"Come on!" She shouted, barely hearing herself amongst the panicked screaming. Snow snapped out of her trance and they fled for the doors.

They ran as fast as possible, matching each other stride for stride and holding on so that they wouldn't be separated. Curtains whipped in invisible winds; paintings fell off their hooks, lamps went out… it was as if he were chasing them. The river of girls thinned as they each went towards their separate dormitories, and soon the only pounding feet were their own. They darted inside and
Belle bolted the door shut.

Sometimes illogical beliefs were held because no matter how silly, they still brought comfort. One such illogical belief led them to jump into their beds and cover themselves with their blankets. Their unenchanted comforters wouldn't defend them against the Dark One if he really did come for them…but Snow and Belle still felt more secure than they had before.

They listened intently, but all there was to hear were each other's breathing. No high-pitched laugh. No scream of agony. Just silence.

"…Madame Morrible can do magic," Belle murmured.

"It was probably just her, spooking us for being out after curfew," Snow said.

"Yeah."

They lapsed into silence again, staring up at the ceiling.

"…what would you ask Rumplestiltskin for in exchange for your firstborn?" Snow asked casually. Belle winced.

"I'd never give any of my children away, especially to the Dark One," she said vehemently.

"Never?" Snow pressed, turning onto her side, "What if your papa was sick?"

Belle turned her head towards her, "He wouldn't stand for his grandbaby to be traded away, even if it meant he had to die."

"What if your lands were plagued by famine?"

Belle frowned, "I'd negotiate with him. Surely I would have something else he wanted," she tucked her arm under her head, watching Snow, "What about you?"

Snow took in a long breath, "I might… I mean, not for just anything, but I can't say I'd never," she shrugged, "Besides I can always have more children."

"Not one exactly the same as the one you lost," Belle insisted softly, closing her eyes, "No matter what, I will never give Rumplestiltskin a child," she vowed.

III

Tobias Gold…how important sounding, and a perfect name to shout. Toby for short and he'd look more like Mr. Gold than her. Maybe he'd just have her blue eyes, and her love of reading…

Belle's creation of her latest imaginary child was interrupted as Emma came back into the main shop, coughing as if she had just emerged from a burning building. She stared at Belle in shock.

"How can you stand that?"

Belle shrugged, "I just got used to him over time. I hardly think twice about his surliness now."

Emma smirked, "Actually I was talking about the smell."

Figaro rose from his nap with a "mrawr", stretching and sniffing at Emma curiously. Emma freed a hand and scratched the kitten behind the ears, which immediately sent Figaro into a fit of purrs.
"Oh that," Belle shook her head, "Not the worst stench he's ever conjured. Makes me feel like I married a shepherd, but he knows that he has to keep his distance while he works with it."

She honestly didn't mind a slight lingering scent; it was almost cozy, and made him seem so ordinary. Too much however was a turn-off, because it made her picture a sheep. Kissing a sheep was not sexy.

There was a pair of walkie-talkies in Emma's hand, and she recognized them from a box Mr. Gold had set aside. Keepsakes of Graham. She brushed away the name, not wanting to start crying just because of some toys.

"Sweeney Todd and the String of Pearls"? Emma read the title of the thin volume in Belle's hand, "Is that, like, based off of the movie?"

Mr. Gold snickered from the safety of the back room.

Belle set the book down and frowned.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, Miss Swan, but ignorance about the order of production makes me want to throw a book at the person… Luckily my beliefs in the sanctity of literature forbid me from throwing books," Belle sighed, "The character Sweeney Todd first emerged in a series of penny dreadfuls published in the mid-1800's. It was later adapted as a musical and then became a movie."

Emma looked at her as if she had just started screaming obscenities and throwing things around.

"...okay, um, alright… Cool," she backed away and Belle blinked. She hadn't even raised her voice…

Figaro watched Emma leave with cattish contemplation, tail flicking behind him.

"Not everyone's used to your passion, dearie," Mr. Gold said, strolling in at Emma's departure. Belle pouted.

"I'm sorry; it's just a pet peeve…"

"I know," he said, going to give her a reassuring hug. She stiff-armed him and wrinkled her nose.

"No, I don't want to be a ewe."

"Even if I'm your ram?" He countered. She shook her head, retreating to a different section of the shop before they could continue the sheep analogies.

Mr. Gold stared down at the book a moment, then turned away. There was a heaviness to his shoulders, his head bent and his eyes distant. His spinner's look, she had dubbed it, and it usually meant he was thinking about his past. Sometimes he opened up if it was about Bae… But usually he just wanted her to ignore his dwelling on what was done. She busied herself with rearranging a display case.

"You're not going to be happy with me," he said.

She glanced up to see Figaro's futile attempts to get Gold to pay attention to him. The cat was practically throwing himself at the man, but Mr. Gold was focused on Mrs. Gold. Belle sighed.

"What did you do?" She asked.
"Nothing…yet."

She leaned against the table, "Usually by the time you realize I'm not going to like something, you've already done it."

"Progress, right?"

He ambled towards her and Figaro gave up on gaining affection, batting half-heartedly at the book instead. She eyed him suspiciously.

"What are you thinking about doing, then?"

He pursed his lips and shrugged, "Just helping to maneuver Emma into a position of power…all the easier to beat Regina."

Belle glanced towards the back room, "…her promotion to sheriff."

"Her Majesty won't stand for that, of course," he stopped about a foot away from her, but even then she could still smell the lanolin, "It'll come to an election."

"And you want to pull a stunt," she concluded. He shrugged.

"Whatever you wish to call it."

Belle groaned, rubbing at her temples, "Are you going to kill someone?"

He straightened, offended, "I'm almost twenty-nine years sober of murder," he protested.

"Just covering my bases," she said, "Is anyone going to get hurt?"

"…possibly, though not enough to put them in the hospital if it goes right."

Belle scowled, "And if it doesn't?"

"It will," he insisted. She sighed, admitting he did have a high percentage of plans-gone-right, far higher than most.

"And property damage?"

"A little, but that's what our tax dollars are for."

Pre-castle Belle was screaming at her that something bad was going to happen, he was evil, stop him! Post-castle Belle wasn't so quick to condemn. She rolled her eyes.

"Alright, we'll go over it tonight during dinner."

He grinned, "Yes dearie. I love you."

"Yeah, whatever. I haven't agreed to anything yet," she reminded him.

He went for a kiss, but she shoved him away.

"You know the rules; shower first, then you're allowed to touch me again!"

III

After years of being scolded, tied to a brisk walk if there was an emergency and nothing faster, it
felt good to *run*. It wasn't lady-like, and it wasn't for fun, but it registered somewhere that she was doing it again.

The corset was hell as Belle ran through the corridors, and several times her vision went hazy from lack of air. But there was a primitive need to escape and she followed it, thoughts blurring and tumbling together.

It hadn't been a "welcome home" party for her concluding finishing school after seven long years away; it had been an engagement party, and she hadn't even known she was betrothed. She had spent the evening on her fiancé's arm, listening numbly to congratulations and trying not to look at him. The shine in Gaston's eyes was the same as when he returned from a successful hunt…only this time she was the quarry.

She threw open the doors to her chambers, the sanctuary where she could read without being ridiculed. She hardly looked around as she sprinted to the balcony, only stopping when she ran into the ledge's barrier.

Was her life over so soon? Childhood, finishing school, wifehood? Couldn't she have some time to herself, to travel a bit? He'd want children immediately, and he would take her as soon as the festivities were over. She'd bear children of a man she could not love, and wither away just like every other woman. The tears came, hot on her cheeks. She didn't want this, she *didn't want this*!

She stared down at her gardens, and thought how easy it would be just to throw herself off this tower. There probably wouldn't be much pain, she'd think. It would be over soon.

Belle recoiled violently from the wall, disgusted at her thoughts. Her solution was to *kill* herself? How pathetic… Still, the desperation lingered. She didn't want to marry Gaston. She didn't want the safe indoor life that was planned for her. She wanted another chance.

A memory slipped into the front of her mind, wisps of words long since spoken. *He is the most powerful man in the realms. Rumor has it nothing eludes the magic he wields… He goes to those desperate souls and offers them a deal for their heart's desires…* She shivered. Four little words. Four little words and she would have the opportunity to change her fate. Her lips parted.

"Rrrr…Rrrrum…" The name caught in her throat, refusing to come out.

Was she insane, calling upon the Dark One? Just to complain about some petty engagement, and pay a steep price in exchange for freedom that would most likely be tainted in some way? No, such magic was not to be trifled with, if dealt with at all. It would have to be much more severe to justify calling upon him.

She settled for wishing on a star, for the chance to have a life of freedom and adventure.

A week later, war was declared against the invading ogres, and the wedding was postponed.

III

Belle fought back a smirk when she saw Sidney slide up onto the stool beside her.

"Hey Rose," he greeted cheerfully.

"Hi Sidney," she said dryly.

Granny's started to quiet down, listening but trying not to be obvious about it. A candidate for sheriff striking up a conversation with Gold's wife? There was no way it was an innocent chat.
"How are you doing? I heard you're back at work." He looked like an eager puppy, Belle decided. A basset hound, maybe.

"Yeah, I ran out of personal days, and he threatened to fire me," she said. Sidney looked startled and then seeing her smile, laughed nervously, "I'm still not happy with you after that article," she informed him.

"What was wrong with it?" He asked incredulously.

"The fact it was written. My personal life is my business, not Storybrooke's."

Sidney opened his mouth to object, but instead turned back to his coffee, "Sorry." She sipped at her tea, "So Mr. Gold's endorsing Miss Swan?"

"It appears so," she finished off her pancakes, "No offense, but she does have experience in criminal justice, and she was next in line."

Sidney sighed, "So, you're voting for her too?"

"No."

Sidney straightened in hopeful surprise, "You're voting for me?"

"No," she glanced at him and smirked at his stare, "I'm abstaining from the election."

"Why?"

"Besides the fact this town needs a reminder that Mr. Gold and I are actually two separate people who can have a difference of opinion? Conflict of interests," Belle lowered her head, "You don't remember this, but you saved my life once. I'm forever in your debt for it."

"When was that?"

Belle giggled, "I just told you, you don't remember."

She paid her bill and hopped down off the stool, "Though honestly, Sidney, even if I was voting I don't approve of your methods. How do you think Henry will feel when he hears about the article you wrote about his birth mother?"

Sidney blanched, then stared down at his coffee. The other customers turned away, feeling the burn no matter how far away they were sitting. Ruby silently cheered for Belle as she left, another flawless victory for Rosaline Gold.

III

Belle stood at the window of the pawnshop, leaning on her arms and watching Storybrooke put up flyers. Households were divided; friends bickered heatedly. The populace seemed to be split down the middle for the inevitable election, and Belle was glad to play Switzerland for this particular fight.

An arm snaked around her waist, a low voice singing into her ear.

"What's the sound of the world out there?"

Belle leaned back into him, smiling faintly, "What Mr. Gold, what Mr. Gold, what is that sound?"
He brought his head up, resting his chin on the top of hers, "Those crunching noises pervading the air?"

"Yes Mr. Gold, yes Mr. Gold, yes all around."

He gently rocked her, their bodies swaying back and forth together, "It's man devouring man, my dear."

Her voice joined his in a soft crescendo.

"And who are we to deny it in here?"

She snickered, tilting her head back, "You're sexy when you sing musical numbers with me," she told him. He grinned.

"I like that one."

"It's the only one you haven't slept through," she pointed out.

"Not true," he objected, "I made it through most of "Phantom of the Opera"."

"And complained the entire time you were conscious."

"Raoul was annoying as hell, even you can admit to that."

"Only because I'm a fan of Erik," she pursed her lips, "You know, The Phantom is less sympathetic in the book."

Mr. Gold shook his head, "Never thought I'd live to see the day you'd have a bad word to say against a book versus its movie."

"I'm not even supposed to be cheering for the man who kidnapped the heroine, so it's not too much of a criticism."

Continuing to sway in a sort of back-to-chest slow dance, Mr. Gold started to kiss along her jawline. Belle gave a soft contented sigh, letting her head lull and exposing the rest of her neck to him.

"Care to wager?" He asked offhandedly.

"About the election?" She guessed. He nodded, "The election you're already going to manipulate?"

"Emma's a wild card, you know that. It might not even work."

Belle rolled her eyes, "Don't even try that with me." The man read people like she read books. She huffed, "Fine, what's your proposition?"

"How about if Emma wins…" His words tickled her ear, his warm breath making her own catch, "…we play a little Beauty and the Beast in the back room?"

Belle couldn't help but shiver at the offer, and smiled, "I hate it when you make me play Devil's Advocate."

"You never know, dearie, you never know."

She turned around, facing him with a triumphant smirk on her face, "Fine, but if Sidney wins...I
get to be the Beast."

Mr. Gold's lips puckered into an "o" as Belle beamed. He was no longer sure which candidate he wanted to win.

III

"The Puss in Boots has turned down our offer," The messenger informed the gathering. Groans and despairing sighs circled the room. Belle cringed, closing her eyes.

Sir Maurice deflated against his seat, more discouraged than Belle had ever seen him.

"We cannot win this war by men alone," he said, resigned.

"Who else is there?" Gaston inquired.

Silence. After it had become apparent that their armies and allies weren't enough for the task, all well-known magic users were called upon, offered enough gold for a comfortable life in exchange for their help. Most were too cowardly to even attempt; others were nervous it would compromise their neutrality. Still others had excuses that weren't really valid.

Belle opened her eyes, looking around. It had always been made clear that her opinions were not welcome, and it was understood that if she were to attend a meeting she was to remain silent. But everyone was so discouraged, and so many lives were being lost…

"The Dark One," she murmured.

The assembly turned to her. Gaston glared his disapproval. Sir Maurice stiffened.

"How can you suggest such a thing, Belle?" He scolded.

"People are dying, Papa," she said plainly, "These are desperate times; desperate measures are called for."

Maurice watched her, frowning deeply. Belle's stomach flip-flopped at the thought of what she was suggesting, but she could not bring herself to regret speaking it.

"We don't really have anything more to lose, sir," One of the diplomats said.

Maurice sighed, and gave a small nod, "We will contact him, then."

III

Mr. Gold sat, watching the stage attentively for any glimpses of Emma. He did not like this part of a plan, the part where the ball was in another court. She had confronted him last night about the lanolin rags, so she knew… But would she do anything with that knowledge? His instincts told him that she would…question was, how?

He glanced to his right as it was occupied with a sudden drop, Belle crossing her legs smoothly.

"You're not even voting, what are you doing here?" He scolded. She pouted.

"It's still open to the community…and I'm curious," she admitted, giving him a pointed look.

She wanted to see what Emma would do, she meant.
Belle hadn't been crazy about the plan; he knew she wouldn't be. But after constant reassuement that Emma wouldn't get hurt and he wouldn't get arrested for arson, she had turned a blind eye to the project, spending that fateful night of the town hall catching fire at home and leaving him to deal with any consequences.

He suspected that it was less the necessity of drastic action to convince Storybrooke to take a chance on an outsider hated by their mayor and more the muted desire to see Regina pay for Graham's death. He felt guilty for, first of all, tainting Belle to even consider revenge an option, and secondly for the feeling that he was using her grief and anger to get her to agree with him.

Rumplestiltskin had staked the vast majority of his deals on being able to read people and manipulate them like a master puppeteer. It had become second nature for him, and he was smacked in the face with shame whenever he caught himself employing his tactics on Belle. The only thing that eased his mind was the knowledge that she could see the puppet wires and, if it went too far, she'd cut her strings and walk away.

He glanced over to see Belle watching Regina, who was front and center to the debate. Her face was pinched with quiet anger.

"You know how I outlined in our marriage contract that I would never start baking cannibalistic meat pies if you started murdering people?"

"Not that specific clause, but yes?"

"I think I have an exception to that rule," she decided, watching Regina feed Sidney his speech.

Mr. Gold wrinkled his nose, "I think she'd taste too bitter to swallow."

Belle slouched back in her seat, "You're right. Offer still stands, though."

It pained him to see his little ray of sunshine so jaded and vicious. She needed a break from all of this heartache… Regardless of their pending deal about Mary Margaret and David, maybe they needed a night out, go see a movie…

"…I didn't know that that meant he was going to start a fire." Damn, he missed the grand confession, lost in his own thoughts. He'd have to settle for the small gasps and whispering coming from the crowd, "I don't have definitive evidence, but I'm sure."

No one dared to look at Mr. Gold. Hell, the accusation itself was ballsy, and he was proud of their little savior for doing the right thing. Belle turned and stared at him as if hearing this for the first time.

"You psychotic bastard," she muttered, "You're off your meds again, aren't you?"

Mr. Gold didn't respond, just looked down at his cane. Belle sighed, getting to her feet.

"You're walking home," she informed him before leaving.

Mr. Gold waited an appropriate amount of time before following after her. He hoped she was happy with her little display, because he didn't need Storybrooke to think he was crazy. And when Tom Clark informed people that he had never had any prescriptions filled at the only pharmacy in town…

He checked his pockets again, but he didn't feel his keys. She must have them. He was really hoping she wasn't serious about making him walk home.
Belle didn't know what to expect, but the actual Rumplestiltskin wasn't it.

"Well that was a bit of a let-down."

The group turned around to face Maurice's seat where the presumed Dark One now sat. He giggled, and the sound was infectious. He was in some ostentatious garb, looking as comfortable in her father's seat as if he were in his own castle. His very features shifted as she stared, one moment almost human and the next positively monstrous. She watched him move around the room, guarded on all sides by her father and his men, and could not squelch her curiosity.

There was an odd charisma to him; a flame she could understand plenty of moths would be drawn to. She forced herself to remember that he was the Dark One of legend, a creature so horrid she should be repulsed by his very presence. He was not a mystery for her to unravel.

"My price…is her."

His finger pointed at her like an arrow, and Gaston's arm reached out to shield her (or maybe to keep her back). She felt sick to her stomach, and yet relieved that the price wasn't something they couldn't afford.

"…I'm looking for a caretaker, for my rather large estate."

Belle could do that. Sure she was a noble lady with little experience, but she could learn. If that was the price for her land's safety-

"It's her or no deal."

Could she really give herself away, not knowing what would become of her? What if he beat her, or killed her, or did unmentionable things to her? If he was so bent on babies…

He was walking away. She had no time to think; either do the brave thing or be a coward.

"No, wait."

Gaston looked horrified as she pushed his arm aside. She touched it briefly, reassuring, before approaching the smug beast.

"I will go with him."

"I forbid it!"

"No one decides my fate but me," she said vehemently, "I shall go."

"It's forever, dearie." A warning. The flutter of an invisible contract, the last moment before she signed the dotted line.

"My family, my friends, they will all live?"

He gave a small bow with a flurry of hand movement, "You have my word."

Their eyes met briefly, brief enough to see the truth in those soulless black pits. She bowed her head, "Then you have mine. I will go with you forever."

"Deal!" He squeaked, giggling and jumping in place as if he were a child who had just received a
The pain in her father's eyes. The hurt in Gaston's. The slow realization that she had just sold her life away to someone she did not know past stories. It sombered her as he led her away, a light hand on her lower back to guide her. She hardly got to say goodbye.

She wondered a lot, those next few days. She wondered if her decision was as selfless as she first believed. She wondered why he had wanted a caretaker for a castle that she assumed could be clean with a flick of his wrist if he so desired. She wondered if he knew she'd take the deal when her father and fiancé refused it, if he sensed that desperation and dull hope to escape her life that she had kept hidden for months and months, and had preyed on her like he did with everyone else.

III

Election Day. Never had the words sounded sweeter to Belle, she thought as she tied her hair back into a loose ponytail. She checked herself over in the mirror again, gave a playful kiss to her reflection, and then started for the stairs. Work was going to be very enjoyable today, she was sure.

She growled as the phone rang, and made her way to the office unenthusiastically.

"Gold residence, Rose speaking."

"Hey Mrs. Gold."

Belle smiled, "Hey Henry, what's up?"

"Can you meet me at the castle?" He asked. She was about to ask which one, but Storybrooke only had one castle to her knowledge.

"Sure, I'll be right there."

"And...can you give me a ride there?" He added, embarrassed. Belle giggled.

"Of course."

Henry was adamantly silent on the way over to the old playground; not giving in to her most persuasive of tones to tell her what was going on. He was smiling to himself, though, and hugging his backpack to his chest. Eventually she parked, and Henry raced to climb up into the playground's tower. Belle laughed, following after him at a slower pace.

"Come on, Henry, you have to tell me why we're here, or else I'm not driving you home," she threatened. He stood, proud as a peacock and smiling at her.

"I've been thinking a lot about Operation Cobra lately, especially after yesterday," he told her, "And it's going to be really hard if it's just me and Emma and sometimes Archie. We need another agent, someone who knows the book cover-to-cover and isn't afraid of the Evil Queen."

Belle's heart fluttered in excitement and she pointed at herself shyly. Henry nodded, opening up his backpack.

"We need you, Belle; you're brave, and smart, and loyal. You brought love back to the beast, and saved your village. Even here, standing up to Mr. Gold and the mayor for what you believe in, you're a hero. We need heroes, even if they're married to villains." She laughed at this.

Henry pulled out the book and motioned for her to come forward. She approached, head held high.
"Raise your right hand and put your left hand on the book," he instructed. She did so and Henry cleared his throat, "Do you promise to help the savior learn and fulfill her destiny, overthrow the Evil Queen and bring back the happy endings to all the people of Storybrooke?"

"I do."

"Good," he lowered the book and offered his hand to her, "Welcome to Operation Cobra, Agent Beauty."

Belle raised an eyebrow as she shook his hand, "Beauty?"

"Well you can't use your real name, or your fake name."

"You and Emma don't have code names," she pointed out.

"We also aren't characters in the book… Well, she is, but she hates code names."

"Fair enough," she jutted out her bottom lip, "But can't I have a less egotistical code name?"

"But it's who you are!" Henry insisted, "You're the Beauty of "Beauty and the Beast"!"

Belle shook her head, but she couldn't argue too much. She had been indoctrinated into the elite good guy team after weeks of trying. She was going to help break the curse and overthrow Regina…officially.

Mr. Gold noticed Belle's incredibly good mood. He also noticed her incredibly clingy short black skirt, her incredibly low neckline, and her incredibly beautiful face accentuated with a shade of lipstick that he had taken to referring to as "eff-me red". Work was going to be hell today, waiting around for those ballots to be counted.

The afternoon and evening was a tango around the shop, a much more pleasurable version of the strength game. A brush of fingertips here, a gentle pressing of bodies in order to get through there, a flirtation to see who would be the weaker one and kiss first.

Belle stood at the counter, bent over a notebook she wouldn't let him look at. Chocolate curls cascaded over her shoulders, long since free of the hair tie. Her dainty little hand moved across the page, azure eyes intense and focused. Watching her being so studious was making his resolve crumble, and he was tempted to wrap his arms around her waist and beg her for something, anything, to tide him over until the victor was announced.

There was a low buzz and Belle jumped, hand going down to her pocket. She pulled out her phone and flipped it open, reading something. She grinned and put her phone away, rubbing at her lips as she tried to resume a poker face.

"What was that?" He asked.

"Nothing, just Ruby telling me something," she closed her notebook, avoiding his eyes.

He was pretty sure he knew exactly what Ruby was telling her.

Belle's eyes flicked rapidly; checking the side door, then back to him, then back at the side door, then the front door, judging distances. She bit her lip in that oh-so-cute way and shifted as though uneasy.

"Something the matter, dearie?" He asked, making his way towards her. She shook her head.
"Nnnno, of course not, I just… I think I'm going to turn in early tonight."

"Oh really?"

He started down the narrow aisle between the counter and the back wall. She moved a couple steps back, glancing over her shoulder nervously. There was a deep rumbling chuckle in his throat as his eyes drank her in.

"You wouldn't be trying to run, now would you?"

She shook her head rapidly, "Of course not," she bowed her head, trying to smother a smile as her eyes refused to meet his. The distance between them was closing as he backed her into a corner.

"No one breaks a deal with me, dearie," he reminded her, a growl in his words. She shivered, her chest rising and falling faster the closer he came to her.

He was soon on top of her, pressing himself against her and forcing her against the wall. The heat of their bodies mingled and as she raised her head, their lips were only inches apart.

"Please," she murmured. He leered at her.

"Please what?"

"Please let me go…"

He gave a harsh chortle, "Never," he promised.

The moment was interrupted by his phone vibrating and Belle scowled, breaking character. Mr. Gold refused to let something as irritating as a text message ruin the moment, and he pulled his phone out with the same calculated slowness as his walk. He glanced at the screen; Regina. "I hope you're happy, Gold. One battle is not the war".

Mr. Gold smirked and slid the phone back into his pocket, locking eyes with his pretty little victim.

"That was Her Majesty," he said, barely above a whisper, "…you lost the bet."

Belle exploded into motion, squirming her way out from between her husband and the wall with a happy little squeal. She darted into the back room, the curtain still swaying long after she disappeared. Mr. Gold chuckled, and started turning lights off.

Anticipation heightened his hunger for her, and he took his time in closing up shop, making her wait. It was almost disturbing how easily he shifted into the mindset of the beast, a hunter with his prey quivering in the back room. Tonight he would dwell on nothing but how lovely his wife was, and sating both of their desires.

He closed the blinds on both windows and locked the door. He lifted the sign with intense pleasure, flipping it over to declare to the world that they were now closed.

"Curtains…" he heard her mutter, clambering around the back room, "Whose idea was it to get curtains? You can't barricade curtains…"

She knew better than anyone that if there was something Rumplestiltskin really wanted, he wouldn't rest until he got it.

He strolled the length of their little shop, cane coming down harder than necessary against the wooden floorboards.
"I'm coming for you, my little beauty…"

III

Things had changed when Belle arrived home (home, is that what the Dark Castle was to her now?). Rumplestiltskin didn't seem nearly as evasive and secretive, though his paranoia about her leaving hadn't eased any. There was more communication, more teamwork, more of them going on. Their feelings for one another out in the open, they had fallen into a casual courtship for the past few months.

Lastly, the west wing was finally hers to explore. "Forbidden" was one of Belle's favorite words, and she went against it every chance she got, but it was different with Rumplestiltskin. Usually there was a very good reason behind his actions (such as covering all the mirrors to avoid being constantly spied on…), and so she hadn't tested his boundaries often. But with only a warning to be careful, she was set loose into the only part of the castle she had never seen before.

It was well past time to retire to her chambers, but Belle was too excited at all the things she was finding. The treasures in the grand hall were nothing in comparison to those hidden in the wing. She could spend days looking over everything and, since this place needed a good cleaning, she supposed she would.

She was in her third room when the gears to something started to whir. She turned and found something like a dollhouse covered by a cloth sheet. She threw the cover back and was surprised when a mechanical dragon raised its head and roared at her. She stepped back, watching the miniature castle in fascination as it lit up and produced a merry tune. Suddenly the dragon paused mid-roar and the shutters to one of the towers flew open. A little puppet bobbed and swayed as though controlled by an enthusiastic five year old.

"Ladyfleas and gentlefarts," It began in a high-pitched voice and Belle giggled, "May I present to you tonight's tale… Don't Talk to Strangers!"

Belle settled down onto a rug, drawing her knees up to her chest and watching in wonder at the magical puppet show.

Rumplestiltskin should've been more specific, he thought as he wandered the long hallway. She could explore the west wing at reasonable hours of the day, not at one in the morning. He shouldn't care so much about her sleep, gods knew he didn't sleep nearly enough, but he did because he cared about her.

He still wasn't used to admitting that he loved her, every dark fiber of his being insisting it was a weakness, but he'd have to pretty damn soon.

He felt her presence and opened the door as a warning, wondering what she was so preoccupied with. She was kneeling on a rug, staring as the Time Clock Dragon wound down. Oh no. Oh no no no, of course she had found that! What had she seen?! Someone's death, an eventual tragedy, what he was going to do as soon as he got up the nerve?! Warning bells were going off in his head, and he reigned in his anger.

"Belle…?" He called as gently as his voice could muster.

She turned slowly to him and he noticed immediately that she was crying. Not massive waterworks, but a few tears slipping down her face. She had seen something, something that wasn't innocent or amusing.
"Belle?" He repeated, his tone much more urgent.

"Your son..." She croaked, staring at him, "You killed the Dark One...to save your son."

It was worse than what he expected, the past instead of the future. His past. That piece of junk should be more reliable as to what it showed...

He stood, rooted to the spot, taunt as a bowstring. "Yes," he confessed, trying to read her while masking his own emotions.

"You took on a curse...to save your son from having to go to war," she continued. Rumplestiltskin's throat felt dry.

"...yes."

She rose to her feet and he didn't dare retreat as she approached him. Her chin trembled, and she shook her head incredulously, "Everything you've ever done... Was for your son."

"Maybe not everything." Her, for example; he was pretty sure getting a caretaker had nothing to do with finding Baelfire.

He stiffened as he felt arms wrap around him, Belle's cheek on his shoulder.

"You are a good man, Rumplestiltskin, and an excellent father."

He had expected anger, as she tended to be when faced with his cowardice. The fear of losing his son and therefore bartering his soul away should've been no different. But somehow, maybe because of what he had already told her, she had seen it the way he meant it; he had only been protecting the love of his life, his precious Bae.

His hand tentatively stroked her hair once as he breathed in her scent, her love...and he became intoxicated. Now, he decided. Now he would get up the nerve to do it, and be brave.

He pushed her away from him and she stared, preparing to be rejected.

"No one alive knows about Baelfire," he said grimly. She nodded, "No one knows about how I came across my power, and no one knows about the dagger."

"I won't tell anyone," she said earnestly. He held up a hand.

"I'm going to need more than that, dearie."

She was confused, frightened, but Rumplestiltskin didn't know how else to go about this now.

"You must promise me your eternal devotion in a ceremony, a relationship forged between you and I for monogamous bonding and caring for one another, no matter what." He held out his hand and she looked into his palm to see a ring of crystallized fairy dust, almost like a circle of diamonds on a normal ring, "This...will cement our promise until we can go through with the ceremony, at which point you and I will wear matching rings to declare to the world our partnership."

Belle looked up from the ring, staring at him. She smiled slowly, "Rumplestiltskin...is there any chance that you're asking me to marry you?"

He withdrew his hand, sizing her up warily. He couldn't tell what she was thinking right now, which terrified him to no end. He didn't want to propose only to be turned down and laughed at.
"…possibly," he admitted.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when Belle threw her arms around him, crying and squeezing him tight.

"Yes, yes I'll marry you!" She exclaimed.

Rumplestiltskin felt a warmth emanate through him as she accepted him, amazingly, unexplainably. She kissed his cheek before forgetting their agreement about such affections.

"I'm sorry."

"That's alright."

It was more than alright. His true love just agreed to marry him, he, the Beast and the Dark One whom everyone hated, proving that she did really want to be with him forever.

It was perfect.
True North

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold finds out what became of one of his closest allies when he is stolen from.

Belle meets one of Rumplestiltskin's secrets, finding that maybe she wasn't the first to try and weasel her way into his heart.

Regina wasn't normally up this early, and especially not out and about. But the mayor had lost her most prized possession yesterday (and no, it wasn't in reference to control over Storybrooke's law enforcement branch). She hadn't been able to sleep knowing she couldn't find it, and now she was retracing yesterday's footsteps in hopes that it had just fallen off somehow.

She glanced over at Gold's Antiquities and Pawnshop and saw Mr. Gold slipping out the side door, followed by Miss French. They were wearing the same clothes as yesterday, looking exhausted. They weren't meeting each other's eyes as they slid into his car and drove off.

What were they up to…?

She knew, along with the rest of town, Miss French's morning routine so Regina decided she was in the mood for a cup of Granny's coffee.

Miss French came in about 7:30, looking flustered. Ruby glanced up from refilling Regina's mug and arched an eyebrow.

"Aren't you a little bundled up for today's forecast?" She asked.

Belle glanced warily at Regina, "Just felt a little cold this morning. Can I get my tea to go today, Ruby?"

"In a rush, Miss French?" Regina inquired. Belle didn't meet her eyes.

"A lot to do today," she murmured, color rising to her cheeks.

"Cute scarf," Ruby said, "Never seen you wear one before."

"Thanks," she mumbled, staring down at the counter.

Ruby glanced conspiratorially at Regina, which surprised Regina because she and Ruby had never really had a conversation in all of the years they had passed by each other. Quick as a rabbit, Ruby lashed out and grabbed the end of the scarf, yanking it off.

If there was one thing Ruby knew, it was that people didn't just decide to wear scarves on an average temperature day for no reason. Belle was already riddled with shame; Ruby figured it would be a little embarrassment over a hickey or two.

Regina and Ruby stared in horror at Belle's neck. Bruises the width and length of fingers wrapped around her throat. Belle yelped, trying to cover them back up with her jacket's collar.
"What the hell is wrong with you, Ruby?!" She screeched.

"The hell is that, Rose?!" Ruby screamed back, "Did he hurt you?!"

"No!"

"Miss French, if you're being threatened-"

"Mr. Gold is not abusing me!" Belle exclaimed, tearing up in humiliation as her face flushed newborn baby red. She took a shaky breath, "I wanted him to do it."

Both women stared at her in horror and confusion.

"You…wanted him to strangle you?" Regina clarified. Belle buried her face in her hands.

"Sometimes…I like it… I like feeling my pulse against his fingers…feel his control over me… I can't help it if I bruise easily."

The coffee came back up in Regina's mouth, tasting much more bitter the second time around.

Ruby continued to stare, "…what?"

Belle slammed her hands down on the counter, "Do I have to spell it out for you two?! Do I have to bluntly say that yes, sometimes we got at it like a couple of monsters in heat in some of the most depraved kinky sex you can possibly imagine?!"

Tony stopped mid-pancake-flip. Granny looked over her glasses from her spot near the register. Leroy, nursing a hangover, was suddenly completely sober. Emma was frozen halfway through the door, having started to enter during Belle's exclamation.

"…good morning to you too," she muttered, wide-eyed and sliding into a booth.

Belle wanted to die. Or disappear. Or teleport. Something.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, Rose," Granny insisted, "He's your husband; it's natural. Sometimes all the tenderness in the world can't compare to a good hard animalistic fu-"

"I need to go to the bathroom," Regina decided, a hand over her mouth as she walked briskly to the ladies' room.

Ruby gave Belle her scarf and tea and Belle paid.

"…did you at least get him back for that?" Ruby gestured towards her neck.

Belle managed a smirk, wrapping the scarf around her battle wounds, "It's safe to say I did worse to him than he did to me."

Mr. Gold was in agony. His leg complained of him overstepping his bounds. His back was on fire with the hundreds of scratch marks Belled had clawed into him as she squirmed beneath his body in ecstasy. Then of course there were the various bruises that came from bumping against things and holding onto each other too tight.

Last night had been amazing. So amazing Belle and he could scarcely look at each other, feeling like they were wearing giant scarlet letters on their chests for the wantonness of their love-making. He had been tempted to close shop for the day and just hold her in bed but alas, his premonitions were acting up. He had the sense something was going to happen today, though he wasn't sure
Unfortunately for him, the cat had discovered the door's bell, and had been relentlessly beating at it ever since. Why oh why could he not block it out?

"Do you have a death wish, cat?" He growled through his teeth. It paid him no heed, apparently quite pleased with the constant noises it was orchestrating.

Mr. Gold looked around for a projectile, but the cat suddenly lost interest as three older children came through the door, each petting him in turn before continuing towards the counter.

"Well hello there," he said, watching Gretel's purposeful walk, "What can I do for you today?"

She paused to pull her flighty brother Hansel along, who had been distracted by a Faberge egg.

"You buy valuable items, don't you?" She asked, her stern expression almost laughable.

Poor dears. Thankfully Belle wasn't here to see the orphan siblings that lived only a few miles from where their father worked. Knowing her, she probably would've tried to adopt them.

"Yes, if they do prove to be valuable," he glanced towards the door, more specifically at the third child.

The cat had fallen in love with her, rubbing up against her as though they were old friends. She was taller than the other two, probably older, and definitely a she. She was turned away from him and he could only see the back of her head, but Mr. Gold felt a dull ache in his chest and a fierce desire to see her face.

"We found this," Ava announced, setting something on the counter. Mr. Gold reluctantly turned his gaze away from the mysterious third child and down towards the item.

It was a ring. A gold ring. A ring that when he touched it he could feel the lingering magic within, and knew immediately who it belonged to.

"You…found this," he said slowly. Nicholas's eyes widened in panic.

"Yes," Ava kept her cool. Had it been a different situation, Mr. Gold might've commended her poker face.

Mr. Gold turned the ring over and over in his fingers, glaring at the girl.

"How about you leave the ring with me, and I don't turn you in to Sheriff Swan for theft, alright?"

"We didn't steal it, we found it," she insisted, right around the time her brother said, "How did you know?"

Ava glared at Nicholas. Mr. Gold sneered.

"I know who this ring belongs to… And she's never let it out of her sight," he growled, "Now I'm feeling generous, so I'll let you walk away… Or if you still insist you "found it", I could call up Mayor Mills for you. I'm sure she's worried sick over losing it."

This was what did it. The pair didn't bother with apologies or begging, just quickly hurried out the door. The other girl, the one who hadn't moved much since she arrived, followed them out. Mr. Gold watched until they disappeared, and then stared down at the ring the Evil Queen’s true love had given her. He was now holding the hot potato as it were, looking for someone to throw it to.
before Regina found out he had it.

The bell trilled again and Mr. Gold glanced up, half expecting Regina whipped up into a proper fury. It was only Belle though, who took one look at him, went pale white, and then bowed her head, making a mad shuffle towards the back room.

"If people give you weird looks today, it's Ruby's fault," she insisted.

Mr. Gold felt over the smooth surface of the ring, "…are you going to play with Henry today, by any chance?"

Belle paused, looking up at him, "Nothing's planned, but I might. Why?"

"I need him to do us a favor and return some ill-gotten gains."

He walked over to her and held his palm out. Belle gasped when she saw the ring, staring at him.

"How…?"

"Not sure, but it won't be long before Regina starts sniffing around and throwing accusations…and we can't very well just hand it to her and tell her we found it."

He pressed the ring into Belle's hand before passing by her, making his way towards where Figaro had been. Belle pocketed the treasure as if it burned her to touch it.

"Who came in with it?" She asked.

"Ava and Nicholas Zimmer," he said, looking around the display case. Belle's eyebrows furrowed.

"…Hansel and Gretel?"

"The very same," His eyes moved over each item, "They must've had help, stealing right from underneath Regina's nose. Tell me dearie, have you sold or moved anything out of here?"

Belle shook her head, "No, why?"

Mr. Gold straightened, "Then unfortunately we've been robbed."

"What? How…?"

"I was distracted by the ring; the thief knew I would be," he turned to Belle, "Stealing from the mayor requires nerves of steel, but stealing from me? It takes skill."

Belle bit her lip, "You think it's-"

"I don't think, dearie… I know it was her." Figaro rubbed up against Mr. Gold's arm and he distractedly pet him, "The little cat burglar's finally shown up."

III

Belle was positive that she could live a thousand years in the Dark Castle and still be terrified of walking around it at night. Rumplestiltskin had already gone to bed, so the magically-lit torches had been extinguished. She'd have to make a mad dash across the grand dining hall and hope Rumplestiltskin wasn't in the mood to play on her fears.

She slipped into the grand hall, nothing but moonlight illuminating the seemingly-endless room.
She walked softly, the hairs on the back of her neck sticking up. She felt as though she was being watched.

"Funny," A voice came from the table, "He doesn't usually have live pieces in his collection."

Belle froze, slowly turning towards Rumplestiltskin's chair.

She thought for a moment that it was him; those were certainly his boots propped up on the mahogany. But his eyes did not glow in the dark, and his voice did not sound like a young woman's. The stranger continued to stare unabashedly at her, sipping out of the Holy Grail. There was a stranger in the castle. A stranger Rumplestiltskin hadn't been aware was coming, or else he would've stayed up for them. Rumplestiltskin always knew when they were going to have company, unannounced or not.

She continued to drink out of the sacred cup, and Belle thought she saw something moving back and forth in the darkness. Belle raised her chin.

"I'm not a piece of his collection," she said more boldly than she felt, "I'm his wife."

The eyes flickered with surprise, "Oh really? I thought he was a permanent bachelor." Belle took a few cautious steps towards the woman.

It wasn't a woman, Belle quickly discovered; it was a girl, hardly into her teen years. Long wavy hair fell down over her shoulders, the color almost black, and her eyes were a rich amber color. She was small, hardly 4'8", and twig-like in structure. She was almost human, in the same way Rumplestiltskin almost was; an overall human build, but with some major differences. She was much more angular, with cheekbones sharp enough to cut and her ears pointed at the tips. The thing lashed around again, and Belle realized it was a cat's tail.

"The Puss in Boots," Belle murmured. The girl smirked, her voice an odd accent with a deep throaty rumble to it.

"You can call me Katja."

"She also answers to "That Annoying Brat"."

Katja smirked as Rumplestiltskin strolled into the room, a deep frown creasing his face.

"Congratulations on your nuptials, Rumproast," she said, "She's beautiful."

Rumplestiltskin swatted her feet off the table. Katja snickered, finishing off whatever was in the grail and setting it down on the table.

"It would be too much to ask for you to knock, wouldn't it?"

"You'd lock me out," she claimed.

Rumplestiltskin gave a small shrug, "It's never stopped you from getting in before." Katja rolled her eyes before getting to her feet.

She walked over to him, practically rubbing up against him. Rumplestiltskin put a hand on her shoulder before taking an embellished step back. She growled.

"You haven't seen me in two years; you could be a bit more welcoming."

"Whose fault is that?"
Katja turned to Belle, and narrowed her eyes, "Oh I see how it is. You get someone new to cuddle with and I'm kicked to the curb."

Belle arched an eyebrow, "Cuddle?"

"It's a werecat thing," Rumplestiltskin said bluntly, "They're...needy."

"Intimate," Katja corrected, shaking her head, "Something you'd know nothing about."

"I know more than you do about it," he jeered. Katja glanced at Belle and shuddered. "Now, what do you want?"

"Who says I want anything?" She countered, trying to move closer. Rumplestiltskin kept her firmly at arm's length, "You don't visit unless you want something."

"Maybe I just want to meet your new bed mate," Katja stuck out her bottom lip in a pout, "The one that replaced me."

Rumplestiltskin bapped her upside the head. Katja let out a startled "mrawr" and glared at him. Belle wasn't sure why the action shocked her, it had been a soft hit...then she realized she had never seen him hit anyone before.

He pointed at Katja and narrowed his eyes, "Behave."

Katja scowled, then retreated a couple of steps, "You have to admit, it's been awhile since you've cleaned up one of my messes."

"Gods, Katja, what have you done now?" He grumbled.

She folded her arms defensively, "I thought the coast was clear... I didn't know about the Mirror..."

"Mirror?" Rumplestiltskin frowned, "Oh Puss, you didn't..."

"I needed a new top," she mumbled, head bowed in humility, "She showed up before I even picked one out."

Rumplestiltskin wagged a finger at her, "What have I told you about biting off more than you can chew?"

"I thought I could chew it!" She exclaimed, face flushing, "...so long story short, I'm out of lives."

"Did she destroy them, or does she still have them?"

"She's holding onto them."

Rumplestiltskin sighed, shaking his head sadly, "Oh Puss, oh dear little Pussycat. You are going to be the death of you."

Belle didn't have the slightest idea what they were talking about.

Katja's voice softened until it was almost vulnerable, "She's going to use me in the new world... Make me her little pawn..."

Rumplestiltskin's face went stony, his gruff version of a poker face, "...that wouldn't be in my best
interest, having you turn against me," His hand twisted in a flourish, "I guess I'll see what I can do."

"Great! Firstborn, favor, whatever you want you've got it."

Rumplestiltskin huffed, "You're too smart to say such things," he insisted.
Katja grinned, "What can I say? I trust that you won't take advantage of your favorite cat girl."

She circled around him, edging closer carefully. He maneuvered away from her with each step and Belle bit her lip to keep from giggling at their little dance. Katja suddenly rushed at him, seizing him in a quick hug. She received a triple bap for her troubles and she yowled, vanishing into mid-air.

"She's gone," Belle remarked.

"She'll be back," Rumplestiltskin said flippantly.

He started across the hall and Belle jogged to catch up with him, "So…Puss in Boots is actually a cat?"

"Close enough," They started up the winding staircase that led to the upper levels and, eventually, their bedroom.

"I would think a werecat would be a bit more…" She trailed off.

"Like a werewolf?" He finished. She nodded, "The prefix is misleading, unless you brush up on your etymology. Werecats aren't fully human, and can be quite bloodthirsty, but that's where the similarities end."

"They don't change."

"Oh they change," Rumplestiltskin said quickly, "They're just more like berserkers than once-a-month shifters. It's not a curse they bear; it's a natural ability for some strains of magic. They're the rarest of the races," he grimaced, "Partly because they don't breed like mice, and partly because of war."

"There was a werecat war?" Belle asked. Rumplestiltskin snickered.

"No dearie; individual werecats kept getting shanghaied into all the other wars. They move faster than you can start to blink, they teleport, they go through solid walls no matter what barrier spell you put on the place, they have nine chances at life…"

"The perfect soldier," Belle murmured.

Rumplestiltskin nodded, "Precisely."

They stepped out onto their floor, making their way down the hallway. Belle pursed her lips, "She said that she had lost all of her lives…that someone else had them."

"You can simply kill a werecat until they stay dead…but if you know how, you can take a life and contain it, and the werecat is bound to you."

Belle's eyes widened, "So whoever has those lives…"

"Regina and, unless something's changed in the last few years, she has seven. Seven claims to
Katja's servitude."

She could finally see the concern on Rumplestiltskin's face, fear for the young girl's life and what Regina would have in store for her. They seemed so familiar with each other… It made Belle curious as to what was between them, but there'd be time for relationship questions later. After Katja's lives were wrenched out of Regina's cold merciless hands.

Rumplestiltskin paused at their door, hand hovering above the doorknob, "…one more thing you should know about werecats," he cautioned, "They age faster mentally than physically. She may only be fourteen years old physically but in werecat years she's about twenty-one," he giggled, "It's the funniest thing to watch her go into a tavern and order a drink."

The door swung open and Rumplestiltskin gave a feral snarl. Belle followed his gaze and saw Katja in the middle of their bed, innocently curled up under the covers. She tilted her head to the side, her large eyes watching them curiously.

"Out! Out, out, out!" Rumplestiltskin snapped, storming towards his side of the bed.

Katja burrowed deeper under the covers and whined, "You go off and get a wife and suddenly there's no room in your bed for me!"

"You're getting too old for this nonsense!"

"How can you be too old to cuddle?!"

"Oh, Rum, there's plenty of room in the bed for the three of us," Belle insisted, going towards her side, "What is one night going to hurt?"

Rumplestiltskin glowered at her, and Katja grinned triumphantly, "Yeah, Rump, plenty of room."

He continued to mutter as he magicked into his pajamas. Belle slid into the bed, smiling to herself at how grumpy this new girl was making the Dark One.

She jumped as arms wrapped around one of hers, Katja's head nuzzling into her shoulder.

"I think you and I are going to get along just fine, Bellie," she said. The stranger cuddling up to her might've been disconcerting had she not started purring. Belle fought back an "awww", figuring that it would be rude to fawn over a werecat as though it were an ordinary kitten.

Rumplestiltskin glared from his position on the far side of the bed, watching Belle doze off with the little troublemaker curled into her as though she were her mother. Usually he was the one who got to cuddle up to Belle like that, and he wasn't taking too well to sharing his wife.

III

Mr. Gold was mildly certain that he had never stepped foot in either of Storybrooke's two schools, the K-8 or the high school. The closest he had ever come was whenever there was a book fair or when the librarians started asking for donations. They knew Belle's weakness and, as if trying to soften his image, she always signed the checks in his name. He had left the education system alone in his monopoly of the town, leaving the children as he had always done alone.

He could see the wisdom in his decision as the staff stared openly at him walking down the hallway. Children gathered at doors, quickly looking away if he glanced at them. He managed to make it to the eighth grade classrooms without making any little kids cry, and slipped into the room the secretary had given him.
He didn't pride himself on his stealth, especially with a cane, but stopping a class mid-lecture in five seconds was a bit too blatant even for him.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Shoemaker," he murmured, "I was just wondering if I could borrow Miss Pettigrew for a few minutes."

"Sure," The elder teacher said without hesitation, "Kit…"

Dang. He could be planning to abduct her and no one was asking a single question.

All heads turned to a girl in the back and she slid out of her slouch. If she was nervous about him showing up, she didn't show it, walking over to him in a bored unhurried fashion. She didn't meet his eyes as he held the door open for her and they slipped out into the hall. Mr. Gold braced himself for his first real look at the Storybrooke version of Katja.

She was obviously not as cat-like as she had been; no tail swishing under her skirt, and her claws had become black polished nails chewed to the quick. She was still as small as she had always been, sharp featured and looked like what this world would call anorexic. She finally looked up at him and those amber eyes were almost exactly how they had been, save for the human pupils. She had overdosed on eyeliner, her uniform's shirt skin tight and her skirt way too short to meet with the school's code. She wore knee-high steel-toed black boots, and he found himself oddly disappointed she wasn't wearing the ones she stole from him.

"What?" She snapped. Even from that one word, he could tell her throaty growlish accent was gone, voice as neutral as possible.

"I think you know what."

Kit wrinkled her nose, "You saw me yesterday and now you wanna make a pass at me."

Rumplestiltskin and Katja had never been beyond a good innuendo, but it had been harmless, meaningless. Kit sounded serious, and bitter.

Mr. Gold had to fight to keep the disgust down, "No, I saw you steal from me."

"So?"

No lies, no pleading or guilty downcast eyes. Just an impervious response.

"So I want what you stole from me back or I'll be forced to go to the authorities."

"You mean that Emma chick," she snorted rolling her eyes, "You don't like cops up in your business. You're not gonna go to her."

Mr. Gold raised an eyebrow, "Oh really?"

Kit gave something between a snort and a laugh, "You think I just strolled into the pawnshop of the most ruthless man in town and though "hey, that's a pretty bauble, I think I'll take it without paying"?" She shook her head, smirking, "I'm not some common thief. Now, stop threatening me before I hit you where it hurts."

Mr. Gold felt like hitting her where it hurt, but now was neither the time nor the place. Instead, he just smirked back at her, "It's cute how you think you can play a grown man's game, Kitty, but I can guarantee you I always win…and I won't take it easy on you because you're young and inexperienced."
"That's what she said," she quipped, straightening and heading back towards the door, "I've gotta go back to pretending I'm paying attention now. Toodles, asswipe."

Mr. Gold could only stare as she went back into the classroom, dumbstruck how some teenage girl just spoke to him. What the hell had Regina done to Katja?

He drifted through the next seventeen hours or so, feeling the virtual smack long after seeing her. He could not reconcile the admirably outspoken but conscientious Katja with her tactless, cold, irreverent counterpart. Had she any idea of herself, he would've smacked her until she behaved. But she was ignorant of who he was to her, or how she used to be. He mourned and lamented, Belle his only comfort.

What kind of hell would it be to have his wife be that close, he knowing everything and she knowing nothing, and for her to have lost her true self? Thank the gods he didn't have to find out.

He brewed some earl grey the next morning, hand absently reaching into the cabinet. It closed around empty air and he started. He scanned the other shelves, then the rest of the tea set, the back room, and even the shop. Panic rose in his throat and he whipped around as the door opened.

"Did you bring my cup home?" He asked urgently.

Belle furrowed her eyebrows, "…no, I haven't seen it since yesterday," she reached down to stroke Figaro, "Though how you can find anything in that back room is beyond me."

It's just a cup; he tried to tell himself, it's just a cup. You have Belle; the cup is just a memento, you don't need it. But he could not quiet the other side, a side that knew it wasn't just a chipped cup and never would be and he needed to know where it was more than he needed to breathe.

He suddenly remembered Kit's threat, and all sense of rationale left him.

III

"I'm going to go see what I can do about this," Rumplestiltskin had informed Belle, shrugging on his scaled coat, "You get the honor of babysitting the pussycat. Feed her, entertain her, try to keep her out of my things…"

"If she's mentally twenty-one, then I really shouldn't need to babysit her," Belle had rationalized. Rumplestiltskin smirked.

"That's where the cat part comes in," he spun on his heel towards the door, "She might be an honorable thief, but she's still a thief. And nosy."

Belle just shook her head at his retreating back, waiting until he was gone to go seek out their guest. She hadn't seen Katja since last night and was half worried the werecat had vanished.

But there she was, sitting on the windowsill in the dining hall and staring out at the sky.

"You convinced him to take the curtains down," she commented. Belle bit her lip.

"In a manner of speaking…"

She sat down across from Katja, folding her legs up underneath her. Katja's eyes never left the outside.

"…you're from that small village, aren't you?" Belle glanced questioningly at Katja as she spoke,
"The one that was stuck in the middle of the most recent Ogre Wars?"

The question caught her off guard. That seemed like a lifetime ago…well, Belle supposed it was, going from noblewoman to maid to prisoner to wife, "Yes, I'm Sir Maurice's daughter."

"I'm sorry," she said bluntly, flicking her tail, "It's not that I didn't want to help… I'm known as an ogre killer, but even I can't slaughter an entire army by myself."

"It's alright," Belle assured her, smiling softly, "I think it worked out in the end."

Katja smiled and chuckled, nodding her agreement, "Luckily, it did."

The pair lapsed into silence, Belle watching Katja while Katja watched the clouds drift lazily through the sky.

"…I lost my mother to ogres, when I was little. Never knew my father," she said as casually as if she were talking about the weather. Belle stared at her as she continued, "They took one of my lives, too. After I came back I found a little crevice to hide in…and that's where he found me." She tugged at one of the ends of her laces, "Rump took me in, gave me somewhere to sleep and food to eat, taught me how to use my magic and about proper deal-making…"

Rumplestiltskin had never said a word about having someone else live with him, let alone The Puss in Boots. Then again, he hadn't brought up his son until Belle mentioned what she had found.

"He's like a father to you, then," Belle said. Katja snickered.

"Trying to put a name to our relationship is like trying to pin down a shaft of light," she shrugged, "He's just Rump, and I'm just Puss."

"But you two love each other," Belle insisted. Katja's nose twitched.

"In a way, yes," she admitted, "But it's conditional, easily lost and not all that powerful. I won't be tied down, and he won't let me get too close."

Katja turned her gaze to Belle, looking both sad and resolved, "I'm glad he has you now, someone who finally scaled the walls around his heart and isn't gonna up and leave him over any little thing. Everyone needs someone…even the Dark One."

Belle bowed her head, "I can't take too much credit…all I did was fall in love."

"Yeah, but you stayed there even when you hit the cold hard ground," Katja pointed out. She glanced down at Belle's exposed left arm, tail swaying curiously, "You done much magic yet?"

Belle pulled the sleeve of her dress further down, "I didn't know I could do any…"

"His blood's in your veins; you should be able to," she said, leaning forward. She gestured towards Belle's hand, "May I?" Belle offered it to her.

She watched as Katja drew a sharp claw over the tip of Belle's finger, and a second later Belle felt the prick. A drop of blood swelled out of the cut and Katja bent over it.

Katja's tongue was rough down the center, but soft on either side, as it glided over the cut. Belle tried not to let her horror show at Katja lapping up her blood, no matter how brief the moment. She sat back up, eyes thoughtful.

"…it's inherent magic," she informed her, "You've got a limited amount of things you can do on
your own; teleporting, which is super handy, as well as some conscious healing, meaning you've got to focus on the wound in order to heal it." She snickered, wrinkling her nose, "Outfit changing? That's kind of a stupid ability, but I guess you're going to get weird stuff like that when your magic comes from an all-powerful source."

Belle had never been of a magical persuasion; her family tree was chock full of normal humans with no incredible skills. The thought of being able to do any magic, even if it was just changing her clothes instantly, unnerved her. She never wanted to wield powers, but now she guessed she would, especially if she wanted to help her husband.

"That mark on your arm gives you siphoning powers over the Dark One," Katja continued as she pointed at it.

Belle glanced down, "Siphoning?"

"If something's beyond your abilities, like say a telekinetic grip of death, you can steal some of Rump's power and temporarily use it. 'Course it weakens him, but magic's a pricey tool."

Rumplestiltskin had warned her, back when the idea was first proposed, that she would change and that it would also strengthen the bond between them. She had no idea it would be by this much.

"Could you…teach me how to use it? The inherent powers, anyway?"

Katja grinned, giving a small bow of her head, "Of course, milady."

III

Mr. Gold had given Belle the rest of the day off, standing stoically behind the counter. He waited like a Venus flytrap expecting prey to land. He was not disappointed.

The pawnshop door flew open as Kit locked eyes on him and charged.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS IT?!" She screamed.

Mr. Gold blinked calmly, "You're going to have to be more specific."

"YOU KNOW EXACTLY WHAT IT IS YOU CUNTFUCKER!" She rounded the counter, "GIVE IT BACK!"

She charged for him and he restrained her, both arms planted on her shoulders as she howled and struck out.

"It's not nice when people take your most valuable possession is it?!" He snarled.

Kit thrashed around, dissolving into sobs, "GIVE IT BACK! PLEASE JUST GIVE IT BACK!"

He started shaking her, "There are lines, lines that shouldn't be crossed! You think it makes you better, strong if you don't regard them but it only makes you look weak and pathetic!"

He shoved her away, glaring as he picked up his cane. She was trying to hold in her cries, trembling and whimpering like a beaten dog.

"You're better than doing things like this," he hissed before turning away from her. Honestly, he felt like crying too.

Kit was quiet, struggling to compose herself before she spoke again.
"I didn't steal the mayor's ring for the hell of it," she murmured, "Ava and Nicholas, those two kids I was with... They're in trouble. They're no good at surviving, and I've been helping them. I thought the ring would bring in enough money for them not to worry for a bit," she hung her head, "And yeah, I used them to steal from you... I've got no excuse for why I did that; I just thought it would be a good story."

Mr. Gold closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, and then opened them again. He reached under the counter for a colorful hand bag and then tossed it to her. Kit caught it, staring at him in open astonishment.

"I took the liberty of stealing back the original item as well as my cup," he muttered. Kit held the bag to her chest, "We have no further business between us; you're free to go."

Kit didn't move, transfixed by what he had said. Mr. Gold's fingers dug into the counter.

"I said leave!" He roared and Kit finally unfroze, going for the door.

Mr. Gold didn't watch her leave. He hadn't watched her leave since that first time, when she decided she wanted to make her own fortune. He'd never had the willpower to make her stay.

III

Belle and Katja sat in front of the fireplace, Belle reading while Katja played with a golden ball the size of a peach. Truthfully Belle could hardly keep her eyes open; Rumplestiltskin made magic look so easy. Katja insisted it was like a muscle that needed to be exercised regularly before she'd use it without fatigue.

Katja glanced up suddenly, tail swaying lazily, "Welcome back, Rumpy," she called, and Belle set her book down.

He appeared haggard and unhappy, though the latter seemed more recent.

"I see you two have gotten along in my absence," he remarked bitterly. Katja smirked, and cuddled deeper into Belle.

Belle didn't see anything wrong with the werecat sitting on her lap, except maybe the age. Rumplestiltskin was so sensitive sometimes...

He tossed something at Katja, who dropped her ball to catch it. It looked to Belle like a heart-shaped flask, metallic with a very complicated outer design. Katja squealed and was off of Belle in an instant.

"You're the best, Rump!"

"I know," he said tiredly, going over to kneel beside Belle's chair.

Katja opened the flask and tipped it to her mouth. Belle caught a glimpse of silvery wisps before they disappeared down her throat.

She reached down and ran her fingers through her husband's hair. He leaned into her hand automatically.

"So I guess we're even now, huh?" Katja said, reaching down towards her hip. A small bag hung from it, hardly big enough to fit a small paperback novel into. It was brightly colored with rich tribal designs dancing around each other. She slipped the flask into it, though Belle had been
"What are you talking about?" Rumplestiltskin grumbled, "I got you your lives back-"

"And I taught Bluebelle magic," she insisted. Rumplestiltskin glanced up at Belle and she gave a sheepish smile, "Really you should've taught her sooner, if she's your wife and all."

"I was going to...eventually."

"And now she knows what she's capable of, so we're even."

"Give me your handbag and we'll be even," he challenged.

Katja's claws dug into the bag as she glared at him, "You know that this is the only thing I have of my mother. Why don't you just give me your chipped cup?"

Rumplestiltskin waved a hand dismissively, leaning his back against the chair, "Are you spending another night or are you going to be on your way now that I've cleaned your mess up?"

Katja stuck out her lip, "Don't be grumpy, Rumpy. It's your fault you left my payment open-ended." She walked back over to Belle, "I hate to hit and run, but I do have to get going. A problem with a picky mother and a pea under a stack of mattresses...don't ask."

She brought Belle's hand to her lips and kissed it, "It was a pleasure to meet you, mistress," she murmured in an oddly formal manner.

Rumplestiltskin grinned in absolute glee as Katja crouched down in front of him, taking his hand with an expression of revulsion. She pressed a kiss to it, "Thank you for helping your humble servant again...master."

Rumplestiltskin let out a high peal of laughter at the title and Katja grimaced, "Your welcome...Pussycat," he reached up to pat her head. She growled, but allowed the action.

Katja stood back up, smoothing her coat, "I'll see the pair of you soon, then."

"Not long enough," Rumplestiltskin insisted moodily and Katja rolled her eyes.

"You love me and you know it," she claimed.

"Goodbye, Katja," Belle said, sad to see her go so soon.

Katja ran her claws through the older woman's hair in an almost sensual manner, "Bye Bluebelle...Try to keep him in check."

Katja walked away. She even used the doors this time.

Rumplestiltskin frowned, silent for a moment. Belle mulled over the conversation, especially the part with the hand kissing and master/mistress.

"You said Regina had all seven of Katja's lives," Belle murmured thoughtfully.

"Yes."

"And Katja told me she lost a life to the ogres that killed her mother."

"Yes."
"So what happened to her other lost life?"

Rumplestiltskin grinned deviously, "...I have it."

Belle's head whipped down towards him, "You what?!"

He gazed innocently up at her, "She stole my boots, so I stole a life from her."

"Rumplestiltskin!"

"She had seven more to spare!" He whined, "Besides, I'm doing her a favor. So long as I have one of her lives stored safely away, she cannot die."

Belle stared into his eyes. Something had flickered in their darkness for a moment, like an eel weaving through strands of seaweed. Concern? Affection? Whatever it had been, it was something that proved he cared about Katja, no matter how he protested.

His devious smile returned, "I did get what I wanted, though," he told her, something dancing between his fingers.

Belle gasped as she saw Katja's golden ball in his hand. He giggled, "We've been stealing this back and forth since she first got it from some cursed prince. This time I'm going to break my record of how long I've been able to hold onto it."

Belle shook her head and laughed with him. She didn't know what to make of the relationship between The Puss in Boots and Rumplestiltskin, but whatever it was there was something adorable about it.

III

Mr. Gold placed the golden ball back into its place in the front display case. He'd be lying if he insisted he hadn't put it there to tempt this world's Katja into an old game she didn't remember. He just hadn't counted on how quickly the game would turn vicious. Reflecting on what had been depressed him; Regina had twisted his playful little werekitten into some ruthless provocative wench. He may not see any hint of the girl he raised until the curse broke, and by then he'd be leaving.

Figaro meowed and trotted towards the door seconds before it opened. He glanced up to see Kit in her school uniform, hands fidgety and eyes darting. He went back to locking the case, "I really don't want to be pushed into legal action, Miss Pettigrew, but if you continue to harass me..."

"Sorry, Mr. Gold. I just wanna talk."

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "And what could you possibly have to say to me?"

Kit folded her arms, scuffing a boot against the floor, "I'm sorry about what I did."

"If you were sorry, then you wouldn't have done it."

"I want to make it right," she blurted out. He looked at her, "I don't have cash, but I've got stuff, vintage stuff. You can look at it; see if there's something you'll take as an apology."

Mr. Gold rested a hand on the case, adjusting his grip on his cane, "Well, ever since the falling out with Miss Boyd, we've had a vacancy for a housekeeper. Two weeks, room and board, and I'll consider your debt to me fulfilled."
Kit wrinkled her nose, "You want me to be your maid?" He nodded, "Sleazeball."

"I didn't say French maid," he muttered, "Just a normal cleaning, cooking maid. Do we have a deal?"

The girl glared at him before responding, "...fine."

"Good. You start tomorrow. Shall we go pick up your things?"

"Whatever." Even if she wasn't enthusiastic, she was agreeing, which was more than what he hoped for.

Mr. Gold drove her out into the woods, a mile or so down the stream that the old toll bridge crossed over. A small sturdy camping tent was pitched in the shade of an old pine tree, somewhere on the edge between "acceptable" and "unacceptable". Not that he was thrilled that Kit's home was collapsible, but he was sure Katja had lived in much sparser conditions. He wasn't sure whether to be relieved or frustrated that her desire not to be caged had carried over (her definition of caged including pretty much any four solid wall building).

She came back to the car ten minutes later, swinging a single backpack into the passenger's seat.

"That's everything?" He asked.

"I'm not a very material person," she murmured.

III

"Goodbye Rumplestiltskin." The spinning wheel paused. She hadn't used his full name since she figured out it had "Rump" in it.

He turned around to see Katja standing near his chair at the dining room table. She didn't have any bags except for her mother's, but with that infinity spell she didn't really need any other ones. His eyes focused somewhere between her and the table.

"...where are you going?" He asked softly.

"Somewhere. Anywhere, really," she shrugged, "I've been in one place for five years. I want to see the world."

"But this is your home," He hated the fact that his voice cracked on the "h" word. Katja gave a sad little smile.

"I wasn't meant to be a housecat. You know that. I know that. This day was inevitable."

Rumplestiltskin's throat closed up, his mouth dry, "...but you're only ten."

"That's seventeen in werecat years; I don't see why you need that reminder."

Werecat years meant nothing when he was sitting there looking at what appeared to be a fragile little girl. She didn't look ready, and even if his mind insisted that she would be able to handle herself...his shriveled blackened little excuse for a heart cried out that she wasn't.

He reached down into his basket and retrieved a spool of golden thread, approaching her.

"At least take this, then," he said, offering it to her.
Katja sneered at the gift and shook her head, "You taught me all I need to know in order to survive. I don't need a handout," she gently pushed his outstretched arm away.

Rumplestiltskin fiddled with the spool awkwardly for a moment, before setting it down on the table.

"Why is it you're only now showing me affection, when I'm about to walk out the door?" She murmured, a pang of hurt in her voice.

Rumplestiltskin shuffled his feet, none of the words he wanted to say coming out of him. Not the fact that he had always cared about her, even since he brought her home. Not the looming threat of being all alone again in his rather large estate. Not the parental/guardian concern he had for her leaving the nest. He was just silent.

Katja sighed, "I hope someday you'll be able to let someone in…the way you never could let me in." The words stung, but only because they were true.

She took his hand and pressed it to her lips, "I'll see you later then, master."

He could only give a small nod in response.

She turned and walked away. She even used the doors, he thought in amazement.

He didn't consciously think about following her, but he did, catching each door as it was about to shut. He stopped on the threshold of his castle and watched from there as she cut through the courtyard, to the front gates, and disappeared along the rocky path that wound its way down the mountainside. She would be just another notation on his long list of regrets, he supposed. The last thing he saw of her was her feet.

She was wearing his boots. She had the nerve to leave him and steal a pair of his boots.

III

"You did a good de-ed," Belle sang as she slid into his car. Mr. Gold's heart pounded, wondering if she somehow knew about his arrangement with Kit already.

"What are you talking about?" He muttered, pulling away from the pawn shop.

"Oh don't start that," Belle swatted his shoulder playfully, "Telling Emma who the Zimmer siblings' father was. You reunited a family!"

"She asked where the compass came from and I told her. Nothing particularly good or evil about it," he stopped at a four-way light and Belle was momentarily distracted by a man on a motorcycle.

He didn't understand Belle's fascination with motorcycles. They weren't much different than bikes or cars. Still, he wished there was a way he could drive one with his bad leg so she could hold onto him like he had seen in the movies.

"I hate it when you won't just admit that you did something good," she continued, resting a hand on his shoulder. She started rubbing it slowly, and he swore he could feel the warmth of her skin on his through the layers of clothing he had on, "It's so sexy when you play the hero…"

A crackle of electricity went down his spine at the sensual tone she used. He cleared his throat and tried to shake it off, "You've already recovered from last time?"
Belle frowned, "Maybe not enough for another round of Beauty and the Beast…but maybe something gentler…"

Oh he was so tempted to detour to Granny's Bed & Breakfast and get a room but, unfortunately, he needed to inform her of the latest turn of events.

"Kit came in to apologize today," he murmured.

Belle snapped out of sexy seductress mode, "Really? Well that's very Katja-like of her."

"I know," he took a deep breath, "She wanted to know what she could do to make it up to me."

Her eyebrows furrowed, "And what did you say?"

Here came the hard part… "I offered her a position as our housekeeper for a couple of weeks, room included."

Instead of her chastising him for taking advantage of the opportunity to kidnap Kit, Belle snickered, "She is going to hate you when she gets her memories back."

Mr. Gold smiled, "I know."

She leaned back in her seat, "But she'll be home again. Safe."

"That's the plan."

They pulled into the driveway and Mr. Gold prepared himself for the battle ahead. It didn't matter if Kit didn't remember their relationship; he was now her boss and guardian, and he would make her be the girl he knew she could be. He would make up for letting her down in the past and goddammit he was going to show her he cared, because Belle had worked wonders on him over the years and he was almost capable of intimacy.

He opened the door and heard Belle hold her breath, clasping her hands nervously. It was as if she was going to be introduced to Kit as a long-lost relative or something. He smirked.

"Kit!" There was no response.

Several scenarios played through his mind. She had left after he dropped her off. She had stolen some things and run off. She was ignoring him for bringing her here. She was dead.

Why was he always sure his loved ones were dead whenever he was going through scenarios?

He made his way into the living room and snarled at what he found. Kit was passed out on the couch, face down and a bottle of vodka in her unconscious fist. Least she wouldn't drown in her own vomit…

"Is she in…?" Belle trailed off as she looked down at the scene, covering her mouth in horrified shock.

Mr. Gold sighed, "I think we're going to have to start locking the liquor cabinet, my dear."

Why on earth did he think taking care of Katja would be easier the second time around?
Mr. and Mrs. Gold try to adjust to having a teenager living in their house, especially one like Kit.

Snow White summons the Caretaker to help deal with her Charming problems, unknowing that she is about to find out what became of one of her old friends.

"I wish there was a way to get him out of my head," Snow said wistfully. Red glanced away nervously, "...wait, is there?"

"Of course not," Red lied, "That would be-"

"Red, what do you know?" The girl in the hood continued to fidget and Snow knew she'd have to hit below the belt to get her to talk, "Come on; I helped you when no one else would. What do you know?"

Red winced, glancing around, "Well, there are whispers. Whispers of a man who can achieve even the most unholy of requests..."

"If you're talking about Rumplestiltskin, forget it," Snow sighed, shaking her head, "It's not worth my firstborn..."

Red bit her lip. She hated to see Snow White so miserable. And after everything she had gone through as Red tried to get a handle on this whole wolf thing? She made dogs look unloyal.

"...if you don't want to deal with him..." She began slowly. Snow perked up, "...there's always his wife."

Snow raised her eyebrows in disbelief, "He's married?"

"They say she was the most desperate of souls, that she'd do anything to save her village. So she agreed to be with him...forever," Red twisted the end of her cloak up in her hand, "Over time her soul corroded away until she was just as evil as he is. People still say it's easier to deal with the Caretaker than the Dark One, but she's...choosy about who she sees."

Snow lifted her chin, face set in grim determination, "I guess I'll just have to take my chances with her, then."

That night, Snow drafted a letter, pleading for an audience with the Caretaker. She did not explain her plight, figuring her and Rumplestiltskin had both heard their share of pleas from brokenhearted fools like her. Against her better judgment she signed it "Snow White"; perhaps the name would tantalize the woman who called the most feared man in all the realms her lover. She sang the bluebird its instructions and then the letter was out of her hands.

She was surprised when her bluebird returned the next day, looking well-rested, well-fed and cheerful. An old bit of parchment was tied to its leg with a gold thread and Snow scowled. So wealthy she could use gold for a tie while entire kingdoms starved... The letter was brief.
Dearest Snow,

Of course I will help you. Meet me tomorrow night at the place where you first told me my husband's name.

Love,

The Caretaker/The Devil's Bride/The Harlot of Hell/The Chosen One/etc

"Dearest Snow"? "Love"? "Of course I'll help you"? Who was this woman, and how did she know her? She doubted she was this intimate with everyone... Snow sat back and pondered where on earth this chick was asking her to meet her at. If she didn't know her, then how was she supposed to know where she had said the name "Rumplestiltskin"?

Then, it hit her. All Hallow's Eve. She had told every girl in that library the name of the Dark One. It wasn't definitive, but it was all she had. Question was which of the hundred or so girls had been so desperate she had married the evil of all evils?

III

Belle woke to the sound of a blender and something yowling in agony. Her first fear was that he had stuck Figaro into the blender. Her second was that he was sticking Kit bit by bit into the blender. She leapt out of the bed and ran downstairs, painfully wide awake.

She came in just as Mr. Gold started up the blender again and Kit screamed obscenities, doubled over the counter and clutching at her head. Belle stormed over to the blender and pulled the cord out of the outlet.

"What in gods' name are you doing?!"

"I felt like making a smoothie this morning!" He proclaimed, his face a mix of anger and derangement.

Kit let out a weak moan, forehead to the counter, "My skull... is cracking... like an egg," she mumbled.

"Nasty hangover?" Mr. Gold asked menacingly.

"I want to die..."

"You should be dead, with the amount of alcohol you consumed," he muttered, then smiled serenely at Belle, "Would you like some, dearie?" He gestured towards the blender.

She shook her head at him, going to the cabinet, "Sadistic bastard..." Mr. Gold frowned, feeling shame for a brief moment before he poured himself a glass.

Kit slowly raised her head, propping it up with her hands, "So, the hell you want me to do today?"

"I'll have a list ready for you when you return from school."

Kit snorted, "There is no way I can go to school with this."

"Oh you will," he said, "Everything comes at a price; getting drunk's no different. You have to pay up."

"Motherfucker..."
"Oh no no no no," Mr. Gold held up a finger, "We're nipping this habit of profanity in the bud. No more of that kind of language."

Kit narrowed her eyes, "You don't control me."

"Actually, I do," he sipped at the beverage, surprised that whatever fruit he had thrown in during his little tantrum worked well together, "For two weeks, I am your employer. Any behavior I deem inappropriate you must strive to change."

"This is bullshit," she growled, "I have rights about freedom of speech."

"You're a minor; your rights are extremely limited at best," he said, gesturing towards the clothes she slept in, "So put some food down your gullet, don some appropriate clothes and get ready for school."

Kit looked pleadingly at Belle. Belle shrugged, "I think they're reasonable requests."

Kit snarled like a wild animal, then stole the remainder of the blender's contents before retreating to the guest room. Mr. Gold watched her go with a frown.

"I don't like being her parent," he decided. Belle sighed, wrapping her arms around his waist from behind.

"She'll only hate you until the curse breaks," she said, standing up on her tiptoes to rest her chin on his shoulder.

He sighed, holding his drink up to the shoulder, "I don't think I can hold off killing her that long." Belle took a sip, made a murmur of approval, and then he lowered his glass again, "Our entire dynamic has gone sour… I kind of just want to punch Regina in the face for this."

"Only if I get to watch," Belle kissed his collar, "Emma might've been the catalyst, but that doesn't mean she's the only one who can change things around here."

She let go of him as her toast popped up. Mr. Gold glanced over at her, amazed as always by her sheer confidence. Where did that even come from? How could she be so bloody sure of some things the way people could be sure of facts? It was like she had a sixth sense…

Belle started up the staircase to shower as Kit reemerged in the kitchen, their heated conversation drifting up with her.

"Go change."

"This is my uniform."

"One you've obviously outgrown. Go put on one that fits you."

"I like it like this."

"I don't. You look like Ruby on a Saturday night."

"It's my body."

"Go change before I make you."

"You're such a pervert!"
Belle was going to get ready as quickly as possible, then sneak out before she became an accessory to the fight. She would, as she had always done, wash her hands of what went on between Rumplestiltskin and The Puss in Boots.

The mothers of Storybrooke's young students (the ones fortunate enough to have one) had an easy, low-stress routine for dropping their kids off. They entered one end of the designated drop-off lane, said their goodbyes and gave last minute reminders before their offspring departed. They then exited through the other side, the lane smoothly letting them back out onto Main Street.

It was peaceful. It was typical. It was a soothing start-of-the-day ritual for parent and child. No one ever even entertained the notion of the most feared man in Storybrooke joining the carpool mothers without so much as a warning.

It was Mary Margaret Blanchard's turn for drop-off patrol, a fairly boring vigil that rotated weekly between all the teachers. She stood absently making sure no parent lingered too long or that traffic wasn't blocked. Her mind was elsewhere though, mulling over the dilemma between her and David Nolan. He was married to a lovely kind woman…but all the rationalizing in the world couldn't stop Mary Margaret from wanting him, coveting him greedily. She was drawn out of her lewd daydreams by a black Cadillac pulling up, a screaming teenage girl in the passenger's seat. Miss Blanchard recognized Kit Pettigrew, a girl infamous for spending more time in the principal's office or playing hooky than actually attending class.

Kit stumbled out of the car, struggling for balance without arms. Said arms were crossed over her chest as she was restrained in a… Mary Margaret squinted to be sure. A strait-jacket. A strait-jacket and an ankle-length black skirt. Kit continued to screech at him, strategic car horn honks drowning out her profanity.


Mr. Gold leaned over, smiling sweetly at the bound enraged adolescent, "Have a good day dearie!"

Knowing better than to hold up traffic, Mr. Gold pulled away leaving Kit fuming. Had Mary Margaret been more positive that what she had just witnessed had occurred, she might've done something about the situation.

Mr. Gold was feeling pretty good about himself. He had set a clear guideline ("dress like a student in uniform, not like someone sexually roleplaying a student in uniform"), had told her the consequences of not following this guideline ("I will change your outfit as though you were a giant Barbie doll"), and then followed through (dressing her up as Mormon Asylum Barbie over her uniform). He had driven her to school like a good parent, and had dropped her off early so she could socialize with her friends before class. He wasn't as rusty as he had imagined; he could totally be a father again.

His delight faded when he entered the shop, Belle glaring at him. He stopped in his tracks, fighting down a whimper.

"…where are we?" She asked coolly.

Mr. Gold shifted uneasily, "…the pawnshop?" He offered.

She arched an eyebrow, "We aren't in the Dark Castle?" He shook his head, "You're certainly acting like it."

Mr. Gold lowered his gaze to the floor.
Belle made her way towards him, "We aren't isolated up in the mountains anymore; we are not free from society. All they see is you taking a fourteen-year-old girl from gods-know-where and abusing her without just cause."

"I'm not abusing her… I'm just not being particularly gentle," he muttered.

She leaned her hip against a counter, "I think you should work the shop today," she suggested softly.

Mr. Gold gave a reluctant nod, feeling a stab of pain in his chest. Belle was right; he was not immune to society here, no matter how despised. His methods with Kit were not appropriate.

III

Snow stood in the center of Winter's Pass Finishing Academy for Young Ladies library, the room empty due to the late hour. Somehow it was even spookier now, this place the past instead of the present, reality versus a story. Every sense was strained, waiting, preparing for whatever menace she agreed to meet.

Snow's stomach lurched as she suddenly heard footsteps in one of the aisles. She spotted a gold gloved hand caressing the book spines of the philosophy section.

"Look at us," A voice murmured, "Two of the finest bred women in the lands, one living with seven men in the woods and the other soul-bound to the Dark One. Headmistress would be ashamed."

Snow's heart skipped a beat, hope clawing upwards from the pit of finality.

"…Belle?"

The woman the gloved hand belonged to ventured out of the aisle, her smile barely fitting her face, "Hello, Snow."

Caretaker or not Snow squealed and ran to embrace her. Belle laughed as Snow ran into her open arms, hugging each other so tight their arms quaked.

"They told me you died!" Snow's words were strangled with emotion, "That you threw yourself off the tower…scourges and flaying…"

"Vicious rumors…well, the death part anyway," Belle amended, "I just got married is all."

Snow pulled away, looking over her former roommate. Belle had always been dressed in the finest her kingdom could offer, but even those dresses paled in comparison to the golden gown she wore now. Details so intricate it would take more than even a seasoned seamstress to accomplish, jewels crafted flawlessly and sewn into the dress that Snow had a sinking suspicion had once been a bale of straw. Belle blushed at the scrutiny.

"He insists I dress the part in public."

Snow shook her head in disbelief, "The girl who wouldn't even give her firstborn to him…"

Belle shrugged helplessly, "Things change. I got to know him. But…" She grabbed Snow's hand, dragging her to a set of chairs, "I'm not the only one who's smitten."

Snow frowned as Belle gently guided her into a chair, bringing her own closer. Her eyes lit up as
she grinned mischievously.

"I've heard that there's a certain Prince Charming on your radar, hmm? A nice chivalrous piece of eye candy?" Belle teased, nudging Snow's knee. Snow stared down at her lap.

"That's what I wanted to speak to the Caretaker about... I don't want to love him anymore."

The joy vanished from Belle's face, "But... why?"

"It was just a day in the woods; he wanted his ring back, a ring for his fiancé. It meant nothing to him."

"But what if it did?" Belle urged, "I was engaged too. It didn't mean that I loved him."

"It doesn't matter," Snow met her eyes, "I'm a princess on the run, not exactly marriage material."

Belle clenched her jaw, "There's always a million reasons why we shouldn't fall in love. Letting them stop us is just an excuse to give up."

"I didn't come here to be preached at, or talked out of doing this. I came here for a cure to my broken heart," Snow insisted. Belle flinched, "Now either you help me, or I go to Rumplestiltskin."

A tense moment passed between them, Belle glowering and Snow standing her ground.

Eventually Belle sighed, "I know better than to try and talk you out of anything... Maybe one day you'll heed my advice."

There was a puff of purple smoke before Belle held a vial in her hand. Snow stared in disbelief, shocked at her old friend's new abilities.

"May I?" Belle asked, gesturing towards her hair.

Snow blinked, "Sure..."

Belle promptly pulled a few strands out of Snow's head. Snow winced.

"Drink this..." Belle said, putting one of Snow's hairs into it. It dissolved immediately, "...and you will forget you ever knew him."

Snow's eyebrows furrowed, "Seems a bit extreme."

"Love is the most powerful magic. It fuels our dreams, gives us hope. The... cure," Belle's mouth twisted at the word, "Must be extreme."

Snow stared at the vial, "...what's the price?"

Belle held up the extra strand, "This."

"Seriously?"

Belle shrugged, "That's what the boss wants."

"Why?"

"Not sure," she smirked, "What do you need it for now?"

Snow looked between the vial and the strand of her hair. She sighed, "Deal..."
Belle offered her the vial and Snow took it hesitantly, "Do me a favor and make sure he doesn't, like, make a doppelganger with it or something."

Belle snickered, "I'll make sure no ill will befalls your tresses," she pulled out a small bag and tucked the strand away, "But Snow?"

"Yes?"

She took a deep breath, "...I haven't been in this long, but I've seen plenty of people who thought they wanted something but it ends up they only thought they wanted it. Think long and hard before you drink that," she smiled wistfully, "Personally I find it's better to have the memory even if you can't have the person."

Snow met Belle's eyes, "I won't drink it on a whim if I do it at all. I'll pretend it'll cost me my firstborn." Belle smiled at the mention of their late night heart-to-heart. How things had changed.

She stood, resting a hand on Snow's shoulder, "It was good to see you again."

"Yeah. Good luck with the Dark One," Snow joked.

"Good luck with your seven men," Belle teased.

As Belle walked away, Snow found herself glad she had summoned the Caretaker, if only to see that her childhood friend was alive and even appeared to be doing well.

III

Belle was tempted to turn off her phone after this morning; it seemed like everyone on her contact list (and a few off) had texted her asking about what Gold had been doing to Kit/Miss Pettigrew/a fourteen year old girl. Belle hadn't replied to most of them (save Regina, whom she had told to mind her own business), and had been dodging concerned looks most of the day.

She was tempted to ignore the message that had just popped up but, reasonably, she couldn't. It could even be an apology from Rumplestiltskin...well, one could hope. She was surprised to say the least when she saw Mary Margaret's number.

Hey, are you free tomorrow for coffee or something? Seems like forever since we've hung out.

"You have no idea," Belle murmured. The last time had to be Emma's baby shower, or in Mary Margaret's mind high school. It had just been one of those falling-outs that happened when lives took different directions.

Belle frowned. That was mean of Regina, not at least giving her a community college education. Hell, Mr. Gold had a Master's in Law...

I'd love to. Granny's after school?

A stream of profanity came from the utility room and Belle tucked her phone away, rushing over. She was greeted with Kit frantically trying to shut off the washing machine, said machine starting to overflow. Belle reached over and pulled the correct knob. Kit's face went red.

"...thank you," she muttered.

"No problem," Belle stood up on her tip-toes, looking into the washing machine, "I think you just put too much in at once."
"I wanted to get it done," she mumbled, crossing her arms, "I've got a shit-employment of other stuff to do."

Belle noticed the correction, but didn't comment on it, "I don't think he really expects you to get through all that in a few hours."

Kit shrugged, "All the more reason to try for it." With a sigh, Kit started to pull out some of the wet clothes, setting them aside, "I think he picked the shidiest person to be a maid ever, though."

Belle laughed, "I'm pretty sure I had you beat."

Kit raised an eyebrow, "You were a maid?"

"For a few months, then I got promoted," Belle smiled at the recollection, "First day on the job, I made tea, and dropped a full cup on a priceless rug. Not only did I chip the handcrafted porcelain, but there was a stain in the rug that took me forever to get out." Kit sniggered.

"Did they get mad?"

"No, surprisingly not; just amused."

Honestly she had expected Rumplestiltskin to get angry, after all the stories of vengeance she had heard. But he had just waved it off, leaning back and smirking as she hurriedly made another cup. Belle's phone vibrated and she glanced down at it, Kit restarting the wash before going to get some towels to mop up the water.

See you there.

There were exactly three people in all of Storybrooke who had any chance of getting at Mr. Gold's soft side. The most successful by far was his lovely Belle, who was the only one who could calm the beast down during one of his infamous tirades. He had also developed a weakness for Henry Mills, perhaps because the kid was bright and precocious, and reminded him of Bae for no particular reason. If it wasn't for Kit being that third person, Mr. Gold might've just beaten her to a bloody pulp when he got home.

Figaro ran to meet him, the cat rubbing up against his leg in hopes of a smidge of affection. Mr. Gold lightly pushed him away with his foot before continuing towards the dining room. He glared in disdain at the set table, three ham and cheese sandwiches set out with some tortilla chips.

"I'm sorry, I must have missed the memo that we were having lunch for dinner," he sneered.

Kit glared at him from where she stood in the kitchen, "Sorry I didn't go to culinary school, master. Maybe you should check the credentials of the chick you decide to have as a maid."

"It's 9:17 and you two are already at each other's throats?" Belle complained, striding into the dining room. She greeted him with a kiss to the cheek before taking her seat, "She made dinner, you ornery old beast, shut up and be grateful."

A low grumble came from the back of his throat, sounding very beastly indeed, before he eased himself down into his seat. With all the wariness of a mouse in a pit of vipers, Kit took her own seat across from Mr. Gold and beside Mrs. Gold.

"So, how was your day at work?" Belle asked, trying to diffuse some tension as she took a bite of her sandwich. She didn't realize the trap she had just set off.
"Well Miss Swan paid me an interesting visit," Mr. Gold began, staring directly at Kit, "Apparently a few teachers heard some...concerning rumors about me prostituting under-aged girls."

Kit looked up at him, chewing her mouthful, "You sent me to school in a strait-jacket, what the heck was I supposed to tell them? You're the most controlling boss ever?"

"Yes!"

"Well I'll know that for the next time I accuse someone of pimping me out!"

Belle looked her husband over, lips pursed thoughtfully. Mr. Gold glanced at her, "What?"

"You do sort of look like a pimp."

Mr. Gold growled, picking up his sandwich and starting to eat it with as much disdain for his dinner companions as he could muster. Belle tried not to smile, and Kit rolled her eyes.

"You probably didn't even do our sheets, did you?"

Kit wrinkled her nose, "Why the hell would I do that? You guys do the nasty there."

Mr. Gold couldn't help himself.

"We've also done the nasty on the dining room table, but you don't seem to be complaining about eating here."

With reflexes that rivaled her old werecat abilities, Kit jumped back from the table as if it had caught fire. Mr. Gold indulged in a self-satisfactory smirk...before Belle picked up her plate and promptly moved to the living room. Apparently he had offended both of them with a single statement.

Belle avoided him the remainder of the evening. It irritated him that such an offhanded remark had irked her so much; was it Kit's business where they did it? No, but it wasn't like he was declaring it to the town... Their private life was still relatively private. Eventually he surrendered, passing by Kit's room on his way towards the stairs. Some sort of noise was coming from within; he supposed it would be called "music", but shouting obscene lyrics over beats wasn't what came to mind whenever he thought of music.

He snaked a hand inside and shut off the light. He was met immediately with protest.

"Midnight, Cinderella," he said simply, "If I catch you still on that laptop you'll be lucky if it just turns into a pumpkin."

He didn't have eyes in the back of his head, but he had a gut feeling she was flipping him off as he walked away.

Belle was already in bed, stroking the cat and staring up at the ceiling. Mr. Gold dressed down, then gave a soft sigh.

"Do you want an apology? I can give you an apology if you want one."

Belle frowned, "I'm not mad, Rumplestiltskin, I'm just...thinking."

They must be very serious contemplations, for her to be so worked up. He slipped into bed, studying her face, "...what are you thinking about?"
The only sound was of the cat purring contently, unaware of the tension in the house.

"I'm thinking about going on birth control."

Rumplestiltskin stared at her, "…why? I thought we wanted kids…"

"I did, but then Kit came," Her head turned towards him, those blue eyes misty with threatened tears, "I mean…is this how you're going to treat our child?"

"Of course not," he insisted, "It's Katja, for god's sake."

"Yet you say you love her, that she's the closest thing you have to a daughter," she gazed back up at the ceiling, scratching the cat behind the ear, "Maybe it's a good thing Ashley wanted her baby. Maybe we're not ready to be parents."

It would have been easier if she would've stabbed him. Mr. Gold sank back, eyes wide in disbelief, "…Belle…"

She closed her eyes and rolled onto her side. Mr. Gold just stared at her back, his mind fighting against processing what she had just said. Belle didn't want kids…because she was afraid of how he'd treat them. She was afraid he'd hurt the most precious thing she could ever give him because he was being a little rough on Kit. He spent the rest of the night continuing to stare at her, swinging between outrage and anger that she would ever consider him hurting their child…and utter self-loathing and pain that she might be right, that maybe he couldn't control himself as easily as he thought he could.

Maybe the gods saw how he handled Bae and weren't about to give him another life to screw up.

III

After school at Granny's was about as private as Granny's could get. Swarmed by teenagers hanging out after school who couldn't care less about adult gossip, adults themselves tended to stay away. Even so, Belle chose a booth near the restroom, having a hunch she knew where this meeting was going.

They exchanged polite greetings and Ruby brought over some tea. It wasn't until they were sure the well-meaning-but-nosy waitress was busy before Mary Margaret spoke.

"It's nice to talk to you, Rose. I mean one on one like this."

"Yeah, it's been a long time," Belle admitted sadly.

Mary Margaret bit her lip, "I'm sorry we didn't stay in touch," she murmured.

"It's my fault as much as yours," Belle shrugged, "You went off to college and I settled down with the town pariah."

Mary Margaret didn't seem to find the self-deprecating joke as humorous as Belle did.

She stared down into her cup of tea and Belle waited for her to organize her thoughts.

"…how do you do it?" She asked softly.

Belle furrowed her eyebrows, "What do you mean?"

"You and Mr. Gold," she shook her head, "I mean if you two can make it…no offense," she added
Belle giggled, "None taken." She grinned, shaking her head slowly, "What it boils down to is fighting and honesty. Every morning, we wake up and decide we'd rather fight for what we have than give up and start all over again on our own," she shrugged, "It's not perfect, and we argue all the time...hell we're in the middle of an argument right now. But we don't let it ruin us; it's just another form of expression."

Mary Margaret smiled longingly, "It must be nice, knowing that someone's there to stay."

"Yeah, but that isn't always the best thing either. If you know someone's going to stay, then some take that as permission to treat each other worse," Belle smirked, "Fortunately we don't take each other for granted, not after some of the things we've been through."

Ruby circled towards them, asking if they needed anything. They both shook their heads and Ruby reluctantly let them be.

"I think even more importantly, we're honest with each other, almost brutally so," Belle continued, "I made him promise early in the relationship no secrets; whatever he's done I'd rather he tell me than find it out from someone else."

Mary Margaret's fingers curled around her mug, "But what if...what if you can't be honest? What if being honest will hurt other people?"

Belle pursed her lips, "Is this about Kathryn?"

Mary Margaret stared at Belle, as shocked as if Belle had just asked her whether David wore boxers or briefs, "No! ...yes... Maybe. How...?"

"I'm just observant," she said flippantly.

Mary Margaret sank back into her seat, "...then what do I do, Rose? I can't stop thinking about him...can't stop feeling that there's this connection between us..."

Why was it the only time Snow asked her for advice, Belle couldn't give her a clear opinion? It was so like her to be so difficult...

Belle crossed her legs and leaned back in her seat, "I believe in the sanctity of marriage..." Mary Margaret immediately opened her mouth and Belle raised a hand in a "hold on" gesture, "...but I also believe that love doesn't always last forever. The man who married Kathryn...he might be gone. If they both have the chance to be happy, then perhaps it's for the best if they separate."

It was hard for her to give the advice, but she had thought about it since she discovered James was married to Abigail in this world. On one hand she knew how it was supposed to be, Snow White and Prince Charming, but on the other... Was it ever right to break up a marriage?

Emotions crossed Mary Margaret's face almost faster than Belle could process; hope, fear, disgust, love.

"Most importantly, though, you have to be honest," she cautioned, "David needs to be honest. Kathryn doesn't deserve to be blindsided," she reached across the table and took Mary Margaret's hand, squeezing it gently, "She's a smart, strong woman; don't demean her by sneaking around."

Mary Margaret nodded, "You're right, Rose. You're always right."
Belle would have to tease her about saying that once she was awake. She'd probably blame it on the curse.

She suddenly stared at Belle in horror as a thought struck her, "If Mr. Gold tells you everything… Did he tell you he was going to put Kit in a strait-jacket?"

Belle frowned, "No, and that's part of the argument, the fact that he did that."

Mary Margaret tilted her head curiously, "What is going on with him and Kit, then? I've never seen him around children, except maybe Henry once or twice."

She sighed, "Darling I live in that house and I have no clue what's going on half the time," she poured herself another cup, "Personally I think he's trying to do the Big Brother Big Sister thing… but has no idea how to go about it."

Mr. Gold returned home that night to a lack of a blue Chevy. Either Belle had been severely sidetracked by her date with Miss Blanchard…or she was more upset at him than he imagined. He had spent the day in silent agony, tortured by her words last night. His mind kept screaming "it's Katja, though, you know how we are!"…but he knew that mattered little in this world's context.

The lack of history between Kit and him was another gut-wrenching stab delivered by Her Majesty.

He came in to incoherent screaming and crying, and he hurried towards the kitchen. The cat was trying to console Kit, his little paw reaching up and tentatively touching her cheek. She didn't seem to acknowledge him, the stench of failure in the air as she bent over a pot. Had the smoke detector in the kitchen still been installed (Belle's tendency to forget things in the oven if she got too involved with a book warranted its removal), it would have been wailing, the acrid smell of burnt pasta lingering around them.

The cat saw him first, and gave an insistent meow to help him comfort her. Kit spun around and stared at Mr. Gold, and the shame on her face knocked him back to another time.

Katja's favorite activity while Rumplestiltskin was away was to mess with his supplies. Countless times he came up to his tower to see Katja pulling at her hair and striking out at the air, the acrid smell of a failed potion in the air. Or sometimes it was a spinning wheel jammed with straw, or a piece of his collection not responding to her the same way it would respond to Rumplestiltskin. There'd be tears in her eyes, a snarl on her lips, and shame when she was caught. She never tolerated her own shortcomings, and was her own worst critic.

"I tried."

It took Gold a moment to realize it wasn't his recollection of Katja who had said those words; it was Kit, the girl who had lost her sense of sanctity in this realm.

"I tried, but I did something wrong," she hissed. Mr. Gold still didn't speak for a full minute.

"…just clean up. I'll be right back," he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Gold turned around and headed out the door again. Kit brushed the tears from her eyes, her frustration morphing into dread. What was he going to do, get Mrs. Gold to make some five-star dinner so she could feel worse about herself?

Belle seemed to be in just as much of a hurry as the White Rabbit sometimes… She wondered if he too lost track of time, and had to chase it back down like she. Musings aside, Mr. Gold was home alone with Kit, and after yesterday she was positive this wasn't going to turn out well. As much as she loved catching up with Mary Margaret, she wasn't sure it was worth a dead body, because that
was certainly what she was going to find.
 "Where the heck's the teriyaki chicken?"
 "Probably still at the restaurant."
 "How can you get Chinese take-out without teriyaki chicken?"
 "Easy, I don't order it."
 "So you got this almond chicken crap instead?"
 "Of course, how can you order Chinese take-out without almond chicken?"
 "You're disgusting."
 "That's what she said."
 "...that is so wrong. You should not say that. Ever."

Belle peeked into the living room. Little white boxes with a red dragon emblazoned on their sides cluttered the coffee table. Kit was kneeling on the ground while Mr. Gold sat on the couch, both of them using chopsticks to portion out the food onto their plates.

"Next time you should get teriyaki chicken," Kit grumbled.

"Next time don't burn dinner."

And then Kit smirked at him. Mr. Gold smirked back. Belle thought that maybe there was hope for things to be as they had been after all.

Kit glanced up, "Hey Mrs. G. We got Mushu's."

"Great," Belle plopped down on the couch beside Mr. Gold. He handed her a container of sweet and sour pork with a fork. She glanced down at Kit, "Let me guess; you informed her we did it on the couch."

Kit's eyes widened to the size of saucer plates and she started screaming, slamming her face down into an open spot on the table.

"Actually I hadn't. She just didn't want to share the couch with me," Mr. Gold said, trying not to laugh. Belle flushed, burrowing into the corner.

Kit eventually recovered, slipping Figaro some of her food when Mr. Gold wasn't looking.

"Did you do your homework?" He inquired. Kit grimaced.

"You're not my father."

"No, I'm your employer."

"Which means stay out of my personal life."

"Just answer the question."

Kit stabbed an innocent piece of beef, "...no."
"You need to do that then."

"But it's so stupid!" She exclaimed, "How the heck is reading "Frankenstein" going to help me in life?"

"It'll teach you to stay away from both men who steal body parts from corpses and monsters composed of body parts from corpses… You'd be surprised how relevant "Frankenstein" is," Mr. Gold said, taking a bite of rice before continuing, "It's the philosophy behind it that's more important, I think. How we shouldn't play god or go against nature… What makes us human, and what makes a monster a monster. Whether it's consciousness or a soul that makes us alive…"

"Whatever, I don't care about all that. I'm alive, I won't date a mad scientist, I don't need to read an entire book to get that," she shook her head, "Besides, reading's stupid. I hate it."

Mr. Gold whipped around towards Belle. She looked as if she had just been slapped across the face, baby blue eyes wide in horrified astonishment. A small whimpering noise slipped out of her throat and Mr. Gold fought the urge to wrap himself around her for comfort.

"Reading…is not…stupid," Belle insisted slowly.

Kit shrugged, "Hey, whatever floats your boat. I'm just sayin' I like movies more."

Belle set the rest of her food down, suddenly not very hungry. Mr. Gold rubbed her thigh reassuringly, trying to think of the worst chores he could assign Kit for depressing Belle so. It was one thing to tell someone you hated reading…it was another thing entirely for a loved one to tell a bibliophile that they hated reading.

III

Mr. Gold sat on the end of their bed, not too subtly watching Belle in the adjacent bathroom. She was combing out her long dark curls, too lost in her own thoughts to really notice his gawking.

"…are you going to go on birth control?" He asked softly.

Belle paused mid-stroke, then slowly pulled the brush through her hair. She set it down on the counter, flicked off the light switch, and came to kneel beside him on the bed.

"Is it wrong if I'm too selfish to?" She asked, gazing at him questioningly, "Is it wrong that I'd rather take a chance on you controlling your temper than not doing everything in my power to have a child?"

Mr. Gold stared back at her, "Maybe," he said honestly, "But maybe it's just that part of you, that strange calm confidence you have sometimes, knowing that something will be alright even when nothing indicates it."

Belle shrugged one shoulder, "Maybe."

She closed her eyes and moved forward and Mr. Gold closed his, feeling her lips on his. He always imagined kissing would get repetitive, boring and flavorless if one did it too many times too often with the same person. Every kiss with Belle felt like that first one though, warm and soft and just so goddamn magical. His breathing hitched as she pulled back, the duo only wearing a pair of boxers and a nightgown between them, and he stared at her.

What kind of magic did Belle possess, that every touch and gesture felt like the first time?
She sat back on her ankles, grinning, "If you were a pimp, I would gladly be your whore," she informed him playfully.

Mr. Gold raised an eyebrow, "If you were my whore, I would never pimp you out. I hate sharing."

He moved with an agility that belied his handicapped leg, pushing her down onto the bed and pinning her beneath him. She gave a delighted little giggle and he kissed her, once, twice, three times. Her hand stroked his smooth chest and he found himself wishing he could purr for her.

...shit.

Belle blinked as Mr. Gold rolled off of her with a growl, flopping down on his back and staring at the ceiling. She looked at him questioningly.

"I can't. Not with Katja downstairs."

"Oh for the gods' sake..."

"I'm sorry!"

"So I'm supposed to wait over a week for my husband to make love to me?" She pouted.

Mr. Gold glanced at her, "There's always the cabin."

Belle brightened a bit, "Tomorrow, for a late lunch?"

"Sounds delightful."

She huffed, "Wait, there's supposed to be a storm coming in..."

He reached for her hand, entwining his fingers in hers, "And what better way to wait it out?" He murmured seductively.

Belle grinned at him, "It's a date, then."

III

"Have a nice time with your fellow lovebird?"

"Well it wasn't exactly a social visit," Belle strode up to him, placing the vial on his workbench, "But I got what you wanted."

Rumpelstiltskin peered into the nearly empty bottle and cackled his delight, "Well done, well done indeed my pet."

Belle hopped up onto a clear spot on the workbench, swinging her legs, "What are you planning to do with Snow White's hair, anyhow?" She queried.

He picked up the vial and went over to his rack of potions. He had bottled practically everything that could be bottled; luck, fame, death, fertility. He moved towards the only open spot, one marked with the symbol of a heart, and dramatically set the vial in it. Belle lifted an eyebrow.

"True love? From her hair?"

"Well it isn't complete yet, of course," he insisted, spinning back around, "We still need the other half."
"…Charming's," she said.

"Precisely."

"But if true love only takes a couple of hairs, why not just use ours?"

Rumplestiltskin smirked, shaking his head fondly at her, "My dear sweet Belle… Can you imagine what would happen if I tried making a love potion with the hairs of a Beauty and a Beast?"

"You're not a-"

"Save it, dearie. Point stands that while opposites may attract…they make for quite unexpected results," he pranced his way back to her, "Besides, they can do something we can't do."

"…kiss?" She guessed.

Rumplestiltskin giggled, "You're so cute when your innocence shows."

Belle glanced out the window, staring at something even Rumplestiltskin couldn't see. Her legs stopped swinging, and sadness crept into her complexion. He tilted his head at the sudden change of mood.

"…what are you thinking about?" He asked.

She sighed, pausing a moment before speaking, "…Snow would rather forget James than live with the pain."

He shrugged, "A lot of people feel that way."

She glanced down at her hands, playing with the two rings he had given her, "…I was in that tower for weeks before you came. It was so cold I could see my own breath, and I had nothing to protect myself against it. The things I ate, the things I drank…I can't even bring myself to say. There were no windows to tell the time of day, only the long absence of Regina meaning it was night. The tortures I endured I thought would kill me, and most of the times I wish they would."

Rumplestiltskin turned away from her, bowing his head in shame. He may not have known the specifics, but the way he found her had told him everything. He could still see the burns; feel the heat coming from infected wounds. He could never forgive himself for what Regina had done to his love, and he would never let himself forget what had happened when he cast her out.

"Her magic would not allow me to die. I should have gone insane…but I didn't." Her voice lowered, "Do you know how I managed to hold on, no matter what that vile woman did to me?"

He shook his head.

"…you. You kept me from losing myself."

He twisted back towards her, utterly baffled. How had he kept her alive? He had done nothing but mope around his castle, believing that witch's lies and mourning her when he could have been searching for her, if only to apologize. She gazed upon him with the love and understanding she had always generously given him.

"Every smile, every laugh, every accidental and intentional touch. Every word spoken, every minute in each other's company… I held onto those memories as if clinging to you would somehow make you appear. Those moments of happiness, that light we shared… I would have died without
them." Her voice faltered.

Sometimes he hated his impulses, but they could not be denied. He reached out to her, knuckles brushing her cheek. She leaned into the touch and even though they were married and she knew everything…he was still surprised that she wasn't repulsed by him.

"…she's going to drink that potion, isn't she?" Belle murmured, "She's going to forget her true love. That light…she's going to extinguish it without knowing how precious it is."

Rumplestiltskin's thumb caressed her cheekbone, "Fear not, my Belle. This is not the end of their story; it's merely a detour. If there's anything you've taught me…" He smirked, "True love doesn't accept defeat sitting down."

III

"It's pretty nasty out here; power's going out every which way, Sheriff Swan's closing off roads… I don't want you out and about, alright?"

Belle hadn't minded the storm, even thought of it as pretty, until Mr. Gold said that. She glared at the wall, since it was only his voice through the telephone, "That truck is nearly indestructible; a few gusts of wind and some rain aren't going to stop it."

"I mean it, stay in the house," he said firmly, "I have enough to worry about, between upset tenants and property damage; I don't need to add you to the mix."

Belle stuck out her bottom lip, "But the cabin…"

"A booty call is not worth getting in an accident."

"Says you."

Mr. Gold growled, "You're acting like we never do it."

"Twenty-eight years, Rum. Twenty. Eight. Years. We still have a lot of catching up to do."

He sighed, and she could imagine him rubbing his forehead in exasperation, "Could you just…not act like the guy in this relationship right now?"

Belle kicked the leg of the office's desk moodily, "I can't help it. I love you, and I want you all the time."

Mr. Gold hissed, "Don't say those sorts of things, Belle; it's hard enough for me to deny you right now. I'll make up for it, alright?"

"You better," she hung up the home phone with a grunt.

They should've made it lunch, not late lunch.

She rose from the office chair and made her way down the staircase. She'd have to trek out to her library anyhow; she was in the mood for a romance. She paused as she caught sight of Kit in the parlor. She was perched on the windowsill, staring out at the trees bending until they looked about to break, at the opaqueness of the sheets of rain. "Frankenstein" lay forgotten in her lap.

"I could've had to deal with this," she commented quietly. Belle approached her tentatively.

Kit finally peeled her eyes away from the scene, staring at Belle with a sort of lost expression,
"Why did he want me here?"

Belle shrugged, giving the old excuse of another lifetime, "The place was filthy."

"No it wasn't," she murmured, "If anything, I've made it messier. He should've thrown me out; especially after all I've said and done to him." Her tone took on urgency, "Why does Mr. Gold give a damn about some juvenile thief who's given him nothing but trouble?"

Belle considered telling her the truth for a brief moment; it was certainly more logical than a lie, in a way. But after what happened to Graham, Belle wasn't about to risk it.

"He had a son your age...a long time ago," she took a deep breath, leaning against the wall and looking out the window, "Ever since then, I think he's been trying to redeem himself. When he saw you, he thought-"

"'Oh that poor little orphan! She must be stealing because she's acting out; she's such a bright girl if only she had someone to look after her'..." Kit mocked in a high falsetto, sneering.

"...he thought he could help you," Belle finished calmly.

Kit tensed, "I don't need a hand-out, or a hand to hold, or whatever! I've managed just fine on my own since my mom left me, and I don't need anyone!"

"Everyone needs someone," Belle murmured.

Kit snorted, "That's a load of shit," she jumped down from the windowsill, "Frankenstein" crashing to the floor, "I'm not your charity case, or a fill-in for your kid, or whatever other reason you've got to keep me around," she clenched her teeth, hands balling into fists, "You picked the wrong girl to "help", 'cuz I don't want you two."

"Well too bad," Belle snapped, "It's too late for us to just act like we never met you! Kit, you matter to us, if you'd just let us in-"

She wheeled around, teeth bared and tears in her eyes, "Don't you dare care about me!"

"Why not?!"

Kit suddenly looked very small and very fragile, eyes wide with terror, "Because the minute a person starts caring about you is the minute you gain power over them...and I'm no good with that power."

III

The storm had finally cleared and Mr. Gold, his priorities out of whack, headed for his cabin in the woods while making a phone call to the power company. He paused on the threshold of their honeymoon lair, noticing two pairs of wet footprints going into and out of the cabin. A man's, and a woman's.

There didn't appear to be signs of a break-in; ten to one odds Belle just forgot to lock it again. He swung the door open and carefully stepped inside. The puddle soaked into the carpet suggested they hadn't been here for any reason other than to stay dry. Still, Mr. Gold did a sweep of the entire cabin, especially the chest in the back of the closet. A man's, and a woman's.

His paranoia did not ease much, though he knew it should. He did a much more thorough investigation of the living room and found a...feather? A dove's feather. What the hell...
He then spotted a discarded scarf of Mary Margaret's and a pair of gloves that belonged to Mr. Nolan, warming innocently by a fire he did not create.

His afternoon plans suddenly shifted. The complaints and damage could wait; he needed to disinfect the cabin until it reeked of ammonia and cleaner, chasing away any thoughts of what Mary Margaret and David might have been doing in his and Belle's sanctuary.
The Fruit of the Poisonous Tree

Chapter Summary

An unlikely hero informs Rumplestiltskin of Belle's imprisonment by the Queen and that she is not, in fact, dead.

Kit slowly warms up to Mr. and Mrs. Gold, just in time for her contract to end.

Kit Pettigrew was no stranger to trouble. She was on a first name basis with Principal Poppins. Sheriff Graham had gone from "Miss Pettigrew, I need to speak to you about something" to "What did you do now, Kit?". She hadn't met Emma yet, but she was sure it was only a matter of time. Her and Mrs. Shoemaker even had a nod so she wouldn't have to say "Kit, you need to go to the office" every other day.

It had been over a week since Mrs. Shoemaker had given her the nod; she figured if Gold caught wind of anything he'd make her sorry for whatever she had done. It caught Kit off guard when she received the nod and, for the first time, had absolutely no idea what she was in trouble for.

Kit felt like a bundle of nerves, an uncommon feeling for entering the main office. Her heart double-timed when she saw Mrs. Gold sitting patiently in one of the chairs, rising as Kit came in.

"Come on," she said brusquely, and Kit gave a helpless glance at Doris, the secretary. Doris just shrugged cluelessly.

Kit thought she was going to climb a frickin' wall by the time they got to Mrs. Gold's truck. The silent, unusually stern face melted as she grinned at Kit.

"I didn't even have to give them an excuse," she bragged.

Kit stared at her, "So…I'm not in trouble?"

"Of course not," she laughed, shaking her head and starting the truck, "We're just playing hooky."

Kit didn't think it was possible for Rose to be any cooler, but she just got cooler.

"So we have Mr. Gold's credit card and explicit instructions to go crazy with clothes shopping…so long as you don't pick out anything inappropriate." Figures. Oh well; even Kit couldn't object to a shopping spree on someone else's dime.

The intermediate con-girl had spent her time in captivity studying Storybrooke's most enigmatic couple. She couldn't figure out his deal; most thieves who dared to try anything were usually lucky to be able to stand when he got through with them. But for some reason he had just decided to demean and change her. Problem was…she didn't entirely mind. Maybe it was his loose code of ethics, or maybe Kit just downright admired the pimp-like Scottish Godfather. Whatever it was, it made her uncomfortable that he had that power over her, and uncomfortable that she was somewhat okay with it.

The pimp-like Scottish Godfather's wife was almost a 180 to his aloof and brazen self. Mrs. Gold was flushed with excitement, content with just critiquing Kit's choices, giving advice or rejecting
"distasteful" clothes. Rosaline seemed to have this glow to her, something that drew people in with hopes of basking in it. Kit loved that glow; it made her want to curl up into it and surrender control... But she was fourteen. She didn't need anyone... Not even Rose.

Laden with bags and the thrill of a successful hunt, Belle decided to end their outing with lunch at Granny's. Kit had been in turn more talkative and quieter than Belle had ever seen her; opening and closing like a revolving door she had to jump in time to get through. But the light that came on in her eyes when Belle declared a top "perfect"...

"Yanno, I'm kind of pissed at Ashley now."

Belle was startled into the present, glancing at Kit, "What?"

"You know, the bitch who wouldn't give you a baby."

Ruby shot a glare towards the back of Kit's head. Belle averted her eyes, "She decided to keep her daughter. It's perfectly legitimate."

"No, it's a crime to deprive you of a baby. I mean, you totally need to be a mother; you're too awesome not to be."

Belle smiled, "Thank you, Kit."

"So why don't you have kids?" She asked, sipping at her cola. Belle sighed.

"Sometimes things just happen... Circumstances won't allow you to do whatever you want to do."

The adolescent pursed her lips, "So which is it, bum ovaries or dead swimmers?"

"Kit!" She looked innocently at Belle and Belle flushed, "That's not an appropriate conversation... here or otherwise."

"He shoots blanks, got it."

Kit paused as Ruby brought them their orders, trying not to listen in on their conversation about issues of fertility. Kit munched on her fries while Belle picked at her salad, praying that no one would start a rumor that Mr. Gold's broken set was the reason behind their lack of offspring. It had been true once upon a time... but did the removal of his curse mean the removal of his sterility? Did the Dark Curse hinder any attempts at creating life until it was fully broken?

"This isn't the Middle Ages, though," Kit continued, "There's things you two can do to get a bun in the oven. They can put your egg and his sperm in a dish, whip them together like a baby omelet, and then stick it back inside your belly so it grows. Hell, I'm sure some hormone therapy crap can bring his swimmers back to life..."

Belle could not believe she was having this conversation.

She brushed a lock of her hair back and cleared her throat, "As much as I want a baby, I can't bring myself to try something like that," she bit her lip, "Life is...a miracle, this precious bit of magic that happens when and how it happens. To tamper with it, play god...it feels wrong."

There was magic in this land, Belle knew, but only the very basic kind. True love. Faith. Hope. Conception and birth. Witnessing deal after deal, hearing Rumplestiltskin's warning time after time, Belle was hesitant to accept any interference of nature. Science was not magic, but that didn't mean there wasn't a price tag.
Kit stared at her, "...what are you, some backwoods Christian? Not believing in dabbling in the divine or some other silly crap?"

Belle shook her head, "I just have my reasons, is all."

Kit bit into her burger, "Well hopefully those reasons don't keep you from having a kid. I think your pimp will even start acting gentler, if he had a Gold Junior he had to behave in front of."

She hoped so.

They paid the bill and left Granny's. Kit stopped dead in her tracks on the sidewalk, staring across the street.

"Now who is that?" She purred. Belle followed her gaze.

A man dressed in a black trench coat made his way out of a store with a single bag, head bent as if determined to move invisibly through the town. A scarf was wrapped snugly around his neck, a frown pulling the corners of his mouth down. Belle pursed her lips.

"That's Jefferson, probably going through his mandatory errands on his once-a-week trip into town."

"Jefferson, like the band? That's hot."

Before Belle could fully recover from "Jefferson" and "hot" being in the same context, Kit had darted across the street.

"Kit!" She yelled, running after her.

"Hey..."

Jefferson glanced up and stopped, the girl the Golds were cohabitating with in front of him. He wasn't used to people talking to him due to the rumors of how he was fresh out of the asylum, and so it took him a moment to respond.

"Hello..."

"Do you have a mirror in your pocket?" She asked, smiling sweetly.

He furrowed his eyebrows at the question, "No, why?"

She grinned lewdly, "Because I could totally see myself in your pants."

"KIT!"

Belle grabbed the girl by the arm and yanked her away from Jefferson. Kit gave an indignant yowl, "Hey!"

"What are you doing?!

"Flirting!"

"He has a daughter that's almost your age!"

"You have no right to talk about age gaps."
"You're a child; I have all the right in the world to keep you from hitting on grown men!" Belle turned and flashed him an apologetic smile, "I'm sorry, Jefferson; we're still teaching her how to behave in public."

Jefferson smirked, "It's fine, Belle. I know she's a bit…enthusiastic."

Belle raised an eyebrow, "You knew her?"

He nodded, "Different name, same pain in the neck."

"Wait, why did he call you Belle?" Kit caught on to their slip-up, shooting a glare at Belle, "Are you hitting on my man?! Because you already have one, so mind your own!"

"Come on," Belle muttered, dragging her away, "See you Thursday, Jefferson."

"Goodbye…and good luck," he added, watching the kitten squirm in the beauty's grasp.

It was things like this that made Jefferson hate going into town, running into old acquaintances that he didn't want to see. It wasn't Belle he was referring to; it was that mangy werecat that Regina had somehow made even more insufferable than before. Had Miss Pettigrew been more aware of whom she was and what she had done, he would have been able to act upon his instincts and beat the ever-loving shit out of her.

Alas, he couldn't bring himself to, not when she didn't realize why he would be beating her to the brink of death.

III

The Mirror was proof that love made fools of even the smartest of men. Hundreds of years of wish-granting went out the window when he met Regina, and he had been too blind to see the trap she had set. Even now, chained to her, he could not stop loving her.

If Regina's temperature came in degrees, he'd say she was lukewarm right now; not icily satisfied, nor fiery raging. She was irritated, and he was there for her.

"The prisoner won't succumb," she muttered, tapping a blood-red finger on her vanity, "I've tried everything from acid to whipping; still she will not break."

"Threatened her with her loved ones?" He offered.

"They want nothing to do with her, thinking she's been corrupted," she raked her fingers through her long hair, "One favor…one small favor and she could be a hero. But she's obstinate."

He had heard of this prisoner before of course; she had been in the tower for weeks tortured three times a day, four if Regina was in an especially foul mood. She wasn't usually so persistent with her victims; she offered them riches, they refused, she made them suffer, end of story. This ongoing pursuit meant this woman had something quite valuable to offer.

"But anything worth destroying takes effort, I suppose," she reached into her jewelry box, "Perhaps you can offer some insight while I offer her something that'll get under her skin."

She took out a small brooch of diamonds encircling a tiny looking glass, hastily fastening it to her breast. The Mirror instantly transferred his essence into it, trying not to think about where he was on her.
She ascended a winding stone staircase, though the Mirror only counted thirty out of the thousand or so steps (she must've teleported, and all without his notice). She paused to smooth her skirts before entering the chamber, the Mirror glancing around curiously for their number one inmate.

There was a girl hardly old enough to be a woman huddled into a corner, wearing only her own pale skin. Matted brown hair hung in her face before it jerked up, pale eyes staring up in terror.

"I'm in the mood for a game," Regina announced, "So I'll make my initial request quick; give Rumplestiltskin true love's kiss, and I will let you go. It's quite simple, really."

The woman's eyes went from fearful to hard as the stone around her, glaring at the Evil Queen, "I keep telling you, Your Majesty." Her voice was as cracked as her lips, but no less strong, "It won't work. He cast me out; he doesn't want me anymore."

"Of course he does," Regina insisted, "He's just too proud to admit it. Men are like that."

The woman continued to glare, "He. Doesn't. Love. Me."

Regina grabbed a fistful of the captive's hair and yanked her to her feet. This close, The Mirror could see the deep bruises, the sores and scorch marks and wounds oozing with pus. Each rib was clearly defined as she swayed on her feet, managing somehow to remain standing. How was she still alive, as weak as she was…and how could she remain so defiant?

He felt a pulse of magic and a box appeared in Regina's hands.

"Are you familiar with tape leeches?" She asked. The woman shuddered and Regina laughed, "I take it you have. Nasty little things, but they won't kill you. Not for a few months at least."

She opened the box to reveal a half dozen centipede-looking things crawling around. The woman shrank back.

"Give me your arm, dear," Regina commanded, "Or agree to take down the Dark One. Your choice."

She hardly wavered, reluctantly offering her left arm. Regina carefully removed one of the tape leeches and placed it on the arm. Regina clasped onto the wrist and the Mirror saw why in a moment.

The head shifted around as if sniffing, curious about its location and possibly hungry. As it sensed a vein, its skin peeled back to reveal tiny razorblade teeth while hooks rose up on its back and sides. It tore into the flesh brutally and the woman screamed, Regina's grip keeping her from pulling away. He felt nauseous as the creature dug into her, the hooks on its body helping it along as it crawled inside of her. She bit her lip until it bled, trying to hold in her screams. It burrowed just under her skin, a bump that moved around by slicing up her muscles and tissue, contently feeding upon her blood whenever the need arose.

The Mirror himself was crying as Regina continued remorselessly, placing one on her other arm, each leg, one on her back and one along her collarbone. The prisoner sobbed and wailed, but did not beg for mercy. Before each new tape leech, Regina asked her to take the Dark One's power away with a simple kiss. She rejected her each time.

Regina grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently after she refused for a final time, "Love is not some delicate little flame!" She screeched, the brooch's pin sliding out of her dress. He hit the ground without a noise, "It doesn't go away in a wind; that's lust! True love scars us, staying with us forever! He does love you, he will always love you, and nothing will ever change that!"
The Mirror heard her heels fade away suddenly, lying forgotten on the tower's floor.

The woman sank to her knees, weeping more openly in the absence of her torturer, "Rumplestiltskin," she murmured, caressing the name with her tongue. The Mirror wished he had had a name at some point, and that Regina had just once spoken it like that.

"Why?" He asked.

The woman started, looking around, "Who's there?"

"Down here, the fashion accessory."

She scooped him up and peered down at him with squinted eyes. He let his face materialize, "Please don't ask me who's the fairest of them all; I get that all the time. Must be the whole "mirror" thing."

"A talking looking glass," she murmured.

If he had shoulders, he would've shrugged, "Talking mirror, enchanted genie, projection of your imagination, whatever you want to see me as."

She considered this a minute, "…you're the reason Rumplestiltskin covers up the mirrors."

"One of the reasons. Regina doesn't need me to see through others' mirrors. Now, back to my question; why are you taking a beating for Rumplestiltskin if you think he doesn't love you?"

She studied him for a moment and he sighed.

"I'm not being a spy right now, I'm just wondering."

She still didn't fess up immediately, blue eyes sizing him up as if she could tell if he were lying or not, "…he does love me," she finally said, "Or else the kiss wouldn't have even almost worked. He's…holding on to something though, his power maybe…" she shook her head, "Regina tried to trick me the first time. I don't know why she wants him powerless but this," she gestured weakly around the tower, "Makes me think it's not an honorable reason."

"You'd rather endure torture than have him defenseless?" He clarified.

She bowed her head, "…I love him."

Three words. Three monosyllabic words. And yet they cut into the Mirror. This woman, this lovely strong woman, would do anything for the man she loved.

"I'll be right back." The Mirror said quickly and the woman stared at him in confusion.

It was hard for him to materialize anywhere Regina wasn't, due to his cursed wish. Staying with the woman hadn't been too tiresome, since he was still in the same building. Going all the way to the Dark Castle? He was already exhausted and he hadn't even found a portal yet.

He finally found a small uncovered mirror inside of the cabinet of Rumplestiltskin's favorite pieces of his collection. He glanced around for the imp, seeing each of his greatest treasures set on full display. King Arthur's sword. The Golden Fleece. King Triton's trident. …the Holy Grail was missing, though, and in its stead was a simple porcelain chipped cup.

Rumplestiltskin started to pass through the room, pausing beside the chipped cup. A finger gently traced the imperfection.
"I'm sorry, Belle," he said in a voice just above a whisper, and then continued on his way.

There was no doubt in the Mirror's mind; the woman in the tower was Belle, and Rumplestiltskin loved her back. The thought of their romance getting the happily ever after after his never did, that in the case of the faithful woman who was being tortured to protect her lover it was reciprocated, was enough to make the Mirror's mind up. And the strange thing? He hardly thought twice about betraying his lovely Regina.

III

Mr. Gold had to say, even though science had been pitched to him as something greater than magic, technology left a lot to be desired. He wouldn't be practically begging a machine to work just to read over a contract, for one thing. No, he could just summon it and it would appear without a thought or the inability to get past the logo screen.

He briefly considered chucking it out the window so it would die gruesomely for not cooperating with his desires. It was his servant, there to do his bidding. Did he not replace unruly or unwilling underlings when he tired of them, knowing there were dozens more he could choose from?

He was Rumplemotherfuckingstiltskin, for god's sake! He should not have to put up with this!

"Download too much dwarf porn?"

He glared at the doorway, Kit leaning against the frame as if she needed permission to enter his office. Acknowledging her presence seemed to work just as well, and she strode towards him, "You do realize that when they say you've won something you usually haven't."

"I didn't do anything to it," he muttered, "It just won't turn on."

"Nothing you'd admit to," she countered, glancing at the screen, "...I could take a crack at it, if you want me to."

Mr. Gold raised an eyebrow, then rose, allowing her the desk chair and the desktop computer. Kit plopped down, immediately restarting and pressing at a row of buttons Mr. Gold usually didn't bother with.

"Best bet's a system restore for now," she said simply, "I can run diagnostics later when you have the time, but it's a nice little band-aid until I dig up the real issue."

Mr. Gold was impressed, "You know about computer problems?"

"Yup," she sat back as a loading bar popped up, biting on her nail, "It's a hobby of mine."

"Fixing computers?"

"Hacking computers," she corrected, "Learning how to deal with problems is a bonus."

This intrigued Mr. Gold, "So if you wanted to know something..."

Kit snorted, "Please. Any keystroke you've put into this I could pull up; every site, every document, even if you think you've erased your cookies and emptied your recycle bin. It's really friggin' hard to completely clear everything out of a computer." She grinned at him, "If you've got any deep dark secrets, better tell me now."

Mr. Gold smirked, "Nothing I wouldn't say to your face." His distrust of leaving a trail meant his
computer was relatively clean; maybe an odd deal here or there he didn't want declared to the town (such as the one he was trying to get at), but nothing greater than that.

Within a few minutes, Kit had successfully gotten past the logo to the log-on screen, "Password?"

"Not a chance," he gestured and she got out of the chair.

She bit her lip, hesitating from departing.

"Thank you," Mr. Gold said.

"No problem," she shifted her weight, "So I was listening to Mrs. G's truck today, and it sounds like the belt's got problems."

He frowned, "Alright, well, I'll take it in then."

"To Tillman?" He nodded. "He'll rip you off, especially now that he's got Thing 1 and Thing 2 to worry about," she folded her arms, "I could look at it tomorrow, see if that's the case."

"You know about cars, too?" She nodded. He looked at her skeptically, "You're not even old enough to drive."

"Doesn't mean I can't take a car apart and put it back together in my sleep."

Mr. Gold pursed his lips thoughtfully, "Seeing as you don't have school tomorrow… I don't see the harm."

Kit grinned. It beat washing windows or anything else he might come up with.

Belle strolled into the kitchen that night proud as a peacock, holding something behind her back. Mr. Gold's danger senses were tingling.

"You owe me a date," she declared.

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "Is that so?"

She nodded, then tossed a manila envelope onto the counter. He warily opened it.

Xeroxed snapshots of Mary Margaret and David Nolan, kissing, holding hands and generally looking in love.

"How did you…?" He trailed off.

"Date night!" She demanded, hopping up and down, "Date night, date night, date night!"

"Belle," he began and her spirits immediately dampened, "We have an alcoholic thief in our house. Do you really want to leave her alone for any length of time?"

Belle glared at him, "We had a deal…"

"And I will make good on that deal, believe me," he smiled, "Wouldn't you rather go out on Valentine's Day, with a reservation at Tony's?"

Belle narrowed her eyes at him, "You're bribing me."

"Only a little," he admitted.
She started twirling the discarded envelope around with her finger, "A normal husband would do two dates…"

"A normal husband goes on two dates a year with his wife," he shrugged, "We may not do the whole public thing, but I certainly enjoy our weekends in the cabin."

Belle sighed, accepting that she wouldn't change his mind. Tonight.

"How was your day with Kit?" He changed the subject, "She seemed to be in an amenable mood when I saw her."

"Pretty good, except for the fact she started hitting on Jefferson."

"Jefferson?" Mr. Gold echoed. She nodded, "Wonder what went on there."

She shrugged, "I'm trying not to read too much into it; Snow slept with Dr. Frankenstein and Red Riding Hood flirts with one of Cinderella's mice. Might just be a Storybrooke circumstance."

"Or maybe it's because the guy wears eyeliner better than I do, and that gets me hot and bothered."

Kit strode into the kitchen, cuddling Figaro to her chest. The kitten seemed perfectly content with being held, rubbing his face against her collarbone. Belle straightened, worried that the conversation might make Kit ask questions about code names or something.

Mr. Gold glowered, "You're fourteen. You shouldn't know what "hot and bothered" means."

"Well, I do, and he does," Kit kissed Figaro's head before setting him down. Figaro looked confused as to why he was suddenly on the floor, then followed after her, "We're going to get married and have twins. Jessie and James."

"And did you inform Jefferson of this when you spoke to him today?" Mr. Gold queried.

"I would've," Kit shot a glare at Belle, "But she dragged me away."

"In four more years I will not care about you going after older men," Belle assured her, following her into the kitchen, "But right now, I do."

"Jesus, what is up with you two and underage laws?" Kit pulled out a pot and started filling it with water, "It's about mental age, not physical."

"Well then you've got another nine years to tack on until you're eighteen," Mr. Gold jeered. Kit scratched at her face using only one finger, as if that would fool him as to her intention.

Belle reached up into the cabinet and pulled out the container of spaghetti, "Are you going to stand there useless and critical, or are you going to help us?"

Mr. Gold considered the ultimatum, "I was just going to stand here being useless and critical…"

He said, then started for another pot, "But then I remembered how your meat sauce could off-put a goat's appetite…"

III

Mr. Gold was starting to see why Belle had loved to just sit and watch him in his tower, or at his wheel. There was something absolutely consuming about witnessing someone at their craft, staring as they went about their work as if it were the easiest thing in the world when it would take another person hours of fumbling around to achieve half of their success. Katja had followed in
Rumplestiltskin's footsteps; deal-making, magic, all things he excelled at due to his curse. But now, he was the one with the elementary education and she with a Master's at Being Completely Skillful.

"Seriously, I'm not going to rip the brakes out or something," Kit grumbled as she caught him watching her from the porch, "If it was your car, maybe, but not Mrs. G. She's actually nice to me."

On cue, the black Cadillac pulled up and Belle hopped out with a paper bag and a drink carrier. She held them up in the air like trophies, "I come baring sustenance."

"Hallelujah," Kit said, wiping her hands off and following Belle up the walkway.

She hadn't worn any of her new clothes yet, he had noticed, choosing what she referred to as a "wife beater" and her jacket with a pair of old ratty jeans. He supposed it was best for working on a car, but he still wanted to see what she had picked out. Kit perched herself on the railing.

"So luckily it isn't the timing belt; it's just one of the drive belts," she explained as Belle doled out grilled cheese sandwiches and drinks, "When was the last time you changed the oil?"

Gold tried to summon a memory of having the oil changed. He couldn't. "It's been awhile."

"I should probably do that too, then, for both the cars."

Belle took her seat beside Mr. Gold on the porch swing, "How do you know so much about cars?"

Kit shrugged, "I picked it up," she bit into her sandwich, "That's the great thing about not having parents; you get to wander around a lot. I pay attention, I watch…and not in a pervy way like Mr. Pimp over there," she pointed an accusatory finger at Mr. Gold.

He brushed it off, sipping at his tea.

"Do you even know how to drive?" Belle asked, tilting her head.

"Yeah. Cars, boats, trains, motorcycles, four-wheelers, jet skis, semis… I've only done the flight simulator stuff, but I think I could fly a plane. Too bad Storybrooke doesn't have any of those lying around," she mused.

The Golds openly gawked at her.

"…you hack computers, know cars inside out, can operate pretty much everything with a wheel… Anything else I should know about?" Mr. Gold joked.

"I've got a black belt in jiu jitsu," Kit offered, continuing on her sandwich as she thought, "Know five languages; Russian, Spanish, German, Japanese, Latin…oh and English, so I guess that's six. Can't even count how many weapons I've been trained in… I've got a knack for explosions. Can decipher pretty much any code. And I've got this weird thing where no matter how injured I get, I don't die. It's like I'm immortal or something," she finished off her sandwich, "Then there's the usual thief stuff like picking locks and disarming security cameras and knowing how to dispose of evidence without a trace of a crime. If you need to get rid of a dead body, Gold, I am really good at that."

The couple was struck speechless, giving Kit time to chug her soda. Mr. Gold cleared his throat, "I imagine school bores you to death, then."

"You have no idea," she set her trash down and swiveled off the railing, hopping down onto the
lawn, "Sometimes I learn something new, like how awesome hydrochloric acid is, but it's usually pretty dang tedious. Especially English. Like seriously, I've been speaking it my whole life, I'm pretty sure I know it by now," she returned to the truck, calling over her shoulder, "If you can get me a new belt and a car jack, that'd be peachy!"

Mr. and Mrs. Gold exchanged a glance.

"…Regina wasn't kidding when she said she was going to use her as a weapon," Mr. Gold muttered, "She's one extreme cause away from being a terrorist."

"She's like a tiny Lisbeth Salander," Belle murmured, staring at Kit as she propped the hood back up, "Minus the tattoos and multiple piercings."

"Maid… Why did I waste my favor on her cleaning when she could've been making me a bomb, or hacking Regina's computer?"

Belle stood back up, "I'm going to go get her that belt, then, before I head back to the shop."

"I should probably do something productive, like not pissing Kit off."

She paused on the first step, before glancing back at him with a playful grin, "You might want to stay within reach of the telephone."

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "Oh? And why would I want to do that?"

"The shop's been particularly slow today," she said, casually descending the steps. She smirked, "I might get bored and need you to…entertain me."

"Oh…" He rose to his feet, "Well whatever you need, dearie."

"Guys, please, chill out on the horny teenager crap," Kit snapped, "Either get a room or shut up."

Getting a room sounded like an excellent idea, Mr. Gold thought. A back room.

III

"…Miss Ginger, I really don't have time for more complaints about working conditions. The air temperature is not one of my areas…"

"Scintillating," Emma muttered before taking a seat next to Sidney, "Been like this all day?"

"One dull conversation after the next," he sighed, "No wonder she's so on edge; half the town calls her daily just to complain."

"Maybe that's how she knows everything…" Emma remarked, prepared for another long, dull conversation.

They got something else as Regina dialed a number.

"…make it quick, you're busy? What on earth could you be busy with if you're answering your home phone? …you're serious? My god! Then she's…in the shop?! …that's just unprofessional. Anyway I just wanted to call to confirm our meeting… No I do not want to join in you sick bastard! Don't you dare take her off hol-" Regina let out a low growl, cut off presumably by being put on hold herself.

Emma and Sidney exchanged a "what the hell" glance.
"Yes hello, Miss French, your husband is being particularly… No, I don't want to "jump in" when you get to the castle, or anywhere! …I'm starting to see why they call you the Harlot of Hell. Gold, all I want is a confirmation- You two are disgusting… No, I'm not jealous, of any aspect of your lives… For the last time you perverts I AM NOT DOING A THREESOME PHONE SEX ROLEPLAY WITH YOU TWO! Now, I'll be at Access Road Twenty Three tonight with the rest of your payment in cash, either show up or not Gold!" She slammed the phone back down into its cradle and groaned, "I need to start dealing with those imps after a drink…maybe two."

Emma clicked the recording off, "Did you hear that? She's meeting Gold for some trade-off tonight."

Sidney stared at her, "That's what stuck out to you about the conversation? Not the invitation to a ménage a trois?"

"Hey, it's their business," Emma insisted, raising her hands, "Personally after the bruises I've seen it's probably safer for them to do it over the phone."

Kit was, for one, outraged that Mr. Gold wasn't coming home for dinner.

"I did his man work, I tidied the house, I made a decent meal I didn't even burn, and this is how he repays me?!" She yelled, calling him profane names that made Belle embarrassed she heard them.

"It's not like he's trying to offend you, Kit," Belle said as she dished herself up some meatloaf, "He's a busy man."

"And I'm a busy girl, but we all need some anchors to keep us from drifting off into chaos," Kit scooped up some salad in perhaps the moodiest way Belle had ever seen anyone put food on their plate, "Dinnertime is sacred, dammit, so he needs to get his ass home already so we can pretend we're a family."

Belle stopped, fork half raised to her mouth. Kit looked like a deer in the headlights as she realized her slip. Belle grinned.

"You said the "f" word," she sang playfully.

"I didn't mean it," Kit protested half-heartedly, stabbing at her lettuce, "And if he had showed up on time, I would've never said it."

Belle knew better than to further antagonize Kit; it would only drive down the exposed underbelly that she was finally starting to show. Still, she ate dinner with a little glowing ball of happiness in her chest as Kit continued to berate Mr. Gold and declaring that he was going to starve for this grievance.

The front door opened later that evening, and Belle glanced up from her book, curled into her reading chair. It was funny how she could tell from the heaviness of his cane falls that there was something weighing on him. He peered into the living room and she set "The Vow" down. She patted her lap gently and he obliged, curling up at her feet. He rested his cheek on her thigh and she stroked his hair, fingers grazing his jaw as she swept it back from his face.

"She's walking into a trap," he murmured, "She's walking straight into Regina's trap and there is nothing I can do to stop her."

"Failure's a good teacher," Belle observed, "It's better if she falls now over some small conspiracy theory than when all of our lives are at risk."
"Doesn't make it any easier to watch. She's going to make a fool of herself, and it's that damn Mirror's fault."

"Hey now, don't talk about Sidney that way," Belle scolded.

Mr. Gold growled, "I can't even talk negatively about him without you getting defensive…"

"And understandably so." She loosened his tie, "Eternal gratitude aside, if you were in his place and I was Regina, then you'd do the same exact thing to make me happy."

"Yeah, but you wouldn't appreciate it. You'd just chastise me about toying with people like I toy with words or something." he frowned, "Unless you actually were Regina, then I probably wouldn't love you. Unless I was the Mirror."

"You're thinking too much about the analogy," she warned, slipping her hand under his collar, "Sidney's a victim, that's all there is to it."

"Are you my victim?" Mr. Gold inquired, practically melting as she rubbed small circles into his sore neck muscles.

Belle hemmed, "…nope, pretty sure you're mine."

"And I am fine with that."

Mr. Gold closed his eyes, puddy in Belle's hand as she massaged his neck, having to move back over the shirt and overcoat to work on his shoulders. He rolled over so he was face down in her lap, giving Belle better access. He let out a soft moan and Belle giggled, giving the spot that triggered his reaction special attention.

"Yes…right there…scratch it please…oh god yes…"

Belle snickered, attacking the itchy spot. He arched into her like a cat, giving a sound that was close to someone dying of happiness.

"That's good…now, spread your legs for him and you hold on to either side of her hip. Improvise your line, but make sure it's really steamy and dominating. We're going for two people madly in love with control issues."

"KIT!" Belle screeched.

Mr. Gold's head jerked up and he whipped around to see the little troublemaker standing in the doorway, grinning like a Cheshire cat. Yet, because he was an older male, he was labeled the pervert…

"Did you hear that scream, Kit?" He asked, reaching for his cane to get back up, "That's the cry of an beautiful innocent moment being murdered."

"Please. I haven't believed in innocence since I was eight. Now chop chop," Kit snapped her fingers, "Time to make a baby."

"Kit!" Belle flushed scarlet.

"What? If you two are determined to create one au naturale, you gotta get goin'. Figure out when you're ovulating. Warm those swimmers up for the big race. Let's go go go!" She pointed up in the general direction of their bedroom.
"Go to bed, Kit," Mr. Gold said.

"Only if you two do the same," she insisted, but did leave them be.

He turned to see Belle covering her face, curled up as though that would help her hide.

"This is why we have to wait until she's gone," he said simply.

III

"Where's my list?"

Mr. Gold glanced up from pouring a cup of coffee. It was a Sunday, yet Kit didn't seem to be able to sleep past eight. He had no idea how late she stayed up but he was sure she wasn't getting a healthy amount of rest; often he could still see the light of her laptop screen coming from underneath her door at three in the morning. He turned back to his coffee.

"No list today, dearie. I thought you'd want a change of pace."

"Are you pissed that I didn't scrub the toilet? It looked clean enough to me, and that long-handed scrubber seems a little sketchy…"

"No, I'm just sick of having a shitty maid," he insisted with a smirk.

Kit snickered, "So, day off?"

"Not quite. I still have your servitude for twenty-four hours," he gestured towards the pot of coffee. Kit nodded, and he got down a second mug, "I was wondering if you'd like to help me in the shop today."

She stared at him in that condescending teenage way he had become familiar with over the past couple of weeks, "Making the thief work the store she stole from? Brilliant plan, Mr. Pimp."

"It's an exercise of trust," he said, pouring another cup and giving it to her. She got off the stool and made a bee-line for the refrigerator.

"Can't we just take turns falling and catching each other and call it good?" She grabbed the creamer and returned to her perch. Mr. Gold watched as she poured nearly as much creamer into the coffee as the actual amount of coffee in the mug, then swirled it around, "Dunno how good I'll do, but it can't be worse than my cooking."

"No it really can't," he agreed and she shot him a glare, trying not to smile.

Kit downed the coffee and went to shower, while Belle awoke and came down to investigate the morning routine.

"...I didn't hear any screaming, cursing or blenders," she said suspiciously, Figaro rubbing up against her leg. She reached down to pet him and scratch his ears, "Did you kill her?"

"No, we had a very civil conversation over coffee about today's plans."

"...Rumplestiltskin, we cannot start killing people here! We are not above the law, and we were the last people seen with her!"

"I didn't kill her!"
"I am not eating any meat today that comes from you!"

"I'm not dead; I just went to take a shower!"

They both turned as Kit appeared in the doorway, and Mr. Gold's breath caught in his throat. She was only wearing a hint of eyeliner today, for starters, hair pulled back into a loose ponytail. Though the sleeves were fishnet, the rose-and-thorns design of the shirt was quite tasteful, and didn't cling to her body. Her jeans were faded gray denim, without chains or rips, and complimented her petite frame. She still wore her old boots, but they seemed considerably diminutive now that long pantslegs covered the fact they went up to her knees.

She was still obviously Kit…but she no longer appeared to be a streetwalker of the night, or Ruby's younger sister. She squirmed at Mr. Gold's gaze.

"What?"

He smiled faintly, eyeing the black ribbon choker necklace with a tiny red rose on it, "Nothing, it's just…" He met her eyes, "You're beautiful."

Kit's face twisted up in confusion, her mouth opening but having no idea how to respond. She glanced away and then back at him, looked ready to make a snide comment about what he said, then stopped herself. She flushed, and bowed her head shyly.

"Thanks."

With a heavy heart Mr. Gold realized that this was the reaction of a girl who had never had a man call her "beautiful". It was one thing for someone of the opposite gender to call a woman "hot" or "cute" or "sexy", but to be called "beautiful"…it was a true compliment. Even if it was a simple acknowledgement of a young lady's beauty as he had done, it still hit home.

"Come on now, we're running late," he insisted, ushering her out of the kitchen.

"But you're the boss, how can we be late?"

"I don't make exceptions for myself when it comes to timeliness," he paused to hug and kiss Belle, who held onto him as he went to pull away.

"I really hope we have a girl."

Mr. Gold smiled, taking it as an apology for her latest stunt with the threat of birth control.

"Can I drive?"

"Absolutely not," he stated, pulling away from Belle.

"Why the heck not? Licensing is just the government's way of controlling people."

"No, it's for keeping dumbasses from killing us with thousands of tons of steel going at high speeds. Now get in the car's passenger seat before I leave you here to organize books or something."

Belle smiled, watching the two of them leave bickering like a father and daughter.

III

Today was a victory for Regina Mills. She had successfully pulled off her anti-conspiracy plan and
made Miss Swan look like an utter fool, working her man puppet perfectly. Now that Miss Swan was dealt with for now…she could focus on another pressing issue.

When she opened the door, she was assaulted with the strumming of a ukulele and someone singing loud and off-key.

"GOLD GETS ALL DEM BI-ITCHES, GOLD GETS ALL DEM BI-ITCHES. FRENCH, SWAN, MILLS, LUCAS, GLASS, GOLD GETS ALL DEM BI-I-I-TCHES!"

Regina cringed, both at the lyrics and the horrible musical composition. Kit paused as she noticed the mayor.

"The hell you want, beotch?"

"Kit."

The girl jumped down from the counter and went to go put the instrument away as Mr. Gold appeared, glaring at her, "That is not how you greet customers…"

"What if she's not a customer, just someone here to bug you?"

"Then you call her Mayor Mills," he made a shooing gesture at the girl and she huffed, retreating to the back room to give them some semblance of privacy.

"If you're here about Belle and I's proposition, that was strictly an over-the-phone deal," he stated, "This may put me at odds with the rest of the male population, but I have no desire to be with another woman besides my wife, especially not you."

Regina's upper lip twitched as she fought down a snarl, then approached Mr. Gold, "What are you doing with her?" She tilted her head to indicate the currently absent Kit.

Mr. Gold sighed, drumming his fingers on the handle of his cane, "You know I am getting awfully tired of these insinuations… If I were a woman and she were a boy there wouldn't be nearly as much grief, chalk ing it up to being maternal and nurturing."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," she planted her hands on the counter, arms stretched as if she were posing, "Why are you trying to build a bridge with Katja?"

She was always posing though; so aware of how her every move was being watched by him. He glanced over her as though studying her body language but really, he knew she was nervous. He looked into her eyes and gave his best innocent smile.

"Just trying to help out an old friend."

"You don't have friends," she said dismissively, tapping a red-painted talon against the glass, "No, I think you figured out just how valuable that little kitten is and now you're trying to bribe your way into her favor."

"You think it's that easy to gain her as an ally? Give her some new clothes, show her a little discipline and I'll have her eating out of my hand? If it were that easy..." He gave a casual shrug, "She wouldn't be much of an alliance, turning her coat easily for whoever signs the fatter paycheck."

"Wasn't that the point of cutting her ties?" Regina insisted, "Making it so that I could slip in and bring her to my side?"
Mr. Gold flicked open one of the cases, "...have you ever seen a werecat in love, Your Majesty?"

Regina blinked, thinking the question was slightly off-topic, "No, can't say that I have."

"It's poignant, really. The stuff of Greek tragedy," he picked something up, taking it out and closing the case, "They don't live in packs or villages, monogamous and only caring for one child at a time... What few social bonds they have are extremely tight, intense and intimate to a degree no mere mortal could ever fathom."

He set down a small velvet case in front of her, "It's another factor in why they died out; once they fall into true love, it is impossible for them to function without their mate or child. If their loved one dies for some reason, most werecats will commit suicide minutes after they pass. Such is the bond they share that they know they will never find another love, and life ceases to have meaning."

"...are you saying that Katja is in love with you?" Regina murmured.

Mr. Gold was silent for a minute, fingers running over the velvet, "Not nearly that bad, but bad enough," he felt along the crack of the box, "The loyalty of a werecat transcends all curses, all spells; you could have all of their lives and their still-beating heart in your hands and they still won't turn against their loved ones. That is the value of that emotion to them."

He opened the case and inside was a small teardrop of an emerald hanging from a leather string. Regina stared at it, the item making her feel she should know what it is, but she couldn't place it.

"Much as you can't keep Mary Margaret from loving David... Much as you couldn't make Sheriff Graham love you and Sidney bows to your every whim... Katja will always be Katja, and good luck trying to manipulate her," he slammed the box shut.

Regina straightened, flicking her hair back with an irritated shake of her head, "I don't care how she's bonded to you; she doesn't remember you, and I've put up too many walls for your laughable attempts to overcome," she started back out the way she came, "You won't be able to use her against me, Rumple," she called over her shoulder before she let the door swing shut.

"No, no I won't," he agreed softly. Yes, his original plan in securing a werecat kitten had been to gain her trust to use her... but he had long ago given up on any hope she could be persuaded to do anything she didn't want to do.

If Regina kept ticking her off, though, she might get the claws without him having to lift a finger.

The curtain drew back and he glanced over, "Ready to close up?"

Kit's amber eyes were unreadable, "Yeah..."

Perhaps he and Regina should've been more careful, with Kit being so near, "Why don't you get in the car while I lock up, alright?"

She nodded, and then went out the side door. An uneasy feeling gathered in the pit of his stomach, but he just went about turning off lights and locking things up. If Regina and him wanted to talk about the love of werecats, then they could; it would just sound like rubbish to her. Unless she wasn't as cursed as he believed. Perhaps he had been spending too much time with her, corroding the curse inside of her mind. She was acting more like Katja than Kit now...

When he went to join her, he noticed that she was in the driver's seat. He frowned, knocking on the window, "Very funny, Kit, now out," he tried the handle, but it was locked.
"I'm taking you for a drive," she declared, "Now shut up and ride."

He could try to get her out of the driver's seat; he had managed to strap her into a strait-jacket, after all. But a part of him was insanely curious about what she was up to, so he didn't stand his ground as firmly as he ought to have. She actually wasn't too bad of a driver.

She took him out towards the beach, driving past the cannery and ruins of Henry's old castle. She drove until there was nowhere to park, and only a grassy hill to head towards. He followed her as she trudged up the hill, the grass as tall as her hips.

"It's cold," he muttered.

"Aw, quit your bitchin'." She went to the top of the hill and promptly sat down, smoothing the grass down around her. Mr. Gold stood and watched her, "C'mon, now, I'm not gonna flatten it for you too."

"If I knew we were going to be camping, I would've worn more suitable clothes," he complained, before smoothing out his own area beside her.

They lay down on their backs, staring up at the sky. Mr. Gold took in a deep breath and exhaled at the sight.

"You can really see the stars out here," he murmured.

Kit nodded, "I've been all around Storybrooke but here, right by the water… that's where they're the brightest. They're not blocked by buildings or even trees. They're… pure," she laughed at herself, "That sounds silly, huh?"

He shook his head, "Not really."

They lay for a few minutes, watching the sky as though waiting for fireworks. There were no sounds this far away; no cars driving past, or voices except for their own. He felt truly isolated, as though he had been closed out of the village and into his own purgatory with Kit. It was an oddly peaceful moment.

"My… mom told me when I was little that… each star is a door… to another world," she said, her words stilted, "Like how Peter Pan said "second star to the right and straight on 'til morning"? But… that means there's millions of them, all a little different than ours. We could have other selves there too I bet, like evil twins, or us as the other gender, or as a unicorn or something. Infinite possibilities."

Mr. Gold nodded, "I think you're on to something, Miss Pettigrew."

She turned her head to stare at him, her eyes clearly indicating they had entered a no-tolerance-of-bull-crap mode, "… why did you want me?"

Mr. Gold turned to look at her, feeling his heart tumbling out until it was on his sleeve, "Because I saw you that day, when you came out of the classroom… And something spoke to me. Something insisted that here was a precious life being put before me and that I needed to help you… or you'd be lost forever."

"Why do you care what happens to me?" She breathed. Mr. Gold summoned up what little courage he had and used it.

"Because you are a beautiful, intelligent, confident young lady and one day, with whatever you
decide to do, you will change the world. I could see that…but I could also see that you didn't see it, and that no one else saw it. So I knew no matter how others saw the relationship, no matter what you did to try and stop me, no matter my own personal feelings or Rose's… I had to save that light inside of you, before the world smothered it forever."

Kit's amber eyes went glossy, her cheek pressed against the ground as she stared at him. When she spoke, it sounded as though she were about to cry, "...I've never brought anyone out here... I've never told anyone about the stars... But I thought you'd understand."

"I think I do," he murmured, "...thank you."

A couple of tears did spill out then, "I'm so lost sometimes... So fucking alone... So I drink, because when I drink I'm someone else. When I'm drunk I know I don't belong here, and that I'm not Kit, and that nothing's right. But it's the only time I really feel like myself, yanno? That this haze I've been living under is lifted, and that this giant lie is gone, and all I want to do is drink a glass of milk and curl up in front of a fireplace and play with a little golden ball." She was crying now, but Mr. Gold was paralyzed, unable to reach out and touch her, "You must think I'm a fucking psycho..."

"I don't think that at all...Katja."

She stiffened at the name and he wondered if saying it was a mistake. She bit her lip, "That's my name, when I'm drunk," she whispered, "That's my real name..."

As though sensing dangerous territory, Kit turned away, and they lay there on the hill, staring up at the sky and watching the worlds twinkle thousands of light-years away from where they were. And Mr. Gold wondered which one theirs was.

When they did finally drive home, it was getting close to midnight. They hadn't said more than a few words to each other since he had called her Katja. He parked the car in the driveway, but hesitated at turning the engine off.

"While we're being honest with each other..." He began and she glanced at him, eyeliner lightly smudged from where she had wiped at her tears, "I just want to impart a little wisdom on you. There is nothing sexier to a man than a woman who respects herself. If you treat yourself like you're cheap, everyone else will follow suit."

Kit's lips twitched up, "Is that how Mrs. Gold got a ring on your finger? Respecting herself and acting like a lady?"

He smiled, "It was one of the reasons, yes, but choosing one thing that made me propose is impossible."

Kit smiled back, "Can I do something if you promise not to read too much into it?"

He did not like the sound of that, "...alright, sure."

She leaned towards him and planted her lips on his cheek before drawing back. Mr. Gold blinked in surprise, then frowned at her, "What was that for?"

"That's what you're supposed to do to old men, isn't it? Kiss them on the cheek?" She opened her door, rubbing at her mouth, "You need to shave tomorrow, you're all stubbly."

Mr. Gold smiled softly, turned off the car, and followed her inside, the skin where she had kissed him warm compared to the rest of his face.
"Kay, I'm ready," Kit announced, coming into the dining room with her backpack slung over one shoulder.

Belle glanced up in confusion, "Ready for what?"

Kit bit her lip, "My two weeks are up," she reminded her, "I'm leaving."

Belle could only stare uncomprehendingly at her. She wasn't sure what would happen at the end of two weeks, but she was hoping for some kind of breakthrough, that Kit would realize she was welcome and wanted and they would be a small happy family. She didn't expect Kit to actually leave.

"Alright then," Mr. Gold rose from his seat at the table, "Are you coming with, Rose?"

"I guess." Why on earth was Kit leaving? This wasn't how the story was supposed to go… She numbly followed them to the car, feeling blindsided even though she should've known this was coming.

Belle was horrified when they arrived at Kit's "house".

"She lives in the woods?!" She exclaimed, staring at the tent.

Kit shrugged, "I like it out here," she insisted, before sliding out of the car.

Belle turned to Mr. Gold pleadingly, "You can't honestly allow her to go back to living in a tent in the woods, can you?!"

"You think I'm happy about this?" He murmured, meeting her eyes, "This is what she wants, Belle; we can't change that anymore than I could change your mind when you decided to be with me."

"But…"

"She's wild, dearie. She'll go crazy if she's kept up any longer," he took her hand and squeezed it gently, "She's fine, happy even. And our claim to her has ended." He got out of the car and she followed.

Kit stood a couple of feet from the car, braced for the goodbyes. She went for the harder one first, hugging Belle tightly.

"I'm gonna miss you, Mrs. G," she murmured.

Belle fought back her tears, chin quivering as the girl let go, "You're always welcome, Kit. Anything you need, any time at all…"

"I know," she said softly, avoiding Belle's eyes.

She then turned to the easier one, "You, on the other hand, I'm not going to miss at all. Not even a little."

Mr. Gold smirked, "The feeling's mutual, trust me. You're an insufferable little brat, you know that?"

"Yeah, well, you aren't exactly a walk in the park either, Gramps. Now I can actually talk how I want, dress how I want and do what I want."
"And I can have sex without a personal cheerleader goading me on."

Kit shuddered, walking backwards, "Just try to save some spots clean so people can actually not have to worry about what's been done where they sit."

"Not a chance," he grinned. He couldn't help but add, "I love you Kit!"

"Stick that cane up your d-hole and screw yourself, Gold!"

He beamed at Belle, "See? She says she loves me too," he said proudly.

And just like that, Kit was out of their lives again. Ever coming, ever going, like a stray cat fed on the back porch.

**III**

In the past month or so since Belle's departure, Rumplestiltskin had spun more gold than he had ever spun before. Deals were rare, unable to put his heart into them. He barely ate, and he avoided sleep since it brought visions of her. If Regina had wanted to break him, it had worked; he simply could not get himself to function again, something irreplaceable missing in his clockwork.

He tried to convince himself that Sir Maurice was to blame; he was her father, he shouldn't have shut her out like that, should have seen that Belle was too pure for even him to defile. But every beat of his heart, every pair of steps he took, every inhale and exhale, told him the truth. Your fault. Your fault. Belle's dead. Your fault.

"Rumplestiltskin."

The wheel paused and he glanced towards the door, curious about this hallucination. There was obviously no one in the room but himself, and it had been a male voice so he wasn't imagining her…

"Rumplestiltskin," he repeated, and it sounded like it was coming from the mirror. The one he had shouted at that night.

He dropped his thread and approached it with balled up fists. He had covered it again after that night, his pride still holding on to its shriveled husk in not wanting Regina to see him like this. Without thinking, he snatched the sheet and ripped it off.

Honestly he wasn't expecting anything, so when he saw a disembodied head, it sort of threw him for a loop. He scowled.

"What do you want? Here to gloat? Rub it in my face that her blood is on my hands? It won't change anything for Her Majesty; I'm still more powerful than her, she lost."

"Getting your exercise jumping to conclusions?" The Mirror asked, "I'm not here for Regina's sake; I'm here for Belle's."

How dare he speak her name… Rumplestiltskin wanted to smash the Mirror just for being so presumptuous. Instead, he simply narrowed his eyes.

"The Queen lied to you," The Mirror continued, "Belle's alive."

"Don't you dare try and beguile me with your tricks!" Rumplestiltskin snarled, pointing a wicked finger at the Mirror, "I will not fall for them! Dead is dead, and no magic can fix that!"
The Mirror didn't look fearful, or repentant, or even sinisterly pleased. He just looked irritated; as if Rumplestiltskin was accusing him of eating the last cookie in the jar though clearly he couldn't have, being a spiritual entity and all.

"…listen, it's hard enough to sustain my connection here without Her Majesty, so I'm not going to waste my time arguing with you over the state of whether your maid's heart still beats. Belle is alive, in the highest room in the tallest tower of Regina's palace, but who knows how long that will be true. I'm going to give you one more thing before I leave you to your angst; do with it as you wish."

The image of the Mirror faded, replaced by a much darker one. Rumplestiltskin peered at it, stepping closer to get a better look. It was at an odd angle, as if being held. The image shuddered as the holder shivered, and a knife went through Rumplestiltskin as he gazed into his true love's bright blue eyes.

"Please come back, Mirror," Her voice was coarse as sand, "Please…you're the only one I have to talk to." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Her matted hair. Her bruised and blistered body. The way her bones jutted out as though she were a skeleton wearing a tight-fitting skin. Rumplestiltskin could sense illusionary magic…but this felt as real as the cold that hung in the Dark Castle's corridors. The easy thing would be to pretend that it was just a trick, to insist the Evil Queen was just trying to ensnare him in a trap. The brave thing, the hard thing, would be to believe, because then he would have to go and rescue her and chance that he was wrong.

Did Belle not deserve him being brave for her? After what he had done to her? Yes, Regina may laugh if she caught him chasing a dream…but what would the cost of not believing be?

Rumplestiltskin had vanished by the time the image faded, appearing just outside the gates of Regina's castle. He glanced up at the tallest tower, and rage began to fuel his blood like fire.
Rumplestiltskin frees Belle from Regina's tower and finally tells her the truth.

Mrs. Gold is enraged by the fact that her husband has decided to repossess his father-in-law's van, and a whole other side of her is revealed.

"Emma, I think Mr. and Mrs. Gold are going to kill each other."

Mary Margaret's statement only caused the young sheriff to pause a second, leaning back in her desk's chair and playing with the phone cord, "You sure? Because from what I hear they're probably just having sex."

"Oh I'm sure," she insisted, sounding frantic, "They're out here on Front Street, going on their second hour of yelling at each other."

"So they're arguing in public," she rolled her eyes, "Disturbance of the peace maybe, but murderous intent sounds a bit much."

"They both have concealed weapons permits and he just insulted her father. This could turn deadly at any minute now."

Emma sighed. Unfortunately even something as petty as a loud argument in public fell under her jurisdiction, "I'll be right over."

So she walked to Front Street, badge on her hip and authority on her face.

She could hear their voices a block away, a shrill cry and a snarling bark. Half of Storybrooke lined the sidewalk, staring in horror and fascination at the pair. Traffic had ceased to exist as Mr. and Mrs. Gold stood toe-to-toe in the middle of the street, a white van with a logo stating "Game of Thorns" their backdrop.

Emma sidled up to a distress Mary Margaret, a concerned Ruby, and an impressed Granny.

"It's like if Shakespeare trained a couple of honey badgers how to fight," Ruby murmured.

There was an art to the pair's fight, the way they circled each other, turned and gestured. Pulled back lips and pointed fingers gave the illusion of claws and fangs, bodies tensed and eyes livid. They did not hit each other though; the closest they ever came was a finger poke to the chest or grabbing and turning the other around if they threatened to walk away. Profanity was used sparingly, and names of individuals mentioned were not used. Emma sensed a code of ethics refined by years of marriage and hundreds of fights lurking behind their anger.

"What's this about?" She asked, watching Rose shake her head from side to side as Mr. Gold's lips moved at an ungodly speed, jabbing the air with a finger as though punctuating his words.

"Mr. Gold repo-ed his father-in-law's van," Mary Margaret murmured.
Emma spotted Mr. French near a cart of flowers, staring in dismay at the scene. His arm was in front of a furious Mr. LeFleur, who appeared ready to charge into the argument and rip Mr. Gold's head off, "Well damn, I'd be mad too."

"They've been airing out all their dirty laundry," Ruby said.

"Like how Mr. Gold's apparently spent time behind bars," Mary Margaret offered.

"I think I heard something about how she cut off her ex's legs because he didn't warn her or something..."

"I didn't know he had an estranged son." Emma glanced down to see Regina, sipping on an iced tea and relaxing in a chair she had brought. She glanced up at Emma, "Right now they're on the topic of exes," she informed her, as if she had walked in on Regina watching a movie.

Sociopath...

"Emma!" Dr. Whale slid in between her and Mary Margaret, "So glad you're here! Tell me, who are you betting on?"

"Rose, she's got the moral high ground," Emma said without batting an eyelash. She glanced at him, "You have a gambling permit?"

Dr. Whale shrugged nervously, tucking a notepad back into his coat, "It's just a question."

Mrs. Gold folded her arms and shifted her weight back onto her left foot, eyes squinting in mock curiosity, "You know, you can go on and on about my ex-fiancé, but when it comes to your ex-wife..."

"DON'T YOUDARE TALK ABOUT MILAH!" Mr. Gold's voice hit octaves Emma thought impossible for a guy, knuckles white on his cane as his face turned a hazardous shade of red.

Rose smiled dangerously, "I don't dare, huh?"

"Well, that's my cue," Emma mumbled, shouldering past the safety zone.

"Emma, no!" Ruby exclaimed, but it was too late. She was busy striding towards the couple with her best bounty hunter glare.

They paused and in unison slowly turned to glare at whoever dared interrupt. Their shoulders were tensed up as though ready to pounce, eyes intense enough to burn. For the first time in a long time, Emma froze up, the Shakespearean honey badgers now focused on her.

"Could you guys, um, just...take it inside or something?"

"Certainly, Miss Swan," Mr. Gold seethed through clenched teeth, "We'll wrap it up."

"Thanks," Emma mumbled, before backpedaling to the safety of the crowd.

Mr. Gold glared at Mrs. Gold, "Closing statement, dearie?" He managed to make the endearment sound like a curse.

"Closing statement; you're an asshole," Rose spat, "A heartless, evil asshole. It's not like you don't know what's going on in his life; you nursed me back to health after I gave him a kidney!"

"Closing statement; it's business. I can't favor someone just because they're the loosest sense of
family I've ever heard of."

"Business?!" Rose laughed, "Business would be letting the man sell flowers on one of the biggest holidays of the year to florists!"

"It's not personal, Rose. If you defaulted on a loan I'd do the same thing to you."

For one moment, all of Storybrooke froze. The birds ceased their songs. Factories were still. Regina didn't even finish the last few drops of her tea. Belle's jaw dropped open in slow motion and Mr. Gold's eyes widened with the realization of what he had said. Being the generous soul she was she threw him the lifeline that was the closest thing to rewinding time that anyone could use.

"...what?" She hissed.

Mr. Gold had pride issues, sure, but that wasn't what motivated him. He could not take back words he meant, and he meant them. Of course, it came out all wrong, and he did sound like a heartless evil asshole when he told her that. But he believed in fairness and blind justice; had Belle backed out of a deal with him, he'd collect from her too.

So he straightened, swallowed, and repeated in the firmest tone he could muster, "I said, if it came down to you defaulting on a loan, I would show you no favoritism."

Quiet groans echoed around the gathering, along with a solemn "dude..." from David Nolan. Granny clucked her tongue and shook her head.

As the fact that he didn't plead for forgiveness or even apologize reached her, Rose began to tremble, vibrating like a snarling dog.

"You'd repo on your own wife," she murmured, then louder, "You'd repo on me!"

Rose charged at Mr. Gold and Emma's hand instinctively went to her hip. She was twisting something off of her hand and Mr. Gold held his own out as if to steady a spooked horse.

"Rose, please... Don't..."

"Then repo this!" She flung her engagement ring as hard as she could at him. He cringed as it hit him dead on the forehead and she stormed off, parting the crowd like Moses with the Red Sea.

She stopped near Emma's little group, and each of them feared for their lives. Rose's eyes flicked up, meeting Granny's.

"...I'm going to need a room," she stated.

Granny shook her head, "As long as you need it, hon."

Rose continued on her march, each footstep as loud as a gunshot. Mr. Gold was frozen in place, white as Mary Margaret's natural pallor.

The spell broke and he looked around, lip twitching in a sneer, "Get. Out."

Regardless of the fact it was a street, not one of his businesses, the spectators scattered like roaches in the light, Moe and Gaspard long gone. Emma and Mary Margaret hesitated, watching Mr. Gold as if he'd whip out a pistol and start shooting people in their retreating backs.

"What an awful day for a fight," Mary Margaret murmured sympathetically.
"Hey, he brought this upon himself," Emma insisted, "If he wanted a nice Valentine's Day he wouldn't've gone and pissed her off."

III

Rumplestiltskin had never fashioned himself a romantic hero. Maybe a crusader or a protector of children, but not the prince charming who stormed the castle gates to rescue his true love. Then again, that was before he met Belle.

Waves of malice seemed to roll off his very being as he entered the witch's lair, cloak billowing behind him like the flag of an enemy's army. Guards poured out like ants from a destroyed hill and they were promptly cast aside, slamming into the walls by an unseen force. He knew the lay-out of the castle and did not veer from his path to the highest room in the tallest tower. He mounted each step with purpose, heart throwing itself against his ribcage as it longed to race up to her. But that simply wasn't how a beast retrieved his beauty, with the desperation of a commoner. No, he'd make an entrance, because that's what prince charmings did.

The door flung open and instinctively Belle braced herself, expecting a foul-mooded queen. Maybe she had finally realized she was missing a brooch… The figure stood still though, as if turned to stone by her presence. Belle gazed up, squinting in the light. Hope made her heart jump in her chest.

"…Rumplestiltskin?"

He refused to believe what he was seeing. It couldn't be his Belle, curled up like a dog on the cold ground, ribs jutting out and damaged skin on full display. How could anyone hurt her to this degree? How could someone sink so low they'd damage this perfect porcelain doll?!

"Belle…" He murmured, praying that the woman would look confused and insist that she wasn't her. But there was recognition in those impossible-to-imagine eyes.

He was at her side in an instant, ripping off his cloak and wrapping it around her.

"Oh Belle… Oh Belle…" The words came out as jagged as a sob, "I'm so sorry, Belle. I'm so sorry!"

She shivered as he held her to his chest. Tears of relief spilled out as she felt the familiar protection surround her as warm as any blanket.

When she looked up at him, it wasn't with hate or revulsion as he expected; no resentment for causing this to happen or wariness left over from the last time they spoke. Her eyes were shining as her chin trembled, nothing but adoration and gratefulness to be found. She loved him…she truly loved him.

"You came for me," she croaked.

A few tears of his own slipped out, "Of course I came for you," he murmured, pulling her into his lap and burying his face in her hair, "…I love you."

She rested her head against his shoulder and cried. Talons tender as a baby's breath rubbed her back. He closed his eyes, wanting nothing more than to spirit them away to the Dark Castle…back home.

But then he felt a ridge squirming under her skin, and the fire in his blood ignited again. With a flick of his wrist the tape leeches were banished from her body and Belle shuddered in relief. He
scooped her up as though she were little more than a child and carried her from her prison, down the flight of steps, but not towards the castle gates. Body rigid as steel, he walked fixatedly towards the Evil Queen's chambers.

The alarm had been sounded as the palace was suddenly under siege, defenses pushed aside by some great enemy. Regina paced her bedroom, waiting for the Mirror's report, praying it wasn't who she thought it was. Gods damn it where was the Mirror?!

The doors flew open and Regina found herself suddenly pinned against the wall. She squirmed helplessly, the magic against her much more powerful than what she had in her veins. Regina's eyes widened as she fought the urge to scream, seeing none other than Rumplestiltskin walking in with that little maid girl in his arms.

He set her down on Regina's lounge by the fire, "There you go dearie, warm yourself up." He smoothed her hair down, "Close your eyes; it'll be over in a minute." She stared at him uncomprehendingly and he pulled away from her.

Regina's eyes followed him as he went towards the fireplace, eerily calm as he took an iron poker from its stand.

"Rumple?" Regina asked. He didn't respond, examining the tip, "Rumplestiltskin…"

He turned towards her, head cocking to one side. She was unable to look away from his eyes, dark as sin. There was no compassion; no semblance of humanity left…only a bloodthirsty predator intent on its prey.

There was no hurry to his step, the poker swinging absently in his hand like a noose. Panic seized Regina as she strained against her invisible bonds. She panted and whined, even feeling tears prick her eyes as she recognized the end.

"Rumplestiltskin!" She begged, "Rum-" Her throat tightened as if a hand was clenched around it.

He paused a step or two away from her, raising the poker towards her mouth. She tasted the iron on her lips and an image flooded her mind; of a stuck pig, a spear run through its body from mouth to hind. She stared at him and he smirked, nodding his head in answer to her unspoken question. He pulled the poker back and as he prepared to thrust, Regina realized that she had gambled and lost.

"Rumplestiltskin!"

The pain did not come. The poker was still drawn back. But now the girl was between them, clinging to the beast for dear life.

The sound of his name coming from her lips subdued the animal, bringing some conscious back to his eyes.

"Belle…"

"Don't do this, Rumplestiltskin!" She begged, nearly in tears. Rumplestiltskin bared his teeth, "After what she did to you? I cannot let this stand, Belle, I will not let this stand!"

"Don't give in to your anger," she pleaded, legs shaking with the effort of standing, "Please…"

"And why do you care so much about her?" He growled.
Belle shook her head, "It's not her sake; it's yours," she murmured.

He stared, "…why?"

Her chin quivered, "Because you're not a monster."

The beast within Rumplestiltskin subsided, all shreds of what humanity remained back in his eyes again. He tossed the poker aside reluctantly and picked her frail form up bridal-style. He glared at Regina, who had been too busy observing to really form any thoughts of her own.

"I'm going to let you live because Belle wishes it, and for no other reason," he hissed, "But if you ever touch her again… I will kill you, and nothing will stop me. Do you understand?"

Regina gave a stiff nod.

"Good," he started towards the door, "Rot in hell, then."

The bonds slid off and Regina stumbled, staring after the odd pair. She supposed she should feel grateful that some girl who could barely stand saved her life…but all she felt was humiliated. It was just the sort of thing Snow White would've done.

Belle didn't dare speak, not after denying him his revenge. She hated seeing him like that, like how everyone else saw him… She was surprised when he laid her out on grass. She could've sworn they were just in the palace…

"I'm going to have to touch you," he murmured apologetically. Belle didn't understand; hadn't he already been touching her?

…oh…

She blushed and then nodded her consent.

She cringed as she was exposed to the night air, his fingertips carefully feeling along her body. His eyes stayed focused on her face, even if Belle could scarcely meet his gaze. The embarrassment faded as, bit by bit, her body started to mend under his touch. Belle closed her eyes, sighing softly as he healed her.

"She told me you were dead," Rumplestiltskin said feebly, "That your father sent clerics to cleanse you…"

"I never got that far," Belle remarked, "I just passed the dwarven mines when she found me…"

He withdrew his hands and she opened her eyes, giving a small noise of protest. It was so rare he touched her, and even as intimate as he had just gotten he'd been such a perfect gentleman about it…

"I'm so sorry, Belle," he murmured.

She shook her head, "You didn't know-"

"I told you to leave. I told you I didn't want you anymore, like you were some stray dog I was kicking to the curb," His face twisted in revulsion.

"You were scared."

"Don't do that!" He snapped.
She frowned, "Do what?"

"Forgive me so quickly!" His nails dug into his knees, "You have a right to be angry with me, use it."

"I wasn't angry… I was hurt," she sighed, "I was hurt because you'd rather believe I had some hidden agenda than that I loved you, that you'd prefer a life of solitude and loneliness to letting me in."

Rumplestiltskin glanced down towards the forest floor, face grim, "…we're going to have to walk the rest of the way. I'm too weak to send us directly there."

He wrapped her snugly in the cloak before picking her back up and heading out of the forest at the base of the mountains. Belle rested her head against his chest, too tired to face Rumplestiltskin's impenetrable wall tonight. She might have been healed of her wounds, but she was still weak, starved, and emotionally drained from the whole experience. Besides, Rumplestiltskin was so warm, his steps like a rocking cradle.

"Baelfire," he said suddenly.

Belle peered up at him, "What?"

"His name was Baelfire." His face was strained, as if desperately reigning in his emotions, "He had my eyes and his mother's dark hair. He liked to play with his leather ball, and he was friends with everyone in the village, even after…” He trailed off.

"You became the Dark One," she filled in.

He nodded, "He was the best thing to ever happen to me… More of a man at fourteen than I'll ever hope to be."

Belle did not goad him on when he paused; it was clear from the hunch in his shoulders and the tauntness of his features just talking with someone about Baelfire was difficult.

"The curse took hold and I…changed. Power is intoxicating, Belle, especially when you're used to being weak. Bae wanted his papa back… he wanted me to go with him to a land without magic…” Rumplestiltskin clenched his jaw but, try as he might, the tears came, "I was a coward… and I let him go. I clung to power and lost the only thing that ever mattered to me."

Belle pressed her cheek against his vest, a hand reaching up to hold his trembling shoulder.

He shook his head, "There is nothing I wouldn't do to get him back… I swore I'd never love another until I was with him again… but then you came along."

"You can love more than one person, Rumplestiltskin," Belle murmured.

He shook his head harder, "The more I love you, the further I let you in, the larger the hole you'll leave when you're gone," He had to stop, leaning against a tree as the sobs wracked his body, "Even if you stay, there may come a time that I have to choose…” He hunched over her, holding her even tighter, "And I will choose him, Belle! I will always choose him!"

She reached up, wrapping her arms around his neck and holding him with all her might. He buried his face into her shoulder, his tears cold on her skin.

"Oh Rum…” She murmured. He sniffed, fighting to pull himself together, "I would never ask you
to put your child before me…"

"You're lying," he muttered half-heartedly.

"Am not. The bond of a parent and child is sacred," she pressed her cheek to his hair, "Why do you think it's a matter of "either or"? Why can't you have both of us?"

"Because the gods hate me," he said simply.

She let out a soft laugh and nuzzled his hair, "It's not going to come to that, then. I won't make you choose."

He pulled away from her neck, a glimmer of hope in his dark eyes, "Don't make promises you can't keep."

"I'm not making a promise; I'm warning the future that it better bow to my will."

She was rewarded with a small smile and him starting to hike again.

"…do you know how to get him back?" She asked hesitantly.

Rumplestiltskin frowned, "I've tried for centuries…but I think I have finally found a way."

So he told her about the Dark Curse. He told her about his life as a poor wool spinner with a bad leg. He told her about Cora and Regina, about chasing beans and trying to grow enchanted trees and slippers that slipped away. He told her the good things he had done; he told her about the more numerous bad things he had done. Belle listened to his confessional, not judging but just taking it in, letting him get it off his chest and enjoy having someone to tell after so long.

It was dawn by the time they arrived at the Dark Castle's gates, and Belle was looking forward to curling up in a nice warm bed. Rumplestiltskin balked at the door, though.

"…while I'm being honest and open…" He began tentatively, guilt tugging at his features, "…I might've also turned your ex into a rose."

III

Granny's Bed & Breakfast was more of a staple of a town than an actually profitable business, only one or two bedrooms rented out at a time. It was mostly used for one night stands, extra and intermarital, or for spouses taking a break from each other. In Granny's expansive memory, only Emma Swan and August Booth had ever been true visiting guests.

Currently, the latter was sitting on his bed, curiously listening to the soundtrack down the hall. It had been mostly Beyonce and Adele, with dashes of Taylor Swift, Joan Jett, Rihanna, Kelly Clarkson and other female singers he couldn't name angry at the opposite sex. It was a bad idea to approach any woman so wound up… But August's curiosity got the better of him and he trekked to the lair of the beastette.

"…CARVED MY NAME INTO HIS LEATHER SEEEEEAT!" She crooned along with the song, the door open a crack. He peered inside.

The woman stood in front of the vanity, feet planted as she put make-up on dangerously viciously.

"I TOOK A LOUISVILLE SLUGGER TO BOTH HEADLIGHTS, SLASHED A HOLE IN ALL FOUR TIRES, MAYBE NEXT TIME HE'LL THINK BEFORE HE'S MEAN!" She slammed her
compact down, "Zip me up, Ruby; I'm going to go break some necks."

She jumped when she felt very unfeminine hands guiding the zipper of her dress up her spine. She spun around and August arched an eyebrow.

"Should I be concerned for someone's vehicle?" He asked.

She huffed, jabbing the pause button on her iPod, "No…it's just a good song to scream along to."

Being the "official" author of "Once Upon a Time", he knew what Belle looked like. He still wasn't prepared for her beauty, lovely even in the heat of fury. He knew how her story ended, with her marrying Rumplestiltskin the Beast, but not of her life afterwards. When the Blue Fairy recited the stories he’d need to know in order to tell Emma someday, she had been dodgy on the subject of the Caretaker. If she had done something of importance, the Blue Fairy substituted Rumplestiltskin in her stead.

Still, with that pout on her lips and those pretty blue eyes, he didn't think she could be too different from the Beauty who sacrificed her freedom for her village.

"Marital issues?" He asked.

She frowned, "You already know who I am?"

"No, I just noticed the wedding ring," he said, nodding his head towards her hand.

She glanced down at it and sighed, "He's being a jerk."

"On Valentine's Day?"

"Jerks don't observe holidays," she turned back to the mirror, messing with her hair.

August's eyes grazed over her body, "You're going out anyway?"

"Yup."

"Need an escort?"

"Nope," Belle picked up her eff-me red lipstick and applied it, rubbing her lips together and smacking them, "This is a solo revenge mission, no room for wing women or escorts who will end up dead no matter how harmless the interaction. I could use a shoulder, though."

August glanced at her inquisitively, but shrugged his shoulder towards her. She held onto it, steadying herself as she stepped into a pair of heels that he couldn't fathom how anyone could walk in them.

She smiled at him, dazzling him even after all the beautiful young women he had had, "I don't get to wear very high heels around him… Makes us both feel awkward."

She was adorable, so innocent and trusting. How could she be married to Rumplestiltskin?

There was only one bar-like place in the town of Storybrooke; Jolly Roger's Bar and Grill. It was packed with singles trying to drink away bitter disappointment of a holiday that was all about love. Emma hated the holiday, even when she had been with Neal. Love shouldn't be so loud, a shout to the world. It should be a whisper, which anyone listening would hear.

Dang. One drink and she was waxing philosophy about some commercialized holiday. After two
she might be pondering the meaning of life. Ruby seemed to be the only one actually enjoying herself, Ashley downing booze like water and Mary Margaret simply looking like a beaten puppy.

Without warning, necks started breaking.

It was like some male instinct was activated, their heads turning within seconds towards the windows. Emma caught a glimpse of gold before she got to the door, swinging it open casually. Emma gawked along with everyone else as the quiet polite Rosaline French Gold entered Jolly Roger's looking like a she-wolf on the hunt.

Her dress wasn't immodest…but it certainly wasn't shy. Gold silk cradled her curves, neither putting her body on full display nor hiding it. Sleeveless, it cut just under her collarbone, her hem line at mid-thigh. It may not have been provocative but that, in addition with her high heels, showed off a killer pair of legs. Her hair shone in the dim lighting, minimal make-up enhancing her features and… Emma was pretty sure that was eff-me red lipstick.

Sexy, but not slutty. Come-hither, but classy. Yes, Rose was a lady through and through, regardless of her mood. She took a seat near the end of the bar, crossing her legs and flicking her hair back.

"She is pissed, isn't she?" Mary Margaret mused.

"She has a right to be," Ashley insisted, "Gold was out-of-line today."

"She wasn't exactly sitting back like some submissive 1950's wife," Emma said, watching the guys in the bar eyeing the woman like a pack of wolves scenting an innocent lamb. Dr. Whale seemed to be the Alpha, straightening his tie as he prepared to approach her first.

Rose absently rested her hand on her shoulder and Dr. Whale wavered, as did the rest of the pack. Slowly they dispersed, not a one of them approaching her.

"Silly Rose," Ruby muttered, "She forgot to take her wedding ring off."

"I don't think it's an accident," Emma said, "More like a "you can look, but if you touch me you're dead" sign."

"It would take a very stupid person to know her last name, see that ring and stick around," Ashley muttered, sipping at her martini.

Belle saw out of the corner of her eye someone take the seat next to her. The seat beside the shoulder that so obviously displayed her promise to Mr. Gold. There was only one guy she knew of that had that much gall and that little fear of retribution.

"Hey Rosie," Gaspard said softly, "…rough night?"

"Rough day," she admitted. She should've suspected he'd show up since she spotted Leonard in a booth staring at her and then rapidly pulling out his phone.

"May I buy you a drink?"

Belle looked into Gaspard's hopeful eyes and smiled, "Sure. Whiskey, please." He looked surprised at the request, but relayed it to the bartender, ordering a beer for himself.

Somewhere, Belle was sure, Rumplestiltskin would start to feel anxious for no apparent reason. It wasn't her intention to spend a friendly night out with Gaston, but all the colder for her dish of vengeance.
"…it's not like Mr. French wasn't going to pay him eventually," Gaspard insisted as Belle downed her drink. "He was going to wait until tomorrow…we had a grand in roses in the back."

"His deals are strict," Belle murmured, signaling for another drink, "No one gets out of them."

"Not even you?"

Belle's heart jolted, and she searched Gaspard's face for comprehension. Dull as ever; Gaston was still cursed into a corner of Gaspard's mind.

"Not even me," she murmured, a refilled glass set in front of her. She shook her head, "Can we talk about something else, please? How's your training going?" Switching the topic to one of Gaston's passions was a guaranteed hour of merely nodding at the appropriate times.

Gaspard was no different, "Great actually. I shaved a minute off of my record today alone. A lot of people don't realize the secret to winning is turning your mind off."

"Really?"

"Yeah, that way you don't think about the pain; it doesn't exist. The body outlasts the mind every time. I've heard of this one guy who survived an entire week…"

Belle tuned him out, nodding at the right times while she continued to work on getting a buzz. Gaspard didn't even notice when she swiped his beer and drank it, so engrossed was he.

"Yes!"

Belle furrowed her eyebrows and turned to see Prince Thomas rising from a bended knee to embrace Cinderella while the adoring crowd cheered. Bitterness rose up from a wound she had sworn had mended. Because why the hell couldn't Cinderella have it all? The princess who got to the ball with a deal she didn't follow through with when the price didn't suit her, out drinking with friends while someone cared for her baby, her gallant prince that was supposed to be collateral right there being romantic… The only negatives were of this world, her being a mediocre maid and carry her firstborn for twenty-eight oblivious-

"Do you want to get out of here?"

Belle turned to see Gaspard watching her worriedly. She was digging her nails into the counter so hard her arm shook. She fought back tears and nodded.

She should've been at Tony's right now, enjoying the Never-Ending Spaghetti Plate, defending her share of the meatballs from her greedy true love, both of them laughing and gazing into each other's eyes in the dim candlelight. Instead she was following Gaspard out of a bar to his Monte Carlo, fighting the urge to go home and apologize for getting so worked up this morning. It was only business, after all; just a van and some flowers, in the scheme of things.

The main event might've been Ashley becoming engaged, but Ruby's attention was elsewhere. Emma glanced at the door in time to see the glimmer of gold slip out.

"Oh Rose, no, no, no…" Ruby groaned, "What are you doing?"

"What's wrong?" Emma asked.

"She just left with Gaspard LeFleur."
Mary Margaret's head whipped around, "No…"

"Who's Gaspard LaFlour or whatever?" Emma glanced between the two of them.

Mary Margaret sank back in her seat, "He's her ex-fiancé… High school sweethearts… He never got over her…"

Emma grimaced, before taking another sip, "Well if he ends up missing, I know which pawnbroker I'm going after…"

Belle thought revenge would make her feel better, but she was still miserable. Dressed to kill didn't replace a rare chance of in-public romance. It hardly seemed worth standing up for her father now, not when it wouldn't change Mr. Gold's business practices even with family. It wasn't like she didn't know what she was getting into when she agreed to marry him…

"You deserve better," Gaspard declared, and her mind was drawn back into the car, "Someone who will treat you right…who won't hurt you…"

One of his hands rested on her knee, then slowly began to travel higher. Belle laughed softly, gently removing his hand from her leg, "I'm still married."

"So?"

"So it's a promise, and I don't break my promises."

"You broke your promise to me!"

"Keep your eyes on the road; you're going to get us killed."

"Just give me one good reason why you broke up with me-"

"Pull over, I want out."

"-and went for that asshole!"

Belle grabbed for the emergency break and pulled. The car skidded to a halt and Gaspard swore.

"Are you crazy?!"

"No one gets to call him an asshole but me!" She snapped, starting to cry, "And he might very well be an asshole…but he's my asshole."

Gaspard stared in utter confusion, "...how could you ever love someone like him?" He growled.

Belle wiped at her eyes, "Because of waking up…"

"Waking up?"

She nodded, clamoring for composure to try and explain, "Every morning, I wake up. Sometimes it's my alarm going off, and I have to turn it off quickly and slip out as carefully as I can so Mr. Gold can sleep in. Sometimes it's a sensation, his lips on mine, his fingers playing with my hair. Sometimes I open my eyes and he stares into mine, or he's still asleep and I want him awake so I roll on top of him. He's set the cat on my face a couple of times, blown raspberries on my stomach when I'm half awake, brought us a breakfast to share in bed…" She shook her head, giving a sobbing laugh, "That man still can't remember I like cut bananas on my Cheerios! Every time he gives me a bowl of Cheerios he forgets! Just like how I will never remember the name of his pet
lamb as a child!"

She smiled, "You see, I don't know what's going to wake me up the next morning. I don't know what the day has in store for us. This unknowing, these surprises… It excites me, that my life with him will never be boring. …and I will never know everything about him, and he will never know everything about me, but we keep trying to learn, finding clues to each other's unrevealed facts," she clasped her hands together, "He is my favorite book, a mystery/adventure/fantasy novel that I read over and over again because there's always something new and yet something familiar in each telling."

Gaspard just stared at her as if she had started speaking Portuguese, and she knew he'd never understand. It was rare that anyone understood love the way she did, and she was lucky she found someone who agreed. Rumplestiltskin loved a good mystery as much as she did, and they both had so many layers to discover about each other.

"…I can be spontaneous," he offered, "I could be a book."

"Really?" He nodded. "Answer me this, then; who is Elizabeth Bennett?"

He contemplated the question a moment, "…didn't she write that Hunger Games series?"

"And that," Belle said with finality, "Is why we could never be together. Good night Gaspard and thank you for the drinks."

Belle exited the Monte Carlo as dignified as she could manage with alcohol in her blood, smeared mascara, and an ex with a valid concern for her happiness. She got to the sidewalk before her heel caught in a drain grate and she fell onto the concrete. She hissed, but her ankle seemed fine. She glared down to find one of her heels was broken and she took off the shoes, chucking them aside.

It was always just one shoe, wasn't it? Why couldn't the heels simultaneously break, or go missing, or shatter due to a stepmother's accidentally-on-purpose butterfingers?

III

Belle thought at first she was dreaming. Lying in a bed, the only pains being hunger and thirst. She tried to hold onto the dream, but then she heard the crackle of a fire. Fire meant burning, white hot iron on her skin. Her eyes flew open as she jolted upright, bracing herself for darkness and pain.

But she was in her bedroom, the curtains opened to let in the light. There was a small fire in the fireplace, but no tools around it.

"You're alright, dearie," Rumplestiltskin murmured, "I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

He was seated by the fire, fingers steepled and legs crossed, watching over her. It didn't look like he had moved for hours, and she doubted he had slept. She rested back against the headboard.

"I'll bring you up some soup," he said, making no movement to leave. She was glad for that.

"Thank you," she murmured, "For everything."

"Considering it was somewhat my fault it was the least I could do," he remarked bitterly.

Belle gave a small smile, "You really should warn me about spying mirrors and queens you aren't on good terms with," she teased lightly.
He smirked, "I'll make a list of everyone who isn't happy with me... Might take a week and hundreds of sheets of parchment, but you like to read anyway."

She laughed quietly. His rigid stance relaxed a bit.

"...I love you too," she said shyly.

Rumplestiltskin's forehead creased, "What?"

"You told me you loved me last night. I didn't say it then, so I'm saying it now. I love you too."

He sneered, "I said a lot of things last night."

"And you meant them all, didn't you?" She challenged.

He turned his head towards the window, "...yes," he admitted. He stared blankly outside, lips drawn tight as though considering something, "I...have a cabin, in the woods. You could live there quite comfortably; there is a witch a few miles down the road, but she's only interested in children."

Belle frowned, "You're sending me away again."

His lips twitched, "No, dearie, I don't have that kind of strength. Sending you away the first time was hard enough," he glanced down, "Nor can I fathom you remaining here with me, after everything. It's a...compromise, safety and freedom."

"But what if I want you?"

Rumplestiltskin fidgeted in his seat and ignored the question.

Belle huffed, "You let me in last night... You told me about Bae. You told me you loved me. I won't allow you to put your walls back up."

He picked at the upholstery of the seat, "...you know what I've done. You've seen me at my worst. I'm not very hopeful that you'll stick around."

"You underestimate me."

She slipped out of the bed, a simple white nightgown hiding her emaciated body. He tensed as she sank down onto his lap, curling up and wrapping her arms around his neck.

"...what are you doing?" He asked, fear creeping into his voice.

"I'm holding you, silly," she said, burying her face in his chest, "And I'm going to hold onto you until you get used to me holding you. Because I'm not leaving, not now, not ever, and you're just going to have to get used to me wanting you."

Rumplestiltskin remained tense for a few minutes. Muscle by muscle, bit by bit, he relaxed, surrendering to the fact that he loved her and now that she knew that she would be absolutely insufferable, making him be all soft and weak for her. Evil little pixie.

III

Belle had never felt so miserable walking up to her front porch, barefoot and shivering and trying to figure out how to apologize for her part in all this. His car was in the driveway but no lights were on inside. When she tried the front door, it was locked. A lump swelled in her throat.
He had shut her out of their house and gone to bed. He did not want her.

She heard a soft meow from the backyard and circled around, the side gate at least left unlocked. Figaro was at the back door, meowing to be let back inside. The bastard had even shut out the cat to mope… There was something on the porch steps, though, and she glanced down. A jacket she had inherited from Graham was folded crisply, a pair of black flats set on top.

Figaro pressed up against her and she went to stroke him…only to find something tied around his neck with a gold ribbon. She untied it and flipped the item over in her hand. It was a picture of their cabin; no words, no significant differences, no them, just a picture that could've been in a real estate magazine. She picked Figaro up and kissed his head, giving him a hug before letting him back inside. She slipped on the shoes, shrugged on the jacket, and went to her truck. She guessed she was going to the cabin, then.

The "Game of Thorns" van was parked off to the side, explaining why his car was at home. She pulled up beside it and got out, nearly treading on some roses when she started towards the front door. Belle stepped back and saw more, in all varying shades, spread out along the front yard of the cabin. She took a few more steps back and saw they formed two words.

**I'M SORRY.**

Belle smiled as a new reason for a lump in her throat formed. It was so hard to stay mad at him when he put on his Prince Charming persona. She skirted the apology and shyly opened the front door.

The table had been set for two with fine china and a crisp white tablecloth. A lit candelabra stood in the center, illuminating one of Belle's favorite delicacies of this land; macaroni and cheese with hot dog bits. He could remember hot dogs on mac & cheese, but not bananas on Cheerios.

"Before you accuse me of stealing, I reimbursed your father for the flowers." Belle turned to see Mr. Gold standing off to the side, awkwardly clutching his cane. His eyes carefully examined her, waiting to see how his gestures would be received.

Belle bit her lip, "I think we're both to blame for this one, going off halfcocked."

Mr. Gold's lips twitched, "Twenty-eight years of blah… We were due for one of our blow-outs."

"Least it wasn't in the castle," Belle mused, making her way towards the table.

Mr. Gold grinned hesitantly following, "Now *those* fights were work-outs, chasing each other around the estate."

They sat shyly across from each other, picking at their dinner while already full from guilt. They had both apologized in their own way, she for returning and he by going out of his way. But they still needed to talk, to resolve the conflict.

Belle cleared her throat and set down her fork as she finished, "Are you…upset with me?"

He glanced up at her, setting his own fork down and leaning back in his seat, "Depends on what you're referring to. If it's about your night on the town, no. If it's the fact you wore that dress in public, yes, I'm irritated," he gestured towards it, "My opinion still stands of it; you look like a high-class hooker."

She smirked, "Well I didn't wear the boots with it at least. Just those heels and they're gone now," she played with her fingers, "If rumors start spreading… *I did* leave Jolly Roger's with Gaspard, but
"I trust you," he said simply, which considering his track record was a high compliment. He bowed his head, "Today was mostly about business…but there was a bit of personal satisfaction as well," he admitted. One hand slowly curled into a claw, "You may have the grudge range of a teaspoon, but I will never forgive him for how badly he's hurt you."

She reached out and set her hand on the claw, "It's not your job to avenge me, especially over something as petty as a van. If I want to be mad, then I'll be mad, but it's my decision in the end."

His fingers turned over, caressing her hand absently, "...why do you always come back to me?" He asked softly.

"Because I'd rather fight with you than be with anyone else," she said matter-of-factly.

He rose from the table, helping her to her feet and pulling her into his arms. She slid into them as naturally as an old shirt, entangling his waist in her arms. She rested her cheek on his shoulder and leaned trustingly into him. He rocked her gently in a slow dance, feet never moving.

"It's what we do, my Belle. We fight," he whispered into her ear, holding her close, "You tell me when I'm being an arrogant son of a bitch and I tell you when you are a pain in the ass...which you are, ninety-nine percent of the time." She giggled and he kissed her temple, "I'm not afraid to hurt your feelings. You have a two-second rebound rate and then you're back doing the next pain-in-the-ass thing."

"So?" Belle murmured into his shirt.

He rubbed her back, "So it's not gonna be easy. It's going to be really hard. But I want to do that because I want you." He pulled her tighter against him, his voice lowering with an urgency that made his accent even more pronounced, "I want all of you, forever, you and me, every day."

She buried her face into him as he nuzzled into her hair, breathing her in.

"I want that too," Belle murmured, letting the moment last a bit longer before lifting her face, "Though I'd be more impressed if you didn't steal that line from the movie."

"It's not in the book?"

"Doesn't matter, I know you got it from the movie."

He growled, face comically sour, "See if I ever quote from anything to you ever again."

She giggled and he looked offended, as if he had been serious. She rested her chin on his chest, "I need to ask you something."

"Anything, my dear."

"Who's Elizabeth Bennett?"

Mr. Gold's forehead creased, "Lizzie Bennett?" Belle nodded. "She's the protagonist of "Pride and Prejudice", of course. Why do you ask?"

Belle grinned, "Just making sure I picked the right man."

That had to be the easiest test Rumplestiltskin had ever taken. He couldn't help but add, "It was a great movie."
The rib shot was worth it and he snickered as she playfully pushed him away.

Mr. Gold was well aware that the main goal of Valentine's Day for most males was sex; if they were romantic enough, their significant other might reward them with permission to enter them. It was a game he had no interest in playing; he simply wanted to worship his wife, letting her know how thankful he was to have her, and Valentine's Day was an excuse. He had let go of the notion of intercourse the moment Belle caught him repossessing the van. Some things were better than sex, such as holding Belle as she drifted off midway through the movie he had rented, brown curls blocking half the screen. The very fact he had her was the most incredible sort of miracle.

Curling around her warm body, her scent in his lungs and her taste still on his lips, he couldn't help but feel he had won the 2012 Fight of Saint Valentine's Day.

III

Lying on his back staring up at the cabin ceiling, Rumplestiltskin was high off of happiness. There were so very few times he felt certain he was loved; really, the only person who had loved him unconditionally his whole life was Bae. But now, with Belle lying peacefully beside him, tracing circles in his skin, he was certain she loved him. This entire day had been a testament to both her bravery and impossibly true love to him. Him, the Dark One, who had once been a cripple and forever remained a coward.

Not even two hours ago, he had stood outside the cabin, pacing with his eyes trained on the door. Of all the places they could've gone for their honeymoon (he could've even struck a deal with Jefferson if she desired to visit another world), she had wanted this cabin in the woods. The place he had threatened to send her the morning after he rescued her from Regina. He wondered about that girl sometimes…

"Belle," he began his hundredth reiteration of the speech he'd give her once he entered, "You've been through a lot today, binding your soul to the Dark One and all. It's…alright if you'd like to rest tonight, and wait until you're feeling up to this. What do I mean? Um… Well, I don't know what you've been told, I've heard that women close to a young bride warn her of what to expect from a groom their wedding night… Well when two people love each other very much… Yes Belle, that thing you've read about in your romance novels. I will not pressure you…" He stopped, glaring at his imaginary Belle, "Of course I desire you, more than you can imagine… I am highly attracted to you, in face I'd just love to- Belle, you can't just take dark magic into your body and expect to be up-and-at-'em by sundown. …I am not going to deflower you yet and that is final!"

Rumplestiltskin then realized, for the hundredth time, that his offer to abstain had spiraled down into an argument. His imaginary Belle was a bit of a nag sometimes. He straightened his stature, smoothed his black coat, and approached the cabin's door without a script, prepared to face their first fight as a married couple.

He forgot that his new wife was Belle, a woman who controlled him even before she gained the dagger. His weakness.

She was sitting on the bed, staring absentmindedly at the fireplace. Even though the Blue Fairy's magic had turned her pure white dress an ashen shade of gray, it was still lovely, though not nearly as lovely as the woman herself. Even without the light of the fire she glowed, that light inside of her branching out like a beacon. She turned to him as the door opened and beamed. Rumplestiltskin feared his heart had fallen dead in his chest from the sight.

"My husband," she greeted, her tongue cherishing the words.
Rumplestiltskin wanted to respond. He wanted to call her his wife, go to her and kiss every inch of her. But he was suddenly the poor wool spinner again, struck dumb by her words and feeling unworthy to say her new title.

Belle seemed to understand, giggling and hopping off the bed. Each step towards him brought shockwaves of desire and fear into his aching chest.

She reached up, lips puckered, but withdrew violently halfway to his mouth, "Sorry!" She sputtered, "This is going to take some practice…"

Maybe it'd be worth losing his powers, to taste those lips properly.

A hand went to her cheek, knuckles tentatively brushing her skin, "You are…so…beautiful," he said in awe, praying to all the gods he wouldn't start sobbing like a newborn. Why did he lose his mind whenever she was near?

She tilted her head into his hand, gazing up at him, "I love you, Rumplestiltskin."

"And I love you too my…precious, precious Belle."

Her hand reached up and he thought she'd touch his face as well. Instead, it worked on the first gold button of his coat. Their eyes never left each others as she worked her way down the line, hands slipping under the coat in order to push it off. She untucked his shirt and Rumplestiltskin mechanically shrugged it off as she raised it over his head. Her eyes strayed down to his chest and he expected distaste at the unnatural tone. Instead she seemed to be drinking in the sight, fingers light as a feather moving across his chest.

She smiled, "It's smooth," she murmured in surprise.

His lips twisted in an attempt of a smirk, "Most beastly underbellies are."

He was disgusted with himself as he became aroused; she was just curious, and of course she was because she was Belle and anything new made her inquisitive. But he could not let it escalate. He remembered the pain in Milah's eyes the first time he took her, and he would surely die if he did that to Belle.

She met his eyes again and took one of his hands, guiding it to her breast. His fingers curved to its shape but he didn't allow himself to do anything further, a monumental display of restraint he didn't know he was capable of.

His speech whittled down to three words, "…are you sure?"

She just smiled at him in that way that squeezed his heart, "Make love to me, Rumplestiltskin."

And so he did, with every fiber of his being.

Belle was so…responsive. The noises slipping past her lips turned him on more than any touch, and he was shocked at how damp she was before he was remotely down there. Even at the worst moment, when he took her maidenhood as gently as he could muster, Belle had seemed more awed by their oneness than to really focus on the pain, though her slight cringe told him that it was there. She moved with him, investigated him, participated eagerly in the act.

Rumplestiltskin had tried in the beginning with Milah, exploring in hopes of finding some way to make it enjoyable for her as well. He had tried every inch of her body, attempted dirty talk, even sought advice. But she had laid there flat beneath him, uninterested and grimacing and clearly
wishing he'd just finish with her so she could go to sleep.

In a crystalline moment, Rumplestiltskin could see the difference between sex and making love, between someone who didn't love him and someone who did, between Milah and Belle. He felt as though he was given a second chance for a first time and this…was indescribable.

It had been a terrifying moment, seconds after he came inside of her. Belle threw her head back and screamed, nails digging into the sheets as her body convulsed. He could even feel her inner walls spasm around him, coating him in her own fluids. She went slack underneath him, panting and smiling.

"I think I understand the appeal of having sex now," she joked.

He could only stare at her. She had come. His beautiful lovely Belle had come…because of him. He was slowly starting to realize what Belle had known for a long time from her reading; the greatest sex organ was the mind.

With her head on his chest and an arm draped lazily over his stomach as she traced circles in his skin, Rumplestiltskin felt like the luckiest son of a bitch in all the worlds. It was a love worth waiting centuries for, his perfect Belle. And they would be together, forever, and find Bae and be a family and-

"What happened to Baelfire's mother?"

Rumplestiltskin was smacked back into reality, anything close to desire and lust leaving his body at the mention of the Woman Who Must Not Be Named.

"You said you lost her like Bae, but that's it," she continued.

"…Belle I know you're new to this, but you don't bring up exes after making love to your true love," he informed her.

She shrugged, "I was just wondering," she lifted her head, resting her chin on his sternum, "She's the only thing you have left to tell me, and I figured since we're intimate right now…"

Rumplestiltskin ran his fingers through her hair, "I don't want to be reminded that there was anyone besides you," he murmured truthfully, "I don't ever want to think about her or the things she did, and hearing you in all of your glory speak of her… It's the highest form of blasphemy," his thumb rubbed her cheek, "I have opened all my doors to you, Belle…except that one. It's too painful, and I ask that you respect my wishes."

Belle could not fathom what Baelfire's mother could have done to top Rumplestiltskin tutoring the Evil Queen in the ways of magic, or clinging to his power instead of his son. She must have been quite evil…

"Alright," Belle relented and Rumplestiltskin smiled.

"Thank you, love."

She'd let the matter rest for now…but she was determined to learn about the woman before her, and what had gone wrong.
"No," Belle said.

Mr. Gold knew all of his wife's "no"s. There was the no that really meant yes. There was the anguished no when he won a bet, or when he bested her at a game. There was even the soft no that he could work around if he still needed to do something, with manageable consequences to deal with later.

But this was her rare no, a no accompanied by a steeled body and eyes like ice. It was a "do this and I will walk out that door and you will never see me again, don't waste your breath on negotiations you should feel guilty for even bringing it up" no.

"I don't care if it will expose Regina as a liar; most of the town already knows that. I am not putting Mary Margaret's neck out on the line like that, and I am not having Kathryn, an innocent victim, be locked up god-knows-where. She doesn't deserve that."

Mr. Gold bowed his head, "As you wish." He skewered some green beans on his fork and continued eating as if a scheme for framing one woman for murder and kidnapping another hadn't been brought up.

Belle relaxed, sipping at her water, "Dinner's great."

"Thank you."

The rest of the meal passed without incident and Belle started to clear the table, "Can I borrow a pair of your pants tomorrow? All of mine are dirty."

"Then why don't you do laundry?" He suggested.

"Because I don't want to."

"Go without pants, then."

"I want to wear pants."

"We don't even wear the same size. I have absolutely no hips and you know that."

"Why are you being difficult?"

"I'm being difficult? You won't wash your own pants or wear a skirt and I'm being difficult?"

"It's a freaking pair of pants!"

"Fine, try to wear them!"
Belle lifted her chin triumphantly, "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he rolled his eyes, retreating to his office. She was stubborn about the strangest things…

He was finishing off his coffee the next morning, considering the cat as it lay before him on the counter. Its tail twitched as it considered him right back. All attempts to keep it off counters or tables had been futile; the cat was more determined than he about the matter. He wondered if the cat would like coffee; he wondered how much coffee it would drink, and how long it would take for it to have an effect. He wondered if he could somehow sneak the cat into Belle's purse like a bomb waiting to explode in furry paranoia…

"Bye dear, I love you," Belle called as she retreated. He only had a second to feel guilty about his musings before he caught a blur of brown moving down the hall.

He pursued her, "Wait a minute…"

Belle paused in the hallway, trying her best to look innocent. His eyes trailed down her body, blood automatically racing at the sight, "…where did you get those?" He growled.

Belle shifted, bending one knee provocatively, "I brought them over in my trunk… Couldn't bear to leave them behind."

He licked his lips, "Those are…far too small on you… I can't for the life of me figure out how you got them on…"

She gave a small pirouette, "Magic," she insisted.

He wasn't sure who wore his signature leather pants better, but they did look amazing on her, hugging her body tighter than even he could. He wished he had a spare immobilization spell to freeze her for a few hours so he could just sit back and admire that lovely figure. Yet as alluring as she was in them…all he really wanted to do was take them back off.

"I'll see you later," she said cheerily, turning around.

Gods, that back view… "Where the hell are you going?"

She started to retreat at a stiff jog.

"Belle…Belle!" He chased her out the door as she giggled wickedly.

It was the first time Belle had used his handicap against him, outrunning him easily.

"Belle!" He yelled desperately from the porch as she stumbled down the steps, her escape stilted by the tightness of the material, "Belle you get your gorgeous leather-clad ass back here right now or you'll be sorry!"

"How the hell do you run in these things?!" She shouted back, hopping into her getaway truck.

Mr. Gold hissed as she pulled out of the driveway. She would pay for this. Oh how she would pay…

III

Belle woke up alone without warning.
"Rum?" She called out, but she sensed he was gone. Odd, he usually warned her if he had to leave early.

The recognition of the day dawned on her and she grinned to herself. One year ago today, her and Rumplestiltskin had exchanged vows and blood in the little ceremony they called their wedding. She threw the covers back and jumped out of bed, immediately going to wash up.

She scrubbed herself raw in rose water, plaiting her hair intricately before placing a small red rose in it. She went to her wardrobe and pulled out a crimson silk gown that dipped deliciously low on her chest and swirled like waves around her feet. She'd go without gloves today, she decided, bearing her mark to the world. And she'd have brunch ready for when he returned.

A short time later the hall's doors opened and Belle's heart skipped a beat, sitting at the table with all sorts of pastries and meats and fruit laid out. He glanced at her and she beamed, "Good morning, love."

Rumplestiltskin took a minute to respond, apparently distracted, "Morning." He gestured towards the table, "You expecting company?"

There was no playfulness to his tone, as if he actually meant the question. Belle frowned, "No…it's for us."

"Oh. Alright." He picked up a scone and bit into it, heading towards the basket next to his spinning wheel to pull out a few spools of gold.

Horror crept into her throat. He hadn't forgotten…had he?

"I'll be back in about an hour," he said, walking towards the door.

Her shoulders sagged, "You're not going to eat with me?"

He blinked, "I'm busy," he said simply. It was like a slap to her face.

He continued his hasty retreat, flashing a wave back at her, "Thanks for breakfast, dearie."

The doors shut and Belle stared at them in disbelief. He had not joined her for brunch. He had not noticed the extra care she had taken to her looks, or even the dress she was sure the moment he saw it she'd be fighting him off of her. He was too wrapped up in his latest deal to even remember the occasion.

By the time he showed his face again, Belle was whipped up into a proper fury. She sat practically snarling by the hall's hearth when Rumplestiltskin trounced back in.

"Come on, up up up!" He chirped, gesturing wildly.

Belle glared at him, "What?"

"We've got to get going," he said impatiently.

"And why would I go anywhere with you after you brushed me off this morning?" She growled.

He sighed, "Oh dearie, you're mad at me for that?"

Belle opened her mouth to say no, of course not, he was a busy man, she was mad at him for a much bigger matter and perhaps he should consider why she was taking such measures this morning, maybe his memory wasn't as perfect as it seemed… She closed her mouth, uncrossing her
legs and getting to her feet. No, she wouldn't even give him a hint. If he wanted to reconcile, he'd have to remember all on his own.

He eyed her gown and hope caught her in her throat. Maybe she shouldn't judge him too harshly; it might've been important and he couldn't-

"No, no, that won't do at all," he decided, flicking his wrist.

Purple smoke enveloped her and when it cleared, she was left standing in a plain blue frock with a sash, hair tied back with a blue ribbon. Belle's jaw dropped in indignation, "Do you have any idea how long I've waited to wear that dress?!!"

"No," he said bluntly, "Now come on. You can be mad at me after I show you." He was practically dancing in place, so pleased was he with himself, "Comeoncomeoncomeoncomeoncome oncome-

"Fine!" She snapped. Rumplestiltskin gave a trill of pleasure, then gestured towards the gardens, skipping around her like a frisky puppy the entire way.

Belle hoped he was kidding. She really, really hoped he was.

"...a koi pond?" She said slowly, staring at the new item set under a willow tree.

He nodded eagerly, "Let's go swimming!" He took her hand and led her towards it.

She ripped it out of his grasp, "No! You leave me alone all morning to make some deal and now you want to spend time with me?!"

Rumplestiltskin's demeanor dampened, his smile faded and his forehead creased in concern, "But...this is from that deal... I went to the other side of our world for it... For you."

He looked so hopelessly sad, his good intentions misconstrued. It was hard for Belle to stand her ground and besides, did she really want to fight on their first anniversary?

"Please go swimming with me?" He asked meekly.

She sighed, "...fine."

The smile instantly returned as he clapped his hands together, "Tick tock, dearie! This is a single-use pond!"

Without so much as taking his shirt off, Rumplestiltskin jumped in with a splash. Belle shook her head before stepping in after him, and nearly sank under. He caught her arm to keep her afloat.

"...you do know how to swim, don't you dearie?" He asked.

She nodded, "It...just caught me by surprise. I thought I'd touch bottom."

"There is no bottom," he stated, pressing a finger to her lips before she could argue, "It's magic. Now, take a deep breath and when I say one, we dive. We keep swimming down towards the second star on the right, then straight on until morning. Got it?"

"Deep breath, dive down, second star, 'til morning," she furrowed her eyebrows, "But Rum, what are we-"

"One!"
Belle had just enough time to fill her lungs before Rumplestiltskin pulled her under.

It was nearly pitch black in the depths of the water, and Belle was disoriented within seconds. Only Rumplestiltskin's grip guided her and she tried to keep up with him, but she was mostly dragged along. About the time she started to crave air, pinpricks of light began to emerge, thousands of them, concentrated intensity. They grew larger with each kick and Rumplestiltskin veered to the right, going directly towards one. Belle was blinded, mentally screaming as they went right through it. And then the black turned blue, and she could see the sun and her lungs were burning but she had to keep going, straight, straight…

Belle broke the surface with a Herculean gulp for air, sputtering and squinting in the light. The water had gone from tolerable to warm, clear as glass and gently rippling from their sudden appearance. Large leafy trees swayed in the breeze, and Belle heard a bird song she couldn't recognize. She glanced at Rumplestiltskin to see him grinning, thoroughly pleased with his plan.

"One world wasn't enough to give you, so I decided on another," he explained, "Hopefully I didn't misinterpret your desire to travel and "see the world" too badly."

With a splash Belle wrapped her arms around him, hugging him as hard as she could. He smiled, and shyly kissed her cheek.

"Happy anniversary, love."

Belle's face went blood red, pulling away as she let herself sink lower in the water. Rumplestiltskin gave an amused little hum.

"You honestly thought I'd forgotten, didn't you?" Belle gave a slight nod and he snickered, "My acting's better than I thought. Dearie, why on earth did you think I would forget the date of the second best day of my very long life?" She arched an eyebrow and he shrugged, "Bae's birth beat you by a nose."

She tilted her head back, letting her body float up, "What is this place?"

"Neverland," he remarked, glancing around, "I've never been, but it comes recommended by portal-jumpers."

"Jefferson?"

"Jefferson. Apparently the locals aren't too friendly, though…"

"Well then we'll just have to avoid them. All the more time to ourselves," she said cheerily.

Rumplestiltskin grinned, gliding over to her, "I like the way you think…"

Belle squealed as she was scooped up, Rumplestiltskin charging out of the water and up onto the shore. She giggled and he twirled her around once before setting her down. The sand was fine between her toes, and they curled into it.

"I'll let you lead us in our glorious exploration of the isle, captain my captain, in a second. First, close your eyes."

Belle glared suspiciously at him.

"Oh come on; trust me. You owe me a little faith after thinking me such a lousy husband I'd forget the date."
She grumbled, "The faith part's easy most of the time. It's the trust part that eludes me."

"Well, you'll need both right now," he insisted. Belle let out a long, drawn-out sigh before closing her eyes.

She was rewarded with a fistful of something irritating and coarse in her face. She sputtered, "What was that for?!"

"No peeking!"

The grit seemed to flow down her body, embedding itself in her skin.

"I'm itchy…"

"So am I, shut up."

She felt him come up behind her, his gritty cheek against her hair. She leaned back into him and his fingers encircled her wrists.

"Just relax…and follow my lead," he murmured.

As she relaxed into him, the ground slipped out from under her. She felt weightless, rising higher and higher. He raised their arms and hooked his ankles around her feet. He slowly bowed and Belle bent with him, their legs floating up behind them. And then they were moving, the wind curling around her body and playing with her hair.

Rumplestiltskin's mouth leaned down towards her ear, "…open your eyes, dearie." Belle obeyed.

Tall golden grass sped by her and she realized she was staring down at a savannah. She twisted her head around and saw them parallel to the world, nothing holding them. A laugh of pure joy burst from her lips.

"I'm flying!" She exclaimed.

"You're flying," he agreed gently, kissing her head.

Belle arched up into Rumplestiltskin and they tilted upwards, soaring up towards the sky. Their hands stretched out to feel a passing cloud. Her smile was so big it ached.

Suddenly she didn't feel Rumplestiltskin against her, or his fingers around her wrists. The weight came back and she screamed, dropping like a stone.

"Don't lose faith in yourself!" He called staying air-born without a problem, "You just need to believe you can fly!"

Belle briefly processed how strange the words were coming from the Dark One's lips, before she trusted herself to stay aloft. She was once again weightless, suspended in the air. Rumplestiltskin drifted down to her, looking unconcerned about her brush with danger.

"You fly often?" She asked him, the sight of him hanging around in mid-air amusing.

Rumplestiltskin wrinkled his nose, "No, I'm just familiar with the mechanics. Flying is a bit too…whimsical for the Dark One," he said with a flourish of his hand.

Belle giggled, floating up to take his hand, "Come on. I've never seen an ocean before."
Rumplestiltskin felt as though he had a pox, the pixie dust like sandpaper on his skin. Infinitely less allergic to it than pure fairy dust, his discomfort was worth the smile on Belle's face as she raced around the sky, exploring this or that with a firm grip on his hand. She seemed to take a particular interest in the ocean that surrounded the small world, explaining to him excitedly how she dreamed of one day seeing one after reading about them in book after book. Personally the sea made him queasy, and short-tempered for no apparent reason, but he would not deny Belle today.

Belle dipped her fingers languidly into the salt water as they flew over it, skimming the surface and setting sprays of water up. She squinted as bits of color started to rise from the depths; bright teals and hot pinks and fiery oranges. They shimmered like the water itself, moving with them in their flight. The closer they came the clearer the details; long fish-like tails, hair billowing back like seaweed, soft pale skin. Belle's breath caught as some of them surfaced, human backs curving up like dolphins. Faces peered up quizzically at her, then twisted back down to be replaced by another. A school of mermaids so close she could reach down and touch them.

Rumplestiltskin harrumphed and Belle raised an eyebrow at him, "Are you going to tell me that mermaids are as evil as unicorns now?"

"I wouldn't dream of making that comparison," he insisted, then lowered his voice, "Not in front of them, anyway…"

The mermaids' jumping became more enthusiastic, nearly their entire human halves coming up out of the water. Belle could make out a faint murmur between them all, like a bubbling brook. They sounded excited, a few splashing up at them with their tails to Rumplestiltskin's chagrin.

Belle giggled, "I think they want to race."

"There is no way I'm racing a bunch of air-headed-" Rumplestiltskin was soon talking to the wind as Belle accelerated, the mermaids chasing after her eagerly. He snarled, then unwillingly sped after them.

Flying was fast, but the mermaids swam faster, Belle fighting to keep up. They pulled her back towards the shore, to a little lagoon fed by the ocean. Belle touched down on the beach, the mermaids remaining under the water, peering up over the surface at her occasionally then ducking down like a boy caught staring.

"Well they didn't charge at me, or try to gore me to death for not being a virgin. That's a good sign, right?" Belle asked as Rumplestiltskin landed.

"It is," he agreed, "I think they're more curious than hungry right now."

Belle watched the heads bob and duck like raindrops hitting a pond.

"Where are the mermen?"

"There aren't any," he said flatly.

Belle tilted her head, "Then how…?"

Rumplestiltskin grimaced, "Belle, you're a smart woman. I don't really want to discuss the how of it," he shrugged, "Let's just say that the luring sailors bit from the stories is true."

She shuddered, and Rumplestiltskin was quick to try and console her.
"Usually they just eat them, though."

"Ew!"

There was a small scuffle in the water before a merchild was launched up onto the shore. She screeched her protest, seeming to be yelling at the culprits though every noise was like a wordless song. The girl turned around and stared wide-eyed at them, looking only to be a few years old. She had long red hair bright as a fresh drop of blood, freckles sprinkled along the bridge of her nose. Her tail was grass green, shimmering in the light.

Belle smiled, taking a few slow steps towards her, offering her hand. The merchild looked torn between fear and curiosity, curiosity winning over as she stretched out her neck, sniffing at Belle's fingertips.

"Careful," Rumplestiltskin warned, but made no move to stop Belle.

She knelt within arm's reach of the child and met her eyes. Something silvery came over the girl's blue eyes and Belle felt as though she had been stripped bare.

"What's she doing, Rum?" Belle called shakily.

"Reading your soul," he called back casually.

The mini-mermaid lost all fear of Belle, taking the hand and running her own small fingers over it, breathing in Belle's scent, touching the hem of her dress, tugging at her curls and staring at her feet. Belle giggled, looking back at her husband, "I think she likes me."

Rumplestiltskin grinned, "She saw your soul; how could she not?"

The mergirl sang a few bars to her sisters and their own hesitancy disappeared. They approached the shore, calling to Belle. The beached one tugged harder at Belle's dress, trying to pull her towards the water.

"Is it alright?" She asked Rumplestiltskin.

"Trust me, if it wasn't you'd know. Mermaids aren't too subtle."

Belle took a few steps closer and suddenly a dozen arms reached up, pulling her down into the lagoon. She hardly had time to wish for breath before she surfaced, the mermaids dragging her at an astounding speed towards a group of rocks jutting out of the water. They hauled her up onto the largest boulder and she was surrounded by fins, hair and arms. She heard Rumplestiltskin's high laughter as they examined every inch of her, especially taken by her dark hair and her legs. She had to scold a child as it started to venture up her skirt.

"It's like they've never seen a woman before!" She exclaimed.

"Well they probably haven't," Rumplestiltskin mused.

Belle tilted her head, "There are no women in Neverland?"

"Besides mermaids, pixies, and squaws? Nope."

The mermaids started to calm down, a blonde pulling her up onto her scaly lap and playing with Belle's curls. Belle looked down and cautiously ran her fingers over the tail. It felt delicate, like a fish, but they didn't flake off as easily. The muscles shifted under her touch.
"Beautiful," Belle murmured. The blonde tried to mimic the word in her sing-song voice, but it only vaguely sounded like a word.

An orange-haired mermaid tapped Belle's chest and tilted her head questioningly. Belle shook her head and the mermaid motioned to herself, gave an impossible-to-replicate tune, and tapped Belle's chest. Oh!

She motioned to herself, "Belle."

The whole group mimicked the sound, coming much closer than the blonde's attempt at "beautiful". Belle smiled and the mermaids smiled back.

Belle could've spent all day in the mermaid's company, but she kept seeing Rumplestiltskin patiently waiting on the shore out of the corner of her eye.

"How do I excuse myself?" She finally asked.

"You don't," he said, "Mermaids do the excusing."

"Then we could be here forever," she insisted, gesturing towards the braid in her hair that the blonde was currently embedding flowers into.

Rumplestiltskin stood and brushed himself off, "I have no desire to speak mer, so I'll just have to hope they forgive me for this." He rose into the sky and started towards Belle.

The mermaid's demeanor changed instantly. They bared shark-like teeth, a hiss spreading through them as they tensed up, ready to strike. The blonde wrapped a protective arm around Belle, too firm to shrug off. Rumplestiltskin hovered, assessing the situation.

"Sexists, the lot of them," he muttered, "Belle, I'm sorry if you get caught in the crossfire."

Before Belle could ask (or protest), the mermaids were lunging at him as he wretched her away from them. They shrieked their rage as he flew off, Belle face deep in his shirt. She tried to lift her head but he pressed it back down with a free hand.

"I don't need you freaking out on me," he insisted.

A warm drop of something hit her hair and Belle's mind went into a frenzy. She forced his hand away and looked up. There was a dip in his forearm about the size of an orange, white bone shining amidst pulsing reds and pinks. Belle only got out half a scream before he covered her mouth.

"Tis merely a flesh wound," he said, touching down on top of a giant rock.

He set her down, slowly uncovering her mouth.

"They did that to-"

He covered her mouth again, "It's just one bite," he assured her.

Belle's eyes bulged and she screamed into his hand. He waited until the sound faded, "You done? I'd like to heal myself now, and I can't do that if I'm busy keeping you from shrieking like a banshee."

She glared at him and he removed his hand, conjuring enough magic to fix the gaping chunk of his flesh and shirt.
"You're an idiot," she muttered.

"You're an idiot for marrying an idiot," he retorted, then shrugged. "We might have all the time in the world, but that doesn't mean I want to spend it watching you and mermaids investigate each other."

He took a seat on the rock and Belle followed suit.

"How long do you want to stay, dearie? A few months, perhaps?"

"Months?" Belle laughed, "Don't you have a grand scheme to make sure goes flawlessly to get back to?"

"Doesn't matter," he grinned, resting his arms on his knees, "Time doesn't move the same way in every world; a lifetime in one world might only be five minutes in another. Here in Neverland, it simply doesn't exist."

Belle arched an eyebrow, "It doesn't exist?"

"A difficult concept, but nevertheless true. The sun may set and the moon may rise, but it doesn't mean anything."

She leaned back on her arms, trying to wrap her mind around it, "So the children will always be children?"

"Sort of. Natives grow up and die, but intruders like us... We could live forever so long as we weren't killed."

"That doesn't mean much to you, though," Belle smirked.

Rumplestiltskin shrugged, "Maybe, maybe not."

Belle glanced down to see a small rowboat coming towards them, a man in a bright red hat rowing. There was a woman across from him, bound and gagged but sitting as graciously as she could muster. Rumplestiltskin followed her gaze and stiffened.

"...Belle, I'm going to need you to fly inland and entertain yourself for a bit. We'll meet back here at sundown, or I'll come and find you."

She glanced at him, "What's wrong?"

He wouldn't meet her eyes, staring fixatedly at the man, "Remember that list I made for you? The one of people you should be careful of?" She nodded. "I think one of the top 5 might've made their way here. That's one of his goons."

Belle gulped. Anyone that made her husband uncomfortable was not someone to be trifled with.

"Just... stay away from pirates, alright? Especially one with only one hand. I'll take care of this," he murmured. She touched his shoulder reassuringly, and then flew off.

A man with one hand... A man with a red cap... Pirates... Since when was Rumplestiltskin concerned with a few sea thieves? They were brutes, sure, but she couldn't imagine they would be too hard for him to deal with. She might have to scrub some snail slime off of his boots later, though...

A sharp pain to her shoulder startled her from her thoughts and she turned to see a poison dart
sticking out of her. It was suddenly too difficult to fly, and her vision was hazy. She crashed into the growth and promptly passed out.

III

Mr. Gold was not a groveling man anymore. He did not beg or plead to get what he wanted; he simply wielded power or menace towards the unfortunate target. But neither of those worked against Belle. So he waited patiently in the shop, counting down the seconds until lunch when she would have to face him and his persuasiveness.

The image of her in those leather pants was very…distracting, and many times he considered simply hunting her down and hauling her off like a caveman. The good people of Storybrooke didn't need any fuel to their flames of hatred and TMI, however.

Figaro lifted his head and mewed, and Mr. Gold knew it was lunchtime.

Never one to disappoint Belle strolled in, and it took all of his restraint not to glance down and instantly refresh his memory of those leather-clad legs.

"Ruby liked them," she said.

"Liked what?" He feigned ignorance.

Belle shook her head, not believing him for a moment, "The pants. She asked me where I got them from."

Mr. Gold grimaced, "You didn't tell her…"

"Course not, she'd be scarred for life again," she shrugged, "I just told her I forgot."

She set down the sack lunch and Mr. Gold eyed it, "Actually I was thinking we could have lunch in the back room today…"

Belle snorted, "Said the spider to the fly," she opened up the bag and pulled out her lunch, "I see the web you weave and I am not treading on it."

He looked her dead in the eye, his voice lowering to a dangerous rumble, "You knew the minute I saw you in those pants the road you were heading on. I have no qualms with you borrowing my jacket, and it's sexy when you wear my shirts to bed. But those pants… You're just asking for it," he glanced at an antique clock on the wall, "Right now you're going on six hours… Six, Belle, one for each denied hour, and you complain if I push past four in a single night. You wait until dinner and that's…" He quickly did the math, "Fourteen. Now or later…your choice."

No way. That was impossible without magic. He couldn't possibly…

"You'd kill me," she insisted.

He smirked, "Good way to die if you ask me."

He was bluffing. He was good, but not that good. Her pride would not allow her to take the lesser amount…even if the decision ended up killing her. She would not fold.

She pretended not to notice his obvious staring as she ate, grateful he wasn't brazen enough to take her when the blinds were open and they were technically in public.

"Do you regret not having a proper wedding?"
The question caught her by surprise; she had expected something perverted the way he had been oogling her.

"I liked our wedding just fine," she said defensively.

"I'm just saying we could have one in this world, if you wanted to. A church, a kiss…"

"And who would come, Rumplestiltskin?" She crumpled up her trash, "The fact that we're hated hasn't changed."

"I'm hated, Belle…never you. They'd come for you," he insisted.

Belle sighed and shook her head, "Look, I'm married to you one way or another. These rings?" She gestured towards her hand, "You made them yourself. I have a dress that was white, we have each other, I can kiss you, and we're one broken curse away from finding Bae. I couldn't ask for more."

Mr. Gold stared down at his food as if wondering why it was there. Belle chewed over the question a moment before her eyes widened, "...did you want a proper wedding?"

"God no," he wrinkled his nose, "A bunch of supposed friends and family staring at me in silent judgment? I get quite enough of that on a daily basis, I don't need a mob," His cane swayed absently, "I just thought how most little girls dream of their wedding day…"

"And my wedding day was better than I imagined, excruciating pain of having my soul ripped aside. I married someone I loved, which was beyond my wildest hopes," she reached out and took his hand, "You can't remedy regrets I don't have," Her voice softened, "When are you going to realize that all I need is you?"

"Never," he said, squeezing her hand.

She rolled her eyes and kissed his nose, "I'll see you tonight."

"No advance on your debt?" He asked hopefully.

She shook her head, walking backwards, "Anticipation sharpens the hunger."

"I'm plenty hungry already, being with you for a half-hour," he pouted, looking so cute she nearly ran back to kiss him, "You're so mean…"

"I have things to do," she protested, pressing her back against the door, "And I swear to god if you force me into a church on Miner's Day…"

"I won't," he promised. She narrowed her eyes and he made an "x" motion over his heart.

Mr. Gold no longer begged or pleaded or groveled…but watching the back of Belle disappear just might have changed that.

III

Belle came to in steps, blearily rising to consciousness. She was on something soft. It was dark. There were voices.

"You killed her, you blockhead! Peter brought us back a mother and you killed her!" A high wheedling voice cried.

There were heavy sobs, "I thought she was a bird…"
"Does she look like a bird now, you skunk-brained mudflopper?!

"She was flying really fast and she was far away!"


She was in a cave, the heavy smell of earth all around her. There was a group huddled around a fire and at first she thought they were talking animals. They turned out to just be humans clothed in pelts. There was a bear, a rabbit, two foxes, and a little possum.

"Tootles, we should just kick you out. I swear your brain is nothin' but mush!" The rabbit's ears wagged up and down as he spoke. The bear, supposedly Tootles, hung his head.

Belle sat up and found herself lying on a heap of wolf pelts. The possum's head turned towards her, the human face obscured by the hood of his clothes.

"You can't kick him out, Slighty..." One of the foxes piped up.

"...Peter'll box your ears off," The second concluded.

The possum got to its shaky feet and wobbled towards her. They were all boys; the oldest seemed to be the rabbit Slighty at eleven (maybe twelve) and the youngest being the possum, maybe two years old.

"Well Peter's not here and I'm second in command," Slighty declared, folding his scrawny arms over his chest, "Besides, he killed our mother. Peter'd kick him out too."

The possum tottered to the bars that separated Belle from the group. He tilted his head back to peer at her and Belle offered a hesitant smile.

"Where's Nibs?"

"You lost Nibs?!"

"There he is!" The twins crowed, pointing at the possum. When they noticed Belle staring at them, they froze, staring back at her.

"Hai!" Nibs yelled, waving at her.

Belle bit her lip, "...hello," she murmured. This seemed to alarm the boys further, "Excuse me but, er, may I ask why I've been locked up?" She inquired softly.

Tootles turned to Slighty, his whisper just a raspy version of his voice, "...she speaks English."

Slighty straightened, puffing up his chest, and approached the cage, "Are you the mother Peter said he'd bring us?" His question sounded more like an accusation.

Belle frowned, "Who's Peter?" The boys glanced amongst each other, utterly confused by the question.

"She must be wild," Tootles decided.

Slighty looked at him in awe, "...you caught a wild mother," he murmured. The foxes gazed up at the bear in admiration. Nibs tried to squirm his way into her little fenced-off alcove.

"I'm not wild, nor am I a mother," Belle insisted.
"But you're not a girl," Slighty pointed out, "So you have to be a mother."

If they weren't children, Belle might have been offended. "I'm not a mother," she repeated, "I'm a woman."

The group stared in horror as Nibs managed to slip through, making his way to Belle. They acted as if she were a wild animal, she mused, watching Nibs toddle over to her. His foot caught on a pelt and Belle caught him before he fell, instinctively pulling him into her lap.

"See? You are a mother," Slighty pointed at her accusingly, "And we caught you, so now you have to be our mother." He jerked a thumb towards his chest, "I'm Slighty, and that's Tootles, those are the twins, and that's Nibs," he pointed to the boy on her lap.

"Hai," Nibs said.

"We're the Lost Boys. Peter Pan's our leader but he's not here, so I'm in charge," Slighty informed her, "We're going to tame you but don't worry, we'll take good care of you."

Belle wondered what Rumplestiltskin would think of this odd predicament. He'd probably laugh at her.

She hadn't come at sunset. Rumplestiltskin had sat on that skull-shaped rock until the moon was high in the sky, but Belle hadn't appeared. Maybe she got distracted, he tried to convince himself. This was Belle after all; she could've gone back to the mermaids, or made other friends, or found some sort of hidden jungle library…

…or maybe the redskins were holding her captive. Maybe she had been eaten alive by a tiger, or snapped her neck tumbling over a cliff, or maybe the pirate crew had found her and taken her to Hook where he'd- He should have never let her wander off, knowing that Killian Jones was here for some reason. He shouldn't've gotten distracted from being with her to mess around with that Smee guy, no matter how tempting the opportunity. He absentmindedly tried to summon her.

…he felt nothing. Not a single thing through the ether. Even if Belle ignored her mark he still felt her. Did this mean…?

He sprang from the rock and flew inland, fighting the urge to scream her name. He was fairly certain if she did die his heart would stop beating instantly, but the void was still cause for concern. She wasn't with the mermaids, or anywhere along the shoreline. He doubted she'd be wandering the savannah; perhaps the pixie hollow, finding out that pixies were just malevolent versions of fairies.

Rumplestiltskin paused as a spear was pressed to his throat. He was torn between being offended at their nerve and being impressed that the group of warriors had snuck up on him.

He allowed himself to be escorted to the redskin's encampment, mildly irritated by the interruption to his search. He glanced around at the wide-eyed fearful faces, the squaws and children shying away from him. The group was aptly named, their skin an earthy tone of red with black hair they let grow long. Their clothes were mostly animal skins adorned with feathers, shells, beads, teeth, and all other sorts of decorations. Their homes were giant cones also made out of animal skins, a morbid theme starting to emerge. It wasn't like there was a shortage of trees or sod for a proper home, even if there was no flax or wool for clothes.

He was led to a large fire-pit where a man roughly the size and build of a bear stood flanked by other men and a handful of women. It brought Rumplestiltskin back to a war room not so long ago,
a large man thinking his favors could be bought by mere gold.

The man watched him with dark eyes and a raised chin. Rumplestiltskin waited a minute before prompting, "Is there a reason I'm here, or do you just like to play catch-and-release with visitors?"

"You saved my daughter's life," he rumbled.

Rumplestiltskin's eyebrows rose, "Really? I usually remember those sorts of things."

"If you had not have tricked Red Cap into freeing Princess Tiger Lily, she would have drowned with the tide," he elaborated.

Oh, right, that prisoner with Smee. Rumplestiltskin waved his hand dismissively, "A happy accident. I just wanted to get under a certain captain's skin."

"I do not like to be in another man's debt," The chief continued.

Rumplestiltskin smirked, "I don't charge for what I don't intend. It's poor business."

"Then what is your purpose in Neverland?"

"That's not your concern."

"The Princess Tiger Lily wishes to ask him a question."

All heads turned to a young woman who stood as demure as a handmaid, long hair pulled back into a bun. Another young woman stepped out from behind her father, and the woman who had spoken moved with her. She was lovely, with delicate features and a long black braid that wound down to her hips. A tiger skin was wrapped around her like a blanket, hiding her lithe body. She considered him with doe-like eyes and long lashes.

Rumplestiltskin gave a small bow, "And what does the princess wish to know?"

Tiger Lily glanced at her companion and the companion spoke again.

"She wonders if you might be the crocodile of legend, the one who took the Captain's left hand."

A ripple went through the assembled, even the warriors shifting uneasily at the question. It seemed as though his reputation preceded him.

He met Tiger Lily's gaze, "I am," he admitted.

Excitement flashed across her eyes, replaced soon after with longing and pain. Her companion glanced at her questioningly, but she shook her head dismissively.

"The princess has no further questions, and thanks you for saving her life, intentional or not."

Rumplestiltskin bowed his head, "Your welcome, milady."

Tiger Lily glanced at her father, then stepped back with her speaker. The chief frowned, "We still wish to thank you."

"And you have. Leave me be and we'll be even."

The two men stared each other down, before the chief waved the warriors off.
"That's better," Rumplestiltskin turned and started out of the village, "Keep better track of your royalty now!"

What a waste of time. Oh well, clearly Belle hadn't been taken captive by them. He grimaced at the thought that he would now be forced to check the pixie hollow for her.

Rumplestiltskin frowned as he watched flakes of the pixie dust fall off his skin. He shouldn't be flying anyway, unless he wanted a cannonball shot at his head. But walking was such a hassle, and what if Belle was flying around looking for him as well? They could run around the island trying to find each other and never meet up… Why didn't her mark work?

_Crocodile._

Rumplestiltskin turned, confused. It wasn't that he had heard the nickname out loud; he had imagined it in his head, he was certain of this, because his inner voice did not sound like a woman.

He was surprised to see Tiger Lily emerging from the brush, a spear in one hand and the tiger skin still draped around her. She bowed her head in respect, _Forgive my intrusion._

So she was telepathic, eh? That explained her friend… "Something you need, dearie?"

She met his eyes timidly, _I wish to help you to pay off my debt._

Again with the debt thing… Rumplestiltskin shook his head, "I don't want anything from you people."

Tiger Lily glanced thoughtfully at his side, _Where is the squaw you were with?_  
Rumplestiltskin clenched his jaw, "Gone."

_You're looking for her, aren't you? He turned his back on her. If Hook finds her…_  
"I'm well aware of Mr. Jones's view of women, especially of those I have," he growled.

_You are a stranger to this land, Tiger Lily reminded him, I know the island better than any of my people. Your time is running and your pixie dust is wearing off._

Rumplestiltskin stood still, knowing logically that the girl was right. And would he rather run the risk of Belle being found by that bloodthirsty pervert than have someone follow him around trying to help?

Tiger Lily passed him, taking the lead without his agreement to letting her come along, _The pirates usually spend the night on board their ship. Now, when everything is sleeping, is the best time to find her._

Belle kept track of the days by notches in a branch; two weeks had passed, though she hardly felt like it had been a day. After three notches she was let out of the cage. On the fifth notch she tried an escape, only to find she was too big for the holes the boys used to raise out of their den in the ground. On the eighth notch she wondered where the hell Rumplestiltskin was and why she couldn't use her mark to call him.

By the tenth, the boys were used to her. By the fourteenth she still hadn't gotten used to them and their wild ways. Without provocation they would suddenly burst into a fight, and even little Nibs would join in. She cared for them, of course, but they refused to listen to her even as they pretended to be her children.
Belle had just carved the fifteenth notch when the boys jumped up on her bed, yelling over each other.

"One at a time," she said half-heartedly.

"Come on, Mother, we have a surprise for you!" Slighty practically screamed and they pulled her up with a joint effort.

When she got to it, she was almost more excited than they were.

"Your own hole!" Tootles announced proudly.

"We got the measurements in your sleep!" The twins informed her.

"It's wonderful, boys!" She said, pulling them in for a group hug, "Now we can go on an adventure together!"

"But first!" Slighty piped up, holding a rope.

Belle had felt less humiliation scrubbing tiles in the Dark Castle. The rope scratched her neck, and Nibs had a habit of yanking on it if she got too distracted. Pet ponies of spoiled princesses were treated with more respect. But she was above ground, breathing fresh air for the first time in weeks. She couldn't help but enjoy the beauty of Neverland even on a leash.

They dragged her to the pond her and Rumplestiltskin had emerged from and tied her to a tree. She was forced to watch them go swimming while she sat chained like a nursery dog punished for no real reason. She should've learned how to undo complex knots, and she vowed that once she got home she'd find a book on the subject to study.

Because she just had to go home eventually. She didn't want to stay here forever. She halfheartedly tried her mark again, and felt Rumplestiltskin's essence, grumpy and sulking. It changed once he realized she was reaching out, and he immediately sought her location. She sent him an image of the pond, and was ready to summon him… When someone "psss"ed at her.

She glanced over to see the man with the red cap nearby, watching her worriedly. He glanced at the boys to make sure they were occupied before moving closer.

"Are you alright?" He asked. She nodded.

"Good," He unsheathed a knife and moved towards her throat, "Hold still please."

Before Belle could scream, the rope was cut, and he was grabbing for her hand.

"Hurry!"

Nibs spotted them and set off the alarm. The boys charged out of the water, picking up their weapons and hurling themselves at the man, kicking and punching and hitting him. He crumpled to the ground, curling up in self defense.

"STOP IT!" Belle screamed, trying to pull the boys off of him.

"He's a pirate!" They chorused, as if this was the most natural thing in the world to do to a pirate.

"I don't care what he is; you do not treat people that way!"

Eventually she pulled the Lost Boys off and got between them and their target, snatching clubs and
slingshots as fast as she could.

"That's it! No supper and straight to bed tonight!"

The whining was deafening, but Belle stood her ground. She pointed a finger down the path, "MARCH!"

Sullenly a bear, a rabbit, two foxes, and an especially glum possum started home, an enraged mother staying behind with a pirate.

"I'm sorry about that," she said quickly to him, "They're…spirited."

"That's a nice way of putting it," he muttered, rolling up into a sitting position.

"Thank you for helping me, Mister…?"

"Smee, William Smee." He removed his cap, as he remembered was proper in the presence of a lady.

"I'm Belle," she said, glancing down the road, "I should probably make sure they go straight home. It was nice meeting you, Mr. Smee."

Smee could not wait to let the captain know about this turn of events.

It had been a brief flicker of light amidst two weeks of darkness. Rumplestiltskin had sat brooding in the cave he and Tiger Lily had staked out as their sleeping grounds (though he didn't really sleep much). A pulse went through him that was familiar and warm. Belle was reaching out to him through their connection. He pressed back eagerly with his mind and felt her essence, nearly crying with relief. Annoyance, boredom, but no pain or fear. She was fine.

He automatically searched for her location and she gave him a mental image of a pond with a group of boys splashing about. He knew that pond! He knew where she was!

The connection suddenly broke off, but Belle probably figured he didn't need any more information. He was on his feet in an instant, brushing past Tiger Lily as she was coming back from a hunt.

Where are you going?

"I know where she is."

Tiger Lily set her kill down inside of the cave, wrapping her tiger skin tighter around her, How?

"She contacted me through her mark."

And how do you know it isn't a trap?

"I don't, I'm just moderately sure it isn't." She padded after him, and he was tempted to shoo her back to their camp. He doubted the seventy-fourth time was the charm, though.

When they came upon the pond, it was vacant. Not even a bird in a tree to be found. Rumplestiltskin tensed and Tiger Lily raised her spear, but no traps were sprung. No pirates jumped out to attack. There wasn't even a smug captain smirking at Rumplestiltskin's foolishness.

Are you sure she meant to meet you here? Tiger Lily asked softly.
Rumplestiltskin reached out again but this time he was met by the same block he had been experiencing over the past few weeks.

"I don't get it," he insisted, "I had her…she was here…with some boys…"

Boys? Tiger Lily turned to him, How many were there?

"Four or five."

Were they pale like your squaw? Rumplestiltskin nodded. Tiger Lily's eyes lit up, She's with the Lost Boys, then, Peter Pan's group. That's why you couldn't reach her; their hut is underground, the earth around it nullifying any form of magic.

His forehead creased, "Unconsecrated ground?"

Anti-magic spells… Necessary to keep Tinkerbell from caving the entire thing in if she's angered, Tiger Lily made her way to a narrow dirt path, It's a bit of a journey, but we should make it by nightfall.

…that's what Belle had been doing? Babysitting Pan's brats? He was going to kill her…

Captain Killian "Hook" Jones glanced up from the map he was examining as the door to his cabin timidly opened. There was only one person who dared to enter the captain's quarters without a summons…ironically he was the most cowardly of the crew.

He entered with a hesitant smile on his lips.

"I hope you have good news for me, Smee," Hook warned, putting out his cigar (a habit he rarely indulged in).

The Crocodile's arrival into Hook's territory was both a blessing and a curse. The prey had come to the predator, but the predator wasn't sure how to go about killing the prey just yet. Meanwhile the crocodile might be hunting him, wishing for another taste of him, and Hook had no desire to lose his other hand.

He had been moving systematically around the island for a couple of weeks now, the redskin princess strangely accompanying him (probably to fulfill her debt to him for the whole life-saving thing). The crocodile's intentions were unclear so far, making him that much more dangerous.

Smee nodded, the end of his hat bobbing enthusiastically, "The Lost Boys have acquired a mother," he said.

Hook cocked his head to the side, "A mother? From where?"

"No idea, but she's a very good mother. She got the Lost Boys to behave."

Hook arched an eyebrow, "Really?"

Smee nodded, "I think she's a captive, and she couldn't have been here for too long or we would've known."

"You think she's what Rumplestiltskin's after?"

Smee shrugged.

Hook leaned back in his chair, touching his lips thoughtfully, "We could use a mother around here,
at the very least…” Hook got to his feet, "Lower the dinghy, Smee, we're off to negotiate with the kiddies."

Rumpelstiltskin and Tiger Lily reached Hangman's Tree by dusk, and he wanted nothing more than to chop it down and pull his dear Belle out. Tiger Lily glanced at him, looking insecure for the first time he had ever seen.

*I'm used to dealing with Peter Pan, she confessed.*

"Groups are easier to deal with when the leader's present," he murmured.

Tiger Lily knocked on the bark, *I don't speak to them.*

"That's alright. I'm sure I'll do enough talking for the both of us," he grumbled.

Rabbit ears popped out of a hole in a tree branch. He beamed as he saw who had knocked, "Hey Tiger Lily, come to visit? Peter's still gone."

"Actually we're here to discuss the woman you've been holding captive," Rumpelstiltskin said.

Slightly glanced down at him and his eyes widened, *What is that?*

Rumpelstiltskin didn't have time for this discussion. *"The woman," he repeated.*

*"We don't have one."*

*"Yes you do. Long brown hair, bright blue eyes, wearing a blue dress, responds to Belle…"

"Oh her!" Slightly exclaimed, as if woman was a far removed term for Belle, *"We traded her."

*"…you what?"

"We traded her," he nodded seriously. *"She mothered too much. Look at what we got instead!" The rabbit boy pulled out a dull rusty cutlass and waved it proudly, "Isn't it cool, Tiger Lily?!"

*"Who did you trade her to?"* Rumpelstiltskin seethed from behind gritted teeth.

*"Captain Hook,"* Slightly said casually, *"Smee wanted a mother."*

**III**

It was the same old story, the story of Rosaline (Belle) French Gold. She tried to fight her destiny but no matter how she struggled, she convinced herself she would just go into the bookshop to look around…and then she'd allow herself a couple of books…and then she'd return home with a couple of armfuls, trying to figure out where to put them without making Mr. Gold suspicious of her crippling addiction. She'd long for the Dark Castle's endless library and maybe lean against a bookshelf in despair.

But at least the story always ended happily ever after, with Belle finding one last nook to tuck the final paperback into.

She was contemplating striking a deal with Mr. Gold for more space (maybe for his pants back) when her phone rang. It was Mary Margaret…

"Hello?"
"Hey Rose," A hoarse voice answered before she sniffed, "I…I just need someone right now…"

Belle got back into her truck, "Where are you?"

"My apartment," Sniff, "…do you think I'm a homewrecking tramp too?"

"Oh honey," Belle cooed, backing out of the driveway, "Of course not. It's just a horrible situation all around. I'll be there in a few minutes, alright?"

Sniff, "Okay…"

Belle was there as fast as possible, not bothering to knock. Her old friend was curled up on her bed, Emma's baby blanket clutched to her chest.

"Someone told Kathryn," she murmured, the tears starting up again, "David told me he would…but he lied."

"Oh darling," Belle sank down onto the bed beside her, rubbing her back. Her sobs began anew.

"I don't know which hurts worse; the fact he lied or the fact I'm now some kind of harlot."

"You didn't mean for this to happen," Belle insisted.

"But it still did, and now everyone's hurt," she shook her head, "I should have listened to you that day, just told Kathryn what was going on. Now everything's a mess…"

Belle sighed, "If it makes you feel any better, I seldom heed my own advice."

Mary Margaret choked out a laugh, "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm jealous of you and Mr. Gold. It must be so nice, to be honest with each other all the time."

It was Belle's turn to laugh, "Honesty hasn't always been his policy. The truth is painful sometimes, but it's easier to tell it than try to gain trust back after a lie," she smoothed Mary Margaret's hair back, "We're not newlyweds; we've had a few years to work out the kinks. That's the difference between true love and normal love I suppose; true love is stronger, and it takes hard work to maintain."

"But how do you know when it's too hard?"

"You take a couple of days off. If you can function without them, if you find there isn't a gaping hole where your better half used to be…then maybe it's not meant to be."

Regina stared at Mr. Gold uncomprehendingly, "…what?"

"You've raised a boy, haven't you?" He asked, "Surely you've heard someone tell you "no" before."

Regina was tempted to grab the nearest knick knack in his tacky little shop and hurl it at his head, "You came to me with the plan, not the other way around."

"And now something's come up so that I can no longer fulfill my end of the deal," Mr. Gold said, shifting his cane, "It's not like it had been struck; it was just an idea I tossed out there."

Regina studied the man for a moment, a malicious smile spreading across her face, "Oh you are whipped, aren't you? So that little maid's calling the shots now? Big Bad Rumplestiltskin bows at the feet of a woman?" She shook her head pityingly, "How sad; I thought you were above such mortal trappings."
Mr. Gold snickered, "Oh yes, how dare she try and help me be a better man, keeping me from doing something I might regret?" He shrugged, "Mightier men have fallen for less… And having someone to pull me back from the ledge is much different than being controlled. We balance each other out, yin…" He held out his left hand, "And yang," he held out his right, "She has a little bit of darkness in her and I have a little bit of her light in me."

"Poetic," Regina muttered, "But it doesn't mean you aren't under her control," she sighed, turning to leave, "It's sad, really. I miss the Rumplestiltskin who didn't need permission to carry out his schemes."

Mr. Gold just smirked. Being a whipped husband was not an insult; it just meant that he put Belle before himself in his list of priorities. With a dead husband, two dead lovers, and a man so deep in the friend zone he should be fined for loitering, her advice wasn't to be taken too seriously.

"FYI, Madame Mayor," he called to her as she got to the door, "Belle does whip me, and I rather enjoy it."

Regina snarled and shuddered, storming off a little quicker than normal. Mr. Gold snickered and went back to counting down the minutes until close.

III

Belle was quite used to the idea of value being attached to her. Sir Maurice had offered quite a large dowry in exchange for a union with the well-bred, knightly Gaston. She had been worth hundreds upon hundreds of lives to Rumplestiltskin for her services as a caretaker.

It seemed that her value had depreciated to a mere old sword.

"Cheer up, love," The dashing buccaneer across the rowboat pleaded, "I started low just like any good barterer and the boys went for it. I personally think you're worth much more than a sword."

It was certainly her worst reaction to a dealing of her person; with Gaston she was too shocked to really say much and with Rumplestiltskin it was the first time she had accepted her own offer. However when the Lost Boys brought her up from their home and she realized she was going to be traded to a couple of pirates… She had tried to fly off. Whatever Rumplestiltskin had thrown on her had worn off, making her look foolish and wasting the window of time that she could have used to run away. She had been frustrated when the strong grip of his hand came around her arm…she was downright horrified when she felt something sharp digging into her waist and glanced down to see a hook.

She had no weapons; he had a hook, a sword, superior strength and an accomplice. Jumping out of the boat and trying to swim back would only make things worse when he caught up to her. She did not know if he was a practitioner of magic, and she wouldn't test him against her own weak knowledge. She was defenseless right now and she'd have to accept that until another window opened up.

If Smee had any thoughts about the transaction, he kept them to himself, concentrating on rowing them back to the ship.

"You're a grown man. What use do you have for a mother?" She challenged.

"Everyone needs a mother, even pirates," he insisted, sprawled out as if he were on a couch, "Without mothers to care and discipline society would fall apart."

"Shouldn't a captain be able to care for and discipline his crew?"
Hook shook his head, "Nothing can replace a mother's love. Besides..." He grinned, a dark sparkle coming into his eye, "I'm more of a father figure to them, and I like to play house," he winked at her.

Belle was gagging on the size of his ego.

"Aren't you even a little grateful I rescued you from the Lost Boys?" Hook inquired, trying to sound hurt.

"Feels more like going from the frying pan into the fire," Belle muttered.

Hook gave a low whistle, "Such a sharp tongue you wield... Have I even given you a reason to be upset? It's the whole "pirate" stigma, isn't it?" Belle kept silent and Hook rolled his eyes, resting his head back against the stern, "The economy of Neverland is...nonexistent. Not a whole lot of booty to plunder when it's mostly Indians and orphans. But you'll have plenty of time to see that, spending the rest of your days aboard the Jolly Roger and whatnot."

"It's actually a pretty exciting life," Smee piped up, "Hardly anyone gets scurvy."

Captain Hook tried to offer Belle a leg-up but Belle climbed the rickety ladder up onto the ship by herself. The motley crew of sailors paused in their activities to openly stare at the first white woman to step aboard the Jolly Roger since Milah.

"Gentlemen, this is Miss..." He trailed off, gesturing for her to fill in the blank.

"Belle," she muttered.

"Miss Belle, and she will be our new mother, so treat her with respect or I'll have you keelhauled until the mermaids disembowel you."

Belle supposed the threat should make her feel safer...but really it just confirmed the fact that she had been abducted by a bloodthirsty maniac.

Rumplestiltskin didn't like sitting still in the first place; there was always so much to do, relaxing seemed to be one luxury he couldn't afford. But now, knowing his worst fears had been confirmed, sitting still was more impossible than traveling to a world without magic.

He glanced up as Tiger Lily ducked into the cave, her face grim,

"Is she alright?"

Tiger Lily shrugged, "As far as I could tell. She was above deck and seemed to be... Her forehead creased in confusion, Ordering Captain Hook's men around.

Rumplestiltskin gave a small smile, "I wouldn't put it past her; nothing much intimidates her." He got to his feet. "Then he doesn't know what relation she is to me."

Your squaw is brave, to be so calm in the face of such danger, Tiger Lily remarked approvingly.

"That she is," he gave a small bow, "Thank you for your help, princess, but I will not ask you to risk your life. You have done enough." He went to leave.

Wait!

A hand rested on his shoulder and he turned around in time to see the tiger skin slip. For the first time he got a glimpse of her arm and saw slightly glowing runes tattooed all down it. He stared as
he examined the ancient magic, destructive and dark in nature if he was reading them correctly. Tiger Lily awkwardly pulled the skin back up.

*He's tried many ways to find a weapon to kill you, Crocodile. I'm just one of the failures.*

There was a story there, Rumplestiltskin knew, but he didn't have the time to listen to it. He frowned, "Would you like a souvenir?"

Tiger Lily gave a dark, timid smile, *That would be nice.*

Belle had adapted to living on a pirate ship rather quickly, just under twelve hours in fact; it helped that they responded to her much better than the boys had, threat from their captain or not. The ship was filthy, and so she had put them to work scrubbing and dusting and generally making the craft livable. The captain just stood by and watched her with a smirk.

She was taking a break from yelling at the slackers and finding new things for them to do, leaning over the side of the ship and scanning the shoreline hopefully. The sunlight on the water was mesmerizing, but how could she focus on that when she was trapped with an enemy?

"Congratulations, Miss Belle. You've managed to get my crew to do more in a few hours than I have in a century."

Belle glanced up to see Captain Hook approaching her. He leaned on the railing beside her, following her gaze. Finding nothing, he turned to her, "You sure you're not a mother?"

She smirked and shook her head, "I'm sure. I just have a lot of natural ability."

"Shame," he twisted around, his back to the ocean and his arms folded, "So where are you from originally, Miss Belle?"

"The Enchanted Forest."

"Oh really?" Hook grinned, "I'm from there as well. What part?"

"Near Avonlea."

Hook shook his head, "Must be too far inland; never been. How did you end up in Neverland?"

"Magic," she said vaguely.

"Yours or someone else's?"

"Someone else's."

"Whose?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

Hook shrugged, "Just trying to get to know our mother. A father should know his mother, shouldn't he?" He purred.

Belle glanced down at his bared arm and tilted her head to get a better look. There was a tattoo of a dagger going through a heart… "Who's Milah?"

Hook frowned, pulling his sleeve back down, "A memory."
"A happy one?"

Hook clenched his jaw, eyes darkening, "A perfect one," he lowered his head, "But she's gone now…never coming back."

"What happened?" Belle asked softly.

"A crocodile killed her," he hissed.

There was a moment of silence and then Hook shook off the darkness, "You ask a lot of questions," he said, mocking her voice. Belle giggled.

"I do… Sometimes I get a bit too personal," she admitted with a sheepish smile.

Hook waved it off with his hook, "It's an old wound, a scar really… Doesn't bleed anymore…" His hand reached towards her, "…doesn't interfere…"

She pulled her hand away, "I'm married," she stated firmly.

"Lucky man," he said, not stopping his advance. He ran a finger down her inner arm, "Speaking of scars…"

Belle wished she had a jacket or at least longer sleeves now. To compensate, she folded her arms.

Hook flashed her what she supposed was a charming smile.

"Looks like dark magic, love. Please don't tell me your husband did that to you."

"What do you know of dark magic?" She asked warily.

He chortled, "I've made it my hobby over the past three centuries."

He grabbed her arm with a vice-like grip, his hook rising in the air victoriously, "Today's our lucky day, boys!" He bellowed to the crew, "We have ourselves a lovely bit of crocodile bait!"

Either Tiger Lily had lied or circumstances had changed, Rumplestiltskin surmised as he watched the ship. It was unlikely for Tiger Lily to lie, and the crew seemed to be preparing for a fight, so it was probably the latter. Something had slipped. Belle made an off-hand remark, or accidentally showed him something that would clue him in. He couldn't be rash; being rash was the whole reason for this predicament.

Seeing no other way, Rumplestiltskin tossed on a bit of pixie dust and proceeded to board the Jolly Roger.

The crew froze, not expecting him to be so bold in his counterstrike. They stared as the legendary crocodile strolled amongst them once again.

"Jones!" He snapped.

"No need to shout. I'm right here."

Rumplestiltskin turned to see the captain leaning casually against a mast. It was an odd mix, his confident grin with his furious eyes. He had Rumplestiltskin right where he wanted him; cornered, unable to simply weasel his way out. Belle was a liability he couldn't afford to lose, and he had her, and they both knew the perfection of this trap.

"Where is she?" He growled.
"It's always right to business with you, isn't it?" Hook mused, "No "how's it going, how have the last few centuries been treating you"? I see you've moved on from the whole Milah incident, at least," he signaled to some of his men, "Good for you because, well, I haven't."

Rumplestiltskin, as inappropriate as the moment was, became enraptured by his Belle. A knife at her throat, she maintained her pride even as they led her towards their captain. Their eyes met briefly and Belle's composure was broken for a second by pure fear at seeing him caught in the trap.

"Come here, love, there's a good girl…"

Rumplestiltskin's upper lip curled as he began to tremble with rage, Belle passed over to Hook, who lifted that famous weapon to her throat with the point over her jugular.

"So the crocodile has a mate," Hook jeered and then snickered, "Oh my… You should feel how fast her little heart is beating right now. Like a sparrow's…"

"You should've stayed away," Belle hissed at Rumplestiltskin.

"Oh and how could he have, with his twoo wove in danger?" Hook said, grinning at the stone-still crocodile, "Honestly I was hoping for simply the chance to kill you but this…this is a present straight from the gods. Killing your true love just like you killed mine."

Belle's eyes widened, "You're the crocodile?"

Rumplestiltskin's rage vanished in the face of sickness that spread through his body. He was nauseous. His knees were weak. He was fearful as he was faced with telling Belle his last secret, one he had guarded so fiercely.

Hook's mouth opened in an "oh".

"You didn't tell her about Milah, did you? Your current wife has no idea what became of your ex!" Hook was practically ecstatic, laughing until he doubled over.

Rumplestiltskin couldn't look away from Belle's stare.

Hook caught his breath in wheezes, easing himself back up with a grin, "Why don't you tell her about Milah now? Come on, the dear deserves to know."

Rumplestiltskin just stared, "…Belle…"

"Tell her!" Hook snapped, and Belle whimpered as the point dug into her skin, "TELL HER ABOUT MILAH!"

"I killed her!" Rumplestiltskin blurted out helplessly, "…I killed Bae's mother."

Strange how Belle's face was as horrified and terrified as he always imagined.

"Tell her how," Hook hissed. He didn't need any prompting to answer this time.

"I ripped her heart out…and crushed it in my hand."

Belle looked as nauseous as he felt, jaw dropped and eyes becoming glossy.

"And, for the grand finale, why did you kill her?"
Rumplestiltskin tried to wet his mouth; it was too dry to speak, "She left-

"Him!" Hook roared, "She left him for me and he couldn't handle it!"

Rumplestiltskin shook his head weakly in protest.

Hook leaned down to Belle's ear, "Try to imagine him, if you can, without power, a limp, and much more whining and pleading. That's who she left; is it any wonder why?" He laughed.

Belle glared at Rumplestiltskin, teeth bared, "You are a coward, Rumplestiltskin," she snarled, "An absolute coward."

Her words stung more than any sword, and he felt once again like that lowly spinner he had been, pleading for his wife back.

Hook chortled at her words, "Couldn't have said it better myself. Well, at least you learned the truth before you died." The mention of death seemed to be the code words to unfreeze Rumplestiltskin and he prepared to kill Hook before he slit Belle's throat.

Belle had other ideas.

In one fluid motion, she twisted away from Hook with just a scratched cheek and throat, unsheathing his own sword and pointing at him. Hook's eyes lit up.

"Impressive…but do you know how to use it?"

"What's there to know? The pointy end goes into the other person," she said flippantly.

Rumplestiltskin was suddenly immensely grateful he had given in to Belle's begging to teach her how to swordfight.

The crew came to life and Rumplestiltskin eagerly stole one of their swords, trying to mow his way down to Belle. She was incredible, so amazing and perfect, and he swore he was falling for her all over again at bravery he could never have.

Her sword clashed with his hook as she tried to find an opening. Hook had infinitely more years of training on her, though, and stood his ground swordless.

"It really is a pity I have to kill you," he mused, "You have terrific form." He lunged and she cut his cheek.

She met Rumplestiltskin's eyes…then turned and fled from him. His jaw went slack and he raced after her, "Belle!"

"I don't want to talk to you for a very, very long time Rumplestiltskin!" She yelled, trying to weave her way to the rowboat.

Rumplestiltskin ran a pirate through, "Dearie, can you be difficult after you're out of mortal peril?"

"Wasn't I in mortal peril just being married to you? Because apparently you have a habit of killing your wives!"

"Wife, Belle, it was only one!"

She was cut off by a trio and she whirled around, seeking higher ground, "And when were you going to tell me you ripped her heart out?!"
"Never, honestly."

"Never?!" Belle cut into someone's shoulder as they stood in her way, "It's not exactly a first-day-in-the-castle topic, but sometime before we got married would've been nice!"

She was up near the wheel now, as high as she could go without scaling a mast. She looked out over the ship for some other form of escape...before Smee timidly pointed his sword at her. They circled each other for a moment, neither having a desire to kill but needing to keep up the pretense that they would. They continued their little dance until the tip of Belle's sword flicked off his cap. He bent down immediately to retrieve it and Belle fled, Rumplestiltskin carving a path to the rowboat for her.

Belle was cut off by a freshly-armed Hook, his new sword almost identical to the one she stole.

"It's a shame you married him," he said with a sigh, shaking his head, "You would've made a lovely pirate."

"I'm not one for slitting throats or chasing buried treasure," she hissed.

"More's the pity." He struck and she deflected.

There was an aggressiveness to his blows, an anger bottled up for lifetimes fighting to kill her. Belle barely managed to hold him off as he drove her back, away from the rowboat and Rumplestiltskin.

"This. Really isn't. Personal," he said through gritted teeth as he continued to hack at her, "I just. Have to. Avenge Milah."

"I completely understand," Belle grunted, their swords locking for a moment before she twisted it away, "If my life wasn't on the line I'd be partial to your side. Murdering someone's true love is something ONLY A COMPLETE ASSHOLE WOULD DO!" She yelled over Hook's shoulder. Rumplestiltskin growled, still trying to fight his way to her.

Hook gave a soft laugh and a warm smile, "Goodbye Miss Belle." He kicked her.

She had expected to fall against a railing but instead fell through a gap. Her heart skipped a beat as she scrambled to stay on a single thin plank of wood, dropping the sword into the water below. She slowly got to her feet, careful not to lose her footing on the unsteady board. She tried to walk forward, but it was as if she was pressing against a stone wall. She took a step back and tried to move her foot forward again, but it wouldn't go.

Hook beamed, "Nifty, isn't it? A pixie helped me out with it; only one way off."

"Isn't walking the plank a little cliché?" Belle retorted.

Hook shrugged, "I'm a fan of the classics."

A shiver coursed up her spin as she heard a melodic version of her name, followed by a ripple of hissing.

Hook slapped his hand against the side of the boat, "Perfect! At least it'll be a quicker end than drowning or exhaustion trying to reach the shore," he offered cheerily.

Belle glanced down to see a writhing mess of scales and skin waiting just below her, teeth baring up at the ship. She caught Rumplestiltskin's horrified expression and huffed, "Are you happy now,
Rum? Could've just told me the truth about Milah to begin with but nooo, you had to keep that secret to yourself, just like Regina and the mirrors."

His face twisted in agony, "Belle…"

"Don't "Belle" me," she took a few steps back, "you made your choice to keep her from me…and now you're going to regret it," she shrugged, "Better than having my heart crushed, I guess." She continued walking backwards.

"Belle… BELLE!"

She slipped off the end of the plank and vanished.

Hook leaned over the side with a sick fascination, a chorus of splashing and hissing rising up, "Can't even see the blood," he remarked.

Smee took off his cap and the rest of the crew followed suit.

"Rest in peace, Mother," he murmured. The crew echoed his sentiments.

Rumplestiltskin roared his fury, charging through the men to look out into the ocean. The mermaids were already gone. Belle was gone.

He met Hook's triumphant gaze and cried a few big fat crocodile tears.

III

The car was in the driveway, but there were no lights on inside the house. Belle's panic mode instantly activated, her senses on high alert as she opened the unlocked door.

"Rumplestiltskin?" No answer. She took a couple of steps inside, "You know what I do when people sneak up on me in the dark…" She warned.

She tip-toed into the living room, "…Rum?"

She screamed as something pounced on her, tackling her face down onto the couch. A chest pressed down on her shoulders, pinning her as she squirmed. She felt the silk of a tie before a stubby cheek pressed against hers, a low growl coming from the back of his throat.

She giggled, turning her head to the side, "Is that your cane or are you happy to see me?"

"I want my pants back," he snarled and she squealed as his hands tunneled underneath her, heading towards the fastenings. She pressed her hips down, blocking him as best she could, "Goddammit Belle, can't you just let me have you already?!"

"And where's the fun in that?"

"Oh I'll make it fun…"

The doorbell rang.

Both of them groaned.

"I'm not in a position for company."

"What, you don't want Regina to see the Dark One standing at attention?"
"I don't want anyone to see the Dark One…except for you."

"That's sweet."

They knocked. Belle sighed, squeezing out from underneath Mr. Gold.

"Don't go…she'll leave eventually," he whined.

Belle ran her fingers through her hair and smoothed her shirt, "I'll make it quick, let Regina know exactly what she's interrupting," she left him unmoved in the living room.

"Can't you just tell her I'm busy raping you?"

Belle snickered, turning the doorknob and pulling the door open as she called over her shoulder, "You can't rape the willing, dearie," she mocked his accent.

She glanced back to see a pale sheriff on her porch, one who had clearly heard what she had said.

"I see you two have made up," Emma said dryly. Belle blushed; hopefully one of these days she'd be around Emma without some sexual remark slipping out.

"What's up, Miss Swan?"

Mr. Gold sat up, head turned towards the conversation. Emma shrugged, digging her hands into her pockets.

"It's probably nothing… But when was the last time you spoke to Kathryn Nolan?"

Belle furrowed her eyebrows, "Not lately; we're not that close. Why?"

Emma sucked in a deep breath, "Her car was found in a ditch near the city limits, airbag deflated. It's really early, can't even declare her a missing person so keep it to yourself… But I've got a bad feeling about this," she met Belle's eyes hopefully, "Have you or Mr. Gold seen or heard from Kathryn recently? Anything helps."

Belle swallowed hard, putting on her best poker face, "The most recent time either of us have spoken to her was several weeks ago when I was out shopping. I asked about David and she said he was really enjoying his job at the clinic. She asked my opinion on "Water for Elephants" and I said it was great, though I hadn't seen the movie. That's all I can remember."

"That's alright. I'm probably just being paranoid and she hitched a ride back home or something. Sorry to have disturbed you," she looked Belle up and down, pursing her lips "…have fun."

"Take care, and let me know if she shows up."

"Alright."

Emma made her way back to her squad car, trying to keep the nagging suspicion that Rose's response was a little off at bay.

Mr. Gold grabbed his cane, heart pounding. She was still standing in the doorway, staring out at the night.

"Belle?" He asked timidly.

She slowly turned away from the door and opened the front hallway closet. She pulled out her navy
blue suitcase and started towards the stairs, grinding her teeth together. Mr. Gold's stomach plummeted.

"Belle!" He raced after her, desperately grabbing her arm. She spun around, swatting him away.

"Don't touch me!"

"Belle, please!"

"Please what?!" Tears spilled out as her voice cracked, "After everything I've agreed to you couldn't just leave her be?! The dark curse, setting fire to city hall, letting Ashley's baby go without a fight, and you couldn't just listen to me?!

"Please Belle… Don't go," Mr. Gold was sobbing now, losing all dignity in the face of Belle walking out on him.

"Give me one good reason!"

"Because I didn't do it!"

Belle was silent, staring blankly at him. Mr. Gold fought to compose himself, but couldn't keep his chin from trembling.

"You told me no, and I respected that. I did nothing to Kathryn," Tears kept leaking out as his voice shook, "I don't know if someone did this, or if it's just the curse's way of keeping her in Storybrooke…but I did not do anything to Kathryn. Please…please believe me, Belle."

She continued to stare, her emotions melting from fury to fear. It would be so much easier in some ways if he had done it; at least there'd be someone to blame, a definitive answer to a disturbing dilemma.

"If you didn't do it," Belle murmured, "…then who did?"

Mr. Gold pressed his lips together, timid relief curling up inside his chest as she didn't return to going to pack her things.

"That…is a very good question, my dear."

III

Belle watched absentmindedly as a head bobbed along, steadily approaching Skull Rock. She hadn't seen it before but, with just his eyes and nose above the surface, Rumplestiltskin did bear some resemblance to a crocodile.

He entered the cave within Skull Rock, pulling himself up onto the large slab Belle was seated on. He shook himself dry and then made his way towards her. She shot him a glare and he retreated, staying low and off to the side. Belle went back to staring at the ocean as the sun set. The silence was suffocating and Rumplestiltskin squirmed.

"…I think I see why you didn't want to talk about Milah now," Belle muttered.

Rumplestiltskin winced, "I meant it when I said it was too painful to talk about."

"You still needed to tell me," she leaned back on her arms, "It's not so much the fact you did it… even though, you know, that is pretty bad. It's that you weren't brave enough to admit to it."
"I didn't want to scare you off," he mumbled.

She snorted, "Trust me, there were plenty of other reasons if I wanted one to run off…but I stayed."

"I still have no idea why you do," he murmured.

She sighed, "Because I love you, you idiot." Her toes curled into the stone, "Is it just me, or is there a recurring pattern between you withholding information and me getting kidnapped and/or put in mortal peril?"

"I'm starting to notice a trend," he said dryly, pulling his knees to his chest and resting his chin on them. "…she left Bae, Belle. I mean…how could someone leave their own child?" He pressed his forehead against an arm, "I had to go home and tell him she died, because the truth was I didn't want to take the risk of orphaning him from a duel."

Belle's posture softened and she glanced down at her curled-up husband.

"I asked her why she left years later, when I was the Dark One. She said she was miserable… She said that she had never loved me, after how hard I tried to make her happy… It was an impulse. Even as I held her heart in my hand, I had no intention of killing her," His nails dug into his legs, "He took my wife in his arms…and she told him those three little words I would have done anything to have. Crushing her heart was an accident…but I can't make myself regret it."

He closed his eyes, "I would never do that to you, Belle, even if you went right out and killed Bae… What I felt for Milah was one grain of sand against all the deserts of Agrabah in light of what I feel for you. There is simply no comparison; you are an angel and Milah was a demon."

He jerked his head up as he felt something against his side. Belle was now sitting beside him, gently brushing up against him.

"I'm still mad at you, and I'll probably hold this against you for a good long while," she warned, "…but I think you've learned your lesson with my whole near-death experience and painful truths," she attempted a smile, "Luckily I made friends with the mermaids though, right?"

"I like mermaids now," Rumplestiltskin decided.

Belle gave a more genuine smile and rested her head on his shoulder, "So do I…but even if they are dangerous, I'm still rather fond of crocodiles too."
Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold tries to guess what Mr. Gold is up to for Miner's Day.

A certain fairy visits Belle before her wedding to Rumplestiltskin.

Belle woke up alone without warning and her first thought was that it was Miner's Day. She smiled and turned over to the vacant side of the bed. A piece of paper was set on her pillow, along with a Hershey's kiss. She picked up the paper and read the note he had left for her.

*Good morning, love. Enjoy your day off; I will not require your presence until 9:15 tonight outside of the pawnshop. You must stay away from there, Game of Thorns, and the northern woods of Storybrooke. Might I suggest dressing warmly? Oh, and here's your morning kiss.* He had drawn an arrow to the chocolate, signed his name elaborately, and added a little postscript. *I haven't forgotten.*

She smiled and ate her chocolate before getting out of bed, the always bittersweet taste of the day in her mouth.

She chose to sit in a booth at Granny's instead of at the counter, ordering a full breakfast with her tea.

"You guys are closed for Miner's Day?" Ruby asked curiously. Belle nodded. "That's kind of weird, don't you think? But I guess it is technically a holiday…for Storybrooke at least."

"Oh we don't celebrate Miner's Day," Belle corrected her hurriedly.

Ruby's eyebrows knit together, "What do you mean you don't celebrate Miner's Day? It's not like Christmas or something."

"We just…don't. No festival, no candle-buying… It's just a personal day that coincides with Miner's Day."

Ruby sat down and crossed her legs, "Personal?"

Belle glanced down at her tea, biting her lip, "It's…well it's a day of remembrance, for the both of us. What I lost and gained instead. The end of one Rose and the beginning of another."

Ruby frowned, "Am I supposed to get what you're saying?"

Belle laughed and shook her head, "It's just a special occasion for us, regardless of nuns or miners."

As if called by name, a hung-over Leroy staggered in, looking like hell warmed over. Ruby sighed, rolled her eyes and got up to take his order. Belle smiled softly at the back of the former dwarf, a dwarf that had once been called Dreamy before others crushed his spirit. She hoped that maybe he'd find a way in this world to be with his love…even if she was a nun.

Belle was waiting on her check when Mary Margaret arrived. Belle automatically tuned her out.
once she realized it was a Miner's Day thing… Until Mary Margaret slid into the booth.

"Hey, Rose…"

Belle glanced up at her desperate face, "Hey Mary Margaret. How are you?" Her voice softened and the other woman shook her head.

"Not good… I'm trying to get volunteers to sell candles, but so far it's just me. Maybe you could…?"

Belle bit her lip, "You know I'd love to help you…but I can't support this fundraiser."

Mary Margaret tilted her head, "…it's to raise money for the convent…for the nuns…"

"Exactly."

She stared at Belle, "…you don't like nuns?" Belle shook her head. "Who doesn't like nuns? I mean…they're nuns!"

"I'm not Catholic; I have no religious obligation to like them." Ruby set down the check and Belle pulled out her wallet, "I'm not saying I don't like them period; there are a handful of genuinely nice nuns, like Sister Astrid. I just find that they're as human as everyone else, no shining beacons of immaculate goodness," she set her debit card inside and tipped Ruby generously, "Maybe if there was a change in leadership, I'd consider helping out, but as it stands right now I can't support the convent."

Mary Margaret's voice lowered, "…you don't like Mother Superior?"

A solemnity came across Belle's features, "She's hurt both of us quite a bit, pretending to be helpful."

Mary Margaret furrowed her eyebrows, "I thought Regina was the only person you didn't like."

Ruby returned with Belle's card and she tucked it away, "I prefer Regina, honestly. Regina is blatant; if you see a knife you know it's a knife, and that it can cut you. But Mother Superior…"

Belle frowned, "Poison's not always easy to detect; it can be odorless, tasteless. If you look at her she could be water or wine or juice…it's only as you lay dying you realize what she is."

Mother Superior made her way towards city hall, ready to oversee the day's festivities. It was their one big event of the year and, with Astrid's carelessness, it was now more important than ever. Gold did not grant extensions, the incident with Mr. French was proof of that.

A chill ran down her spine as she spotted the fiend alongside a van parked just outside of Jack's Candleshop. He was overseeing a worker loading box after box into the van, Jack standing beside him.

"There you have it, sir. 342 candles."

"Thank you, Mr. Nimble. I'm sure she'll be very pleased."

"I'd say so, with that amount."

Mr. Gold glanced up and met Mother Superior's eyes. He smiled and bowed his head, "Good morning, Mother Superior. Busy day for you today, isn't it?"

She would not take the bait. She would not let him see her fear of losing the convent, or of the
longing for such a large candle order. She bowed her head and smiled thinly.

"Indeed it is, Mr. Gold. We even have a couple of volunteers going door-to-door for sales this year."

"Ah yes, Miss Blanchard and her new friend. I'm curious as to how that will turn out," The last box was loaded into the van, "Well, best of luck to you…and I'll see you bright and early on Saturday."

Saturday. Rent day. Mother Superior nodded, "Good day then, Mr. Gold."

She couldn't help but feel the entire scene was just Mr. Gold's way of sticking his tongue out at her and making rude noises.

**III**

Her wedding day was not as she imagined it. She imagined handmaids helping her into an ugly elaborate gown, telling her how beautiful she looked though she wouldn't even feel pretty. She imagined she'd feel resigned, depressed even, as she made her way to the chapel where she would be wed off to the highest bidder. Instead she was alone, dressing herself as she chose, excited to meet with her fiancé and engage in their "wedding". She was going to marry her true love who, oddly enough, happened to be the feared and loathed Rumplestiltskin.

She was in a tower not far off from the Dark Forest, sitting in front of a vanity. A bowl of white flower blossoms was in front of her and she reached down every once in awhile to pick one up, braiding them into her hair. Her dress was almost entirely composed of lace, intricate patterns swirling tightly around her body. The long sleeves cut open just above the elbow, leaving twin cloaks dangling from her arms. The skirt of the dress moved as her legs did, not puffing out like some. White slippers adorned her feet, and a headband of pearls was placed like a tiara amidst her free-flowing brunette curls.

She wanted everything white on her last day of purity. The gold she desired would come soon enough and stand out against the snow of her attire.

"You certainly live up to your name… Beauty."

Belle was startled out of her daydreams, turning towards the sound of a voice. A splash of blue hovered near the window, and Belle realized with a mix of wonder and anxiety it was a fairy.

"...thank you," she murmured shyly, ducking her chin.

"It's a shame that it isn't actually a wedding," The fairy grew to human-size, touching down on the ground. Her wings folded neatly up onto her back.

Belle bristled. This wasn't just some normal fairy visiting a bride on her big day with well-wishes. She bowed her head respectfully, "Reul Ghorm."

The fairy wrinkled her nose, smiling warmly, "I prefer just the Blue Fairy, if you don't mind." She took a few steps closer to Belle, sighing, "I don't think you have any idea what you've agreed to."

"Aren't fairies supposed to give blessings on a maiden's wedding day?" Belle inquired.

The Blue Fairy gave her a pitying smile, "It's not a wedding, Belle, no matter how you try to convince yourself. There will be no true love's kiss shared."

"Is true love's kiss all that makes a wedding? Not the vows to love each other forever, no matter
what?" Belle shook her head, returning to her reflection for final adjustments, "We can't share true love's kiss."

"Because then he'd lose his power," The Blue Fairy finished, "But isn't that what you want? A normal husband without darkness festering deep within him?"

Belle clenched her jaw, "I can't have that. He needs his power."

"Because of the enemies he's made?"

"Because of the son he lost."

"Because he could not let go of his power for the one he loved."

"He was afraid and it was a moment of weakness he regrets every single day."

The Blue Fairy examined Belle who lifted her chin stubbornly, "He's convinced you I'm the enemy, then."

"He didn't need to convince me; the very fact you're here trying to talk me out of my marriage has."

The fairy obviously wasn't used to being talked back at, staring at Belle as if she didn't know what to make of the woman, "You are selling your soul to the Dark One, no matter how you try and sugar coat it. The ceremony he'll be performing? Originally to create loyal servants bound completely to the Dark One. How is that a happy ending?"

Belle was aware of what the ceremony was for; after the proposal they were both puzzled how to go about a wedding. Traditional was out of the question; true love's kiss was like acid, burning through any enchantment, and using some sort of cloth would feel impersonal and defeat the purpose. No one would come to a wedding, even if they found a priest. When Belle came across the ceremony in one of his countless tomes, Rumplestiltskin objected and accused her of reading too much.

If they wanted personal, sharing blood was as personal as it got.

She knew Rumplestiltskin still wasn't fond of the idea, but nothing else had come up in the meantime. Besides, there'd be benefits.

"You are good, child, purer than most. I would hate to see you lose yourself to him," she said sympathetically.

"I will not lose myself," she said firmly.

The Blue Fairy shook her head, "You will. His curse will settle inside of you, corroding your soul until you're as evil as he is. Darkness consumes the light; that is the way of the world."

"Even the smallest of lights chase the darkness away," Belle murmured, squinting at the Blue Fairy, "You seem to have a lot of faith in evil, for supposedly being a good guy."

The Blue Fairy stared her down, "I've learned not to underestimate the evil in someone's heart."

For a beacon of immaculate goodness, she seemed rather jaded, Belle mused.

"Once you start on the path of darkness, you can never turn back," The Blue Fairy warned, "He will destroy you before you can ever hope to redeem him."
Belle tilted her head to the side, "He sees the future, and you've seen plenty of the past. But you, nor him, nor anyone else will tell me what will or will not happen to me. No one decides my fate but me."

The Blue Fairy frowned, "I tried to warn you…"

"And I will deal with the consequences when and if they come," Belle stated, "I know I seem to be the only one to understand this, but I love him. Utterly, completely, irrevocably…so I suppose he has already consumed me, and I am fine with that. If he needs a light, then I will go into the darkness with him, because I am not afraid of the shadows." Belle adjusted her headband, "I appreciate your concern Reul Ghorm, but I've made it this far without a fairy godmother. I am strong enough to fight on my own, and if I do need one I'll just turn to my beast."

"Then I mourn you, Beauty, for today is the day the true you dies."

The Blue Fairy vanished as quickly as she had appeared and Belle was left alone to snicker. Maybe a part of her would die, but not her true self. No, her true self was who Rumplestiltskin fell in love with, as she fell for his true self.

III

She could lie and insist she hadn't meant to go to the pawnshop; it was habit, or she was just checking on it, or she forgot something. She certainly wasn't there to snoop…

…alright, she totally was, but she couldn't help it. If Belle had been a cat, she would've been dead within weeks because of her never-ending curiosity. She was a mystery lover, and adventurer and explorer… Giving her a list of places not to go was reverse psychology at its finest.

One of the vans was parked in the back, doors wide open. She crept closer and spotted the logo of Jack's Candleshop on most of the cardboard boxes, but a few sported the one from Game of Thrones. She leaned inside, trying to see if any were conveniently open and she could sneak a peek-

Belle yowled as something hard smacked her across her buttocks. She spun around and felt it poking and prodding her away from the van.

"Out! Out, out, out!" Mr. Gold shouted, shepherding her away with his cane.

Belle let out the most pitiful whine she could muster, "Abuse! Abuuuuuuuse!"

He ignored her cries of wolf, prodding her until she was down the sidewalk, "I told you to stay away!" His expression wasn't mad, but it also wasn't amused. It was simply irked.

"But I looooove you," she pouted.

"I love you too, but I'm going to kill you if you don't stop being you."

Once she was an appropriate distance away, his cane went back to helping to support himself, shaking his head at her pouting, "Dearie, you know our arrangement for today. You leave me alone until I want you."

"This has got to be the stupidest clause in our marriage contract," she muttered.

Mr. Gold smirked, "Not my fault you messed up your designated holiday."

"You took my father's van!"
He held up a hand, "You get Valentine's Day, I get Miner's Day, and we have each other's birthdays; all other holidays are joint. It's ridiculously fair, Belle."

"I want to spend today with you."

"I'm busy. Shoo."

Belle growled, before stomping back to her truck, knowing this was going nowhere. He still hadn't forgiven her the first time this occasion had come around, and now he dictated complete control over a day they should share. She pulled away from the shop, guiding her truck towards the lake. She'd fill her time with a stroll down memory lane.

III

Rumplestiltskin had procured for her a lovely horse when she had returned from her stay in the Queen's palace, a symbol of freedom to leave as she wished. He was a gorgeous palomino, with a white blaze and stockings and huge warm eyes that seemed as tender as a mother's touch. He didn't spook easily, even-tempered and forgiving to Belle's mistakes as a new rider. She had never been allowed to ride before, and the sensation of galloping was like how she imagined flying might be. The sturdy horse hardly even bat an eyelash at the Dark One, a creature most animals instinctively fled.

Belle had named him Philippe, after the blacksmith's son that had been her first crush. Philippe and Philippe would get along famously, she was sure.

The stallion sniffed and threatened to rear more the closer they came to the edge of the Dark Forest. His eyes rolled white, and Belle found herself unable to urge him further.

"Why today, Philippe?" She whined but to be honest, the charcoaled trees and lack of light were unnerving her as well.

She dismounted roughly, patting his shoulder and kissing his large cheek.

"Rum and I will see you later, then," she told him. He nuzzled her shoulder in a plea, but she pushed him away, "I'll be fine, you big baby. Go eat some grass or something." Philippe snorted his disapproval, but trotted back the way they came.

Belle watched him leave, smoothing her dress down, before continuing the rest of the way on foot. Her heart drummed in her chest, nerves both excited and terrified dancing in her stomach. It wasn't a cheery place for a wedding, but it was the perfect place for a dark ceremony.

The dead forest ended abruptly in a ledge, a pit coated with ash and surrounded by boulders the focal point. Belle's breath caught as she saw Rumplestiltskin, dressed not in his usual outlandish fashion, but in a gentleman's outfit complete with coattails, polished boots, and a crisp white shirt. There was detailing of gold around his cuffs and the edges of his coat, but apart from that and the shirt, his outfit was completely black.

She smiled as she watched him pace, play with his cuffs, scuff his boots against the dirt and generally fidget with his back to her. It was just so him; the blend of regality with an awkwardness only she seemed allowed to witness.

He half expected Belle to run, to be completely honest. Maybe from him, maybe from the ceremony, locking herself up in her room or that tower he had shown her to prepare herself. She insisted on treating it like a wedding, and he was only too happy to pretend along with her. He wouldn't blame her for getting cold feet about something so sinister.
But this was Belle, a woman who had enough bravery for the both of them.

He saw something standing out of the corner of his eye and he froze, heart pounding excessively. Even as terror flooded his veins, he forced his head to turn. It wasn't fair, it simply wasn't fair; she was trying to kill him, he was sure.

It should be impossible for her to look so lovely and for he, the most despicable man in the realms, to be able to witness her perfection. If he allowed himself to believe she looked this way because she was giving herself to him…he'd explode. He could only take so much of her beauty, and he was at his limits now.

She smiled at him and lifted her skirts, making her way towards him. Stilted legs stumbled forward to meet with her and he nearly tripped over himself as he came within range.

Belle giggled, "Being clumsy's my thing," she insisted, looking him over, "You look very handsome."

Rumplestiltskin's shoulders hunched inwards defensively. His hand reached up timidly towards her, hovering near her cheek. She stood still, staring at him curiously as his face crumpled. His fingers touched her skin as light as a breath, slowly gliding down her cheek. He managed the weakest of smiles as tears rolled down his own cheeks.

"You are…so…beautiful," he murmured, his voice shaking with adoration.

Her own tears spilled out. Rumplestiltskin was such a range of things; he could act as though he thought he were the king of the gods, with his boots and dragonskin coat. But there were also these heartbreaking moments when he seemed to believe he was lower than dirt, powerless and defenseless as a peasant. She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him, trying to steal away whatever notions of being undeserving were in his head. His arms tentatively curled around her, his wet cheek against her hair.

Belle waited for a moment, then pulled away, skipping off towards a boulder. She hopped up onto it and patted the space beside her, grinning. Rumplestiltskin was powerless to do anything but comply. With shaking hands he pulled out a small pouch, fumbling to retrieve the contents.

Two gold rings spilled out onto his palm; not smooth flawless melted-into-shape gold, but bumpy textured gold, hundreds of strands of it woven together into a tight circlet. She could only imagine how carefully he had crafted them and how long it had taken.

"Ladies first?" He suggested meekly. She smiled, taking one of the rings and clasping his left hand in hers.

"I promise..." she began, meeting his eyes, "...to be with you, forever. I promise to love no other man the way I love you. I promise that I won't let you face your demons or enemies alone. I promise not to run at the first sign of trouble, but to talk with you about it. I promise to listen to you, and support you even if I don't agree, and to be whatever you need me to be. I promise only to hate your actions, never you, and I promise to help you and give you hope." She bit her lip, "Do you accept me the way I am?"

"I do," The words shot out of his mouth the second the question was finished. She smiled and slid the ring onto his index finger. It was such a lovely weight, and he felt complete with it on.

But now it was his turn. He took her left hand and found strength in her eyes to speak from his heart. He sat up as straight as any soldier, and his voice managed to come out even.
"I promise to have you as long as you'll have me, to never lock the door behind you when you leave. I will never love another woman the way I love you. I promise not to hide my heart from you any longer, and I promise to let you in on everything. I promise to respect your "no", and to listen to you, and to support you even when I don't agree, and to be everything you need me to be. I promise to protect you, and do whatever I can to make you happy and safe." Rumplestiltskin's words halted as he came to that crucial question, "…do you accept me the way I am?"

Belle beamed, "I do."

He slid the ring onto her finger and was prepared to faint from complete ecstasy. Instead, he cleared his throat, his voice taking on its usual playfulness, "Then by the power of the Dark One to do whatever he pleases, I declare you my wife."

"And I declare you my husband!" She added with an adorable little nod. He smiled and moved to rise.

Belle caught him by his arm and yanked him back down, "Now, Part 2."

"Dearie…"

"Part 2!" She snapped.

Rumplestiltskin frowned, shifting uncomfortably, "I can't undo this once it's been done."

"I know," she said solemnly. Rumplestiltskin took a deep breath before pulling out a parcel wrapped in old cloth.

Belle inhaled sharply as he unwound the cloth, slowly exposing the sixteen inch grooved blade. Its metal gleamed as though it were new, glinting even without light. Belle knew this was the origin and source of her lover's curse; she knew it controlled him, and it was the only weapon that could kill him. His face was taunt as he held the blade out, his eyes laced with fear and hopeful trust as he presented the weapon to her. She looked over the black engraving of his name with reverence and slight dread.

Rumplestiltskin set the blade down between them, rolling up the sleeve of his left arm to expose gray gold flesh. He glanced at her once and she tried to look as fearless as possible.

The sky darkened as Rumplestiltskin took up his knife and she swore the very earth was tensing at the ill magic swirling around the ceremonial grounds.

"I offer the blood of the Dark One to you…Belle," he murmured, sinking the tip of the blade into the crook of his elbow. He cut a deep gash to his wrist, not a single hint of pain amidst his features. She was mildly surprised to see that his blood looked no different than her own.

He met her eyes, pleading with her silently, but Belle held out her bare left arm. His hand held hers, both holding her arm in place and offering comfort as he moved the blade towards it.

"I welcome the Dark One Rumplestiltskin's blood…and invite him and his power into my soul," Belle's voice quivered. Rumplestiltskin only hesitated a moment longer before sinking the blade into Belle's flesh, cutting an identical line to his along the vein.

At first, there was no difference between the Dark One's dagger and a regular sword cutting into her. It stung, but it wasn't insufferable. She bit back a whimper as her blood started to swell up from the gash. Rumplestiltskin gingerly set the blade aside before pressing his own wound down on top of hers.
Belle screamed and tried to recoil, but Rumplestiltskin gripped her firmly. Something sharp and cold was entering her, an icy blade slicing through her veins. It travelled slowly up her arm like a thousand stinging needles and she couldn't stop screaming, shaking at both the cold and the pain. She felt Rumplestiltskin pull him into her, her convulsing body against his as he cooed into her ear.

"It's alright Belle, my darling Belle, my beautiful precious Belle… It'll be over soon, dearie, I promise. You're being so brave; I love you so much..."

She sobbed against his chest as the ice continued to spread through her being, squirming as if she could escape the pain. And then, the ice met her heart and she doubled over in a howl.

Claws ripped inside of her, further down than her heart, into some layer of her she couldn't touch but could feel. It slashed at the layer, cutting it open and Belle felt as violated as if she were being raped. The ice entered through the gashes of the layer and she swore she would pass out right there in his arms.

"That's it, Belle, it's all done… No more pain, dearie, it's over. You are such a beautiful brave woman, and I love you so much..."

The pain did start to ebb, throbbing in her chest and arm, while the ice settled and melted into her muscles. She continued to weep into Rumplestiltskin's chest as he held her tight, rocking her softly. Belle thought Regina's torture was the worst pain she would ever endure…this proved her wrong.

It was Rumplestiltskin's first time creating a minion; over the centuries he preferred to work alone, and who needed to hand that kind of power over to an underling? He knew it would be painful, something as pure as Belle having something as menacing as his curse enter her. He couldn't help but think that maybe if she had been a little less good, it would have been an easier experience for her.

He hadn't counted on being affected by the ritual as well. Something hot coursed through his blood, causing him to break out in a sweat and roast his flesh feverishly. He wanted to throw up, or at least curl under a blanket and fall asleep to forget the ache in his limbs. He hadn't been sick for the longest time…but with this came back all the memories of having a common flu.

He wasn't nearly as bad off as Belle was, and he tried to comfort her as she shook, crying at the violation. He glanced up as he spotted something blue, and scowled. Why did she have to come, here, now?

The Blue Fairy glared at Rumplestiltskin, the evidence of his depravity curled up in his arms and crying like a child. She did not know what Rumplestiltskin planned for poor Belle, but she did know that the Dark One was incapable of love. Hadn't he proven that when he let his own son slip through his fingers?

It sickened her to see Belle clothed in white like some sacrificial lamb. She flicked her wand and the blossoms in Belle's hair crumbled into ash, her dress darkening from white to gray. As far as the Blue Fairy was concerned, today marked the day Belle died.

III

She locked the cabin door behind her and pulled the curtains on the windows closed. Belle didn't care that the property's few neighbors were out of sight range; the last thing she needed was Regina or someone taking a stroll just as she started going through the trunk.

She opened the closet door and pulled a quilt off of a brown chest with golden buckles. It actually
didn't stand out too much, she thought, similar to an antique trunk of this world. She pulled it out of hiding and undid the fastenings. Rumplestiltskin, in his complicated plan, had found room to enchant a single trunk for Belle to bring over whatever she desired. It had been pure hell to decide which books she couldn't part with, but the other items weren't nearly as difficult to pick.

The books were on top and she stroked each spine before setting them aside. After the other day, Rumplestiltskin's leather pants had ended up back in the trunk and she smiled at them. There was one of his silken shirts, the one he had worn when he had let her go to town that first time. A pressed rose from their gardens, a couple spools of gold thread, her maid's dress, the dress he had met her in, a pair of boots... She was surprised how much she managed to cram inside in her desperation to not leave a single memento behind.

She eventually came to the bottom of the trunk and laid out Rumplestiltskin's suit. Her fingers traced the gold details and she closed her eyes, reliving seeing him in it, the softness in his eyes and the way he comforted her as she writhed in pain against him. She then pulled out her grayed wedding dress, still beautiful even with the taint, and held it to her chest. Oddly the strongest memories of it weren't during the ceremony, but rather when she put it on and when he took it off. Her hand touched her cheek where his had been. It had been a beautiful, painful day.

Finally, she laid out her dress next to his suit and took out a small bundle from the bottom of the trunk. She glanced around quickly before slowly unwinding the cloth, exposing the sixteen inch grooved blade. Its metal gleamed as though it were new, glinting even in the dim light. She traced the letters of his name as lovingly as if it were his skin. In a twisted way, it was a part of him, a part he had entrusted her with and she would defend with her life.

III

She had not been prepared for this. Belle stared blankly at the vacant side of their bed, where Rumplestiltskin should be. Instead, he was spending the night in a dungeon and why? Because Cinderella hadn't read the fine print and decided that it was a good enough excuse to back out on her end.

Now Belle was alone, facing four short months to tie up every detail of the intricate Dark Curse without him being there to guide her. This was their best chance at him being reunited with Bae... what if she forgot something crucial? What if she messed up, and it cost him his chance at finding his son? She knew so little about magic and curses in comparison to true practitioners, and all of these strangers she had to negotiate with...

It was so cold without his body to curl up against. It was so dark without seeing the slight shimmer of his odd skin. It was so lonely without his soft breathing, or his tossing and turning like an agitated cat. Belle couldn't take it anymore.

She reached under her pillow and pulled out his dagger, his wedding gift to her.

"It's a promise," he had said, "That you mean more to me than my power in the long run... Maybe not right now, as I need it to find Bae, but eventually."

"But it controls you," Belle had insisted.

He had shrugged, "You already control me, love. It's not going to make much of a difference."

She held it out at arm's length, his name staring her in the face.

"I summon thee, O Dark One," she murmured."
He was supposed to appear immediately, or at the most a few seconds late. It was not a command he could ignore and he likened it to his magic controlling him instead of the other way around. But he did not come.

"I summon thee Rumplestiltskin!" She said a little louder. Still nothing.

Tears spilled down her face as her voice rose hysterically, "I summon thee! I summon thee! Dark One! Rumple! Please, just be here, just come back home! Rumplestiltskin!"

She repeated the command over and over again, until her voice was hoarse and her arm lost its strength. She sobbed into her pillow, her bed no more warm, the room no lighter, the loneliness no less pressing.

In a dungeon far away, Kingsley was doing his best to ignore Rumplestiltskin's latest stunt. His younger counterpart kept glancing back at the prisoner.

"Shouldn't we do something?" He murmured, "I mean, he's convulsing on the ground…"

"Pay him no mind."

"He's bleeding from the nose and foaming at the mouth-"

"I said pay him no mind!" Kingsley snapped, frowning, "It's probably a ruse… Nothing can hurt the Dark One."

"But what if-"

"Do you want to go in and check? Have him use you as leverage, or maybe just rip your heart out and crush it?" The young man closed his mouth. Kingsley shook his head, "He's not a man, my friend…he's a monster."

Rumplestiltskin remained in the corner of his cell, deep in the grasp of a seizure. His eyes rolled back into his head as he tasted his own blood. He wasn't sure which was worse; the pain of being trapped between the cell's magic and obeying his own curse, or the fact his Belle was crying out for him and he was unable to go to her and comfort her.

III

Belle stood under the lamp light on the corner of their store, "Kidnapped" in hand. She preferred "Treasure Island" personally, but it was the only book she had on her at the moment. She'd glance up every minute or so, or whenever a car was coming, but it was never Mr. Gold.

A gloved hand clamped down around her mouth as an arm snaked around her waist, hauling her backwards. Her protest was obviously muted and so she bit into his hand as hard as she could. There was a stream of profanity as he let go of her. She whirled around, ready to hit whatever vulnerable spot she could.

"Goddammit Belle…"

She only felt slightly guilty when she saw Mr. Gold nursing his hand, glaring at her.

"What the hell was that?!" She exclaimed.

"I was trying to abduct you," he mumbled, "I thought it'd be sexy…"

"Even though a woman has recently gone missing?!"
"I didn't think about that!"

Belle stuffed her book back into her purse, "What's sexy about abduction, anyhow?"

Mr. Gold shrugged, picking up his cane, "What's sexy about bondage?"

Touché.

He cleared his throat, "Now that you realize who I am, may I please continue my abduction of your person?"

Belle huffed and rolled her eyes, "I guess…"

He linked his arm with hers and escorted her to the getaway car, "I'm going to have to get a rabies shot now; I'm pretty sure you broke the skin."

"Oh hush. If anyone's a carrier for rabies it's you."

"…fair enough."

A short time later Belle was sitting in the passenger's seat, wrists zip-tied behind her back and blindfolded.

"I can live with the blindfold, but are the zip-ties really necessary?" She asked.

"Absolutely, or else you'd take the blindfold off," he pointed out.

"Are you taking me to fight pirates again?"

"Why do you ask that every year?"

"I feel as though we're driving around in circles…"

"That's because we are right now. I'm disorienting you."

"I'm a little uncomfortable with the amount of your knowledge on kidnapping."

"It's all from television and books, I assure you. It came in handy when I kidnapped Kathryn."

"…"

"It was a quip, dearie, please stop trying to get out of the moving car."

Mr. Gold parked ten minutes later and stepped out of the Cadillac. He opened her door and helped her out. There were no industrial noises, and it smelled like pine and earth. They were somewhere in the woods, then. He gently guided her forward, keeping her from tripping over the endless perils the rugged outdoors posed to someone as clumsy as she.

A glow started to form and Belle squinted through the blindfold. She couldn't make out the type of light, only that it was there. Mr. Gold sawed through her restraints with a pocketknife, massaging her wrists apologetically.

"Alright dearie, you can take your blindfold off now."

"And open my eyes?"

He chuckled at how well she knew him and his technicalities, "And open your eyes." She eagerly
pulled it off.

They were in a small grove of apple trees, bare from winter but no less lovely, that overlooked the town. Rings of lit candles were set up, spiraling towards a mattress that looked identical to the goose down one from their honeymoon. A few thick blankets were piled on top, with only one pillow to share. The rest of the forest floor was carpeted in a sparse layer of red rose petals.

Belle sighed dreamily, "Oh Rum…"

"Humor me," he said as he set down his cane, stooping down to hook an arm under her knees.

"Rumple…"

"Belle, it's only a couple of yards. It won't kill me."

With a well-practiced motion he swept her up into his arms, gritting his teeth determinedly. He slowly started forward, his gait stilted as he forced himself to do the gesture he had done countless times back in the old world.

"It's a good thing you're small, or this might've been very difficult," he grunted. Belle giggled, trying to support some of her own weight.

He made it to the mattress, collapsing rather gracelessly on his bottom. Belle rocked forward into him and he stopped their momentum before they rocked completely back. Belle sat for a moment, her arms around his neck, staring into those perfect brown eyes. If he wasn't the famed Rumplestiltskin, she might have accused him of blushing as he glanced away, adjusting so that he was sitting up and she was in his lap.

"There's 342 candles, Belle," he murmured offhandedly, his arms pulling her snugly against him, "One for each year I managed to survive before you came into my life…"

She stared out at the sea of light, trying to fathom so much time. The couple of decades she had lived without him seemed like an eternity, but nearly three and a half centuries?

"…I cannot begin to express my gratitude to you for coming into my life, for staying in my life," he said softly, "When I lost Bae…I turned to dust. There was nothing left of me. But you, you came along and breathed life back into the dust. You have always been my Persephone, filling my dark with your light…except you never left me like she left Hades. No matter how horrible things got, no matter what I did to you…you stayed. You stayed and I can't begin to imagine why."

He closed his eyes and she tucked her head under his chin, clinging tighter to him.

"You changed me, Belle. You are changing me, from soulless to something that resembles a man, the man I could have been if circumstances hadn't have gotten to me first. You are so precious to me… Every moment with you, even after all these years, is still a gift, a gift I can never repay. I love you so much, and I know this isn't one of my best years… If I could only have magic for this night…"

"It was worth it," she murmured.

He shifted to look down at her, "What was that, love?"

She gazed up at him, smiling softly, "It was worth everything I went through, just to be with you."

Somehow Belle managed to top his sentiments in a mere fraction of the amount of words he used.
She leaned up and their lips connected, a slow sweet kiss so much like that first one. Then they had another slow and sweet, and another, savoring each other. Their kisses deepened, their tongues weaving together in an intricate dance. Their urgency, their passion, their lack of air all increased, but not their speed. They savored each other as they always longed to, a simple joy rewarded to them in the midst of a curse.

As they continued, they left the world behind. There was no past or future, no place to go or other people to be concerned with. They even shed their identities like a pair of slippers as they stepped into a holy place. There was no Caretaker nor Dark One, no Beauty nor Beast, no Belle nor Rumplestiltskin. There was nothing in the sacredness, except for what it was; the bond between them, the love that survived harsh weather and blossomed into the divine state of "Us".

After a few hours of exploring each other's mouths, Mr. Gold lowered Mrs. Gold onto the mattress, his lips moving from her mouth to her jaw line. She gazed up at the night sky, drunk off of their love.

"The stars are lovely here," she remarked.

"Why do you think I chose this place?" He asked, his mouth scarcely leaving her skin as he spoke, as if he couldn't stop tasting her.

He got to the base of her throat before he pulled away, squirming around until he managed to get the covers over the both of them.

"Happy anniversary, Belle," he murmured.

She curled into him, "Happy anniversary, Rumplestiltskin."

They both stared up at the stars until they nodded off, camped out underneath them as if it weren't early March in Maine.

III

Sometimes, Dr. Archibald Hopper liked to take himself and his dog Pongo for a walk through Storybrooke's woods before starting the day. It helped to clear his head, which was an important aspect of being a therapist. Being open-minded left room for the best solutions to a problem.

Pongo started barking as they entered the old apple grove, straining against his leash. Archie barely kept a hold on him and wondered what on earth had gotten into the Dalmatian. Then he saw the mattress surrounded by candles and rose petals. Mr. Gold's cane was nearby, and he saw Rose's dark curls spilling out over the covers.

At first he didn't know what to make of the scene, and shamefully his mind leapt to voodoo and satanic rituals. Even at this distance though he could see them entwined underneath the thick blankets, her head on his chest and his face buried in her hair. Had it been a different couple, his mind would've gone straight to the correct conclusion; a romantic camp-out under the sky.

Archie stared in wonder for a moment. He was as guilty as the next person of thinking Mr. Gold was anything but human, but quite clearly he had a soft spot for his wife. Pongo continued to pull against his leash, whining that his master wouldn't allow him to check up on the nice female who gave him vanilla wafers.

"Come on, Pongo," Archie murmured, tugging the leash until the dog complied.

Perhaps the monster of Storybrooke knew more about love than any of them, Archie realized
longingly. Perhaps there was a secret that the two of them were in on, a secret they kept to
themselves. A secret as powerful and longed-for as true love.
Red-Handed

Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold can never turn away a stray and with her grandmother owning the only motel in Storybrooke, Ruby has little choice but to stay at the Gold house for awhile.

An attack during Wolvestime leaves Rumplestiltskin wondering why exactly he had saved his maid.

"Come on, Frumpypigskin, just one more time!" Faoul begged.

Rumplestiltskin didn't bother to correct him for the hundredth time. Instead he fiddled with his walking stick, "You saw how mad they got last time…" He mumbled, staring down at the grass.

"Yeah, but it was funny! I mean, what else are we supposed to do, watch the flock?"

"Yes," Rumplestiltskin said, because that was what they were supposed to do.

As boys turning into men Rumplestiltskin and Faoul, along with other boys their age in the village, were starting to take on the responsibilities of the herding community and trying to find their niche in its system. It was their week to oversee the flock until sunrise, a quiet shift of watching over sleeping sheep. Rumplestiltskin thought it was peaceful; Faoul on the other hand either became restless or fell asleep.

They were both eleven year old boys from the same village. Their similarities ended there.

This new game was going to get them both on mucking stalls duty, Rumplestiltskin thought, if not a severe beating. As a defect from birth, he was used to being beaten over little things and tended to skirt around trouble. He wasn't sure if Faoul had ever been beaten, by his papa or otherwise.

"One more time, then never again!" He swore, just like he had last time. Rumplestiltskin fidgeted and Faoul grinned, knowing he was close to talking the lame boy into it.

Something shifted out of the corner of his eye and the boys turned to see a shadow peering out of the darkness, examining the flock with interest. It was the size of a horse with sharp features and sleek black fur, its pointed muzzle sniffing curiously. The boys both went pale and wide-eyed, but Faoul came to his senses quickly.

"WOLF!" He screamed, "WOLF!"

The giant head turned towards them and Rumplestiltskin froze, unable to move from his seat on the ground, unable to even join his voice with Faoul's.

"WOLF!" He screeched, but no villagers ran out to help them like they had the first two times he had raised the (then false) alarm, "I MEAN IT THERE'S A WOLF!"

The creature moved like an eel, gliding swiftly towards the pair. Faoul rose to his feet, wielding his shepherd's crook like a bow staff. Rumplestiltskin started to shake, sensing the end.
"WOLF! WOLF! WOLF!" Faoul howled, striking the beast as it approached.

The wolf caught the staff between its sharp fangs and snapped the oak like it was a twig. Faoul let out a single bloodcurdling scream before it lunged at him.

Rumplestiltskin shook harder, staring at the panicking flock as he tried to block out the sounds of tearing flesh and gurgling blood. A low whimper escaped his lips as he started to cry, praying to the gods that his end would be quick.

The beast finally finished with Faoul, moving around to look at Rumplestiltskin with those unnaturally yellow eyes. It was tense, as though expecting the coward to fight or scream, but Rumplestiltskin just trembled, sniveling pathetically. He couldn't even manage to beg for his own life.

It gave a low warning growl before turning to the flock, its original target. Rumplestiltskin sat helplessly by as the wolf helped itself to the sheep, their bleating ringing in his ears as he stared up at the full moon. If he had had anything to eat that day, he might have vomited, sitting next to the remains of the closest thing he had to a friend.

And yet all he could think about was how hard they'd beat him the next day at losing so many sheep. He should have been protecting them with his miserable excuse for a life.

III

"And what did you see, Clarice? What did you see?"

"Lambs. The lambs were screaming."

"They were slaughtering the spring lambs?"

"And they were screaming."

"And you ran away?"

"No. First I tried to free them. I... I opened the gate to their pen, but they wouldn't run. They just stood there, confused. They wouldn't run."

Mr. Gold wasn't sure who he sympathized more with; the FBI agent who was tormented by screaming lambs or the cannibalistic genius locked up in a cage for being himself.

The front door opened and Mr. Gold quickly changed the channel. The last thing Belle needed to walk in on was him watching a movie about serial killers and turning women into suits. Arms wrapped around him as she kissed his cheek.

"Hey, sexy... How's my favorite man today?"

Figaro, believing she was obviously referring to him, uncurled himself from his position on Mr. Gold's lap and stretched upwards, purring at his mother. Belle made no comment about the cat snuggling with the man who supposedly hated it, or the fact he seemed to be watching Dora the Explorer. She was far too busy smiling and nuzzling Mr. Gold like a drunken version of herself.

He sighed, "What'd you break?"

"I didn't break anything!" She protested, rubbing her cheek against his, "I just want you to know how much I love you...and appreciate you...and how glad I am of your kind, generous,
understanding nature…”

"What the hell did you do?"

Seeing how he wasn't going to get any attention from either of them, Figaro hopped down with a disgruntled huff, following a new scent out of the living room.

Belle started kneading his shoulder, "I think someone's been working out," she cooed.

"So help me god, if you don't tell me what you've done this instant…”

She nibbled on his ear thoughtfully, "…I might've brought home a stray…”

"Unless it's Mary's little lamb, we aren't keeping it."

"But she has nowhere else to go!"

"Animal shelter!"

"She can't go there!"

"Why not?"

A snarl came from the hallway and Mr. Gold turned his head. There were two things that caused the laid-back cat to react harshly; Regina and dogs.

"Belle, you didn't…"

"It's only for a little while." Mr. Gold grabbed his cane and got to his feet, ready to send mutt or mayor heading for the hills.

Instead, he saw a young woman standing in the doorway, a suitcase behind her and a terrified expression on her face. The two stared at each other, trying to reconcile the fact that they were face-to-face in his house with only an angry cat between them.

"…Miss Lucas."

"Mr. Gold."

"Well it looks like you met Figgy," Belle cut in cheerfully, scooping up the cat. Figaro continued to growl and glare at the intruder, even as Belle kissed his chest, "It's just Ruby, you silly kitten."

"Rose, a conference," Mr. Gold said, before moving towards one of the more remote rooms. Belle frowned and followed, Figaro twisting to continue to glare at Ruby for as long as he was able to.

Once the door shut behind them Mr. Gold turned on her.

"That's your definition of a stray?!"

She set Figaro down, "I thought you enjoyed clever wordplay…”

"No, Belle, absolutely not when it involves that kind of stray," he frowned, "It's hard enough for me that you're friends with a werewolf, now you want to invite her into our home?"

"I said precious little when you took in an underaged alcoholic nymphomaniac girl as a maid," she pointed out, folding her arms, "Besides, her time of month is void here."
"It doesn't make it any easier to accept."

"It's only for a little while; her and Granny are at odds right now and she can't just jet off to Boston," Belle looked at him, as flexible as an iron rod, "You can suck it up until then."

"But-"

"Neh," she pointed a finger at him.

"Dear-"

"Nehnehneh," she shook it at him. Mr. Gold gritted his teeth together. "Discussion closed," she declared before leaving the room.

Mr. Gold fumed, knowing Belle's foot was down on this one and his rebuttal was weak at best. He glanced down to see Figaro glaring through the door, ears flat against his head as he let out a dangerous growl.

At least the cat was on his side.

He was startled when he came into the kitchen the next morning, and then felt like an idiot for being startled. Of course he'd run into Ruby at some point, now that she was staying in their guest room. She glanced away hurriedly and Mr. Gold awkwardly went along with his routine.

"...I'm just here until I can find a place of my own," she told him softly, "I'm going job hunting today."

"That's good," Mr. Gold said disinterestedly as he pulled out the orange juice.

"...I can pay rent if you want me to," she offered.

Mr. Gold paused, a small smirk daring to come onto his face, "I don't think Rose would like it very much if I started charging her friend when it's supposed to be a good deed." A timid smile slipped across Ruby's lips.

Belle bounded into the kitchen, pouncing on Ruby with a hug, "Good morning!" The pair of them giggled and Belle's smile made him smile...

...but he wiped it off before Ruby could see it.

"Have you had breakfast yet?"

"I, uh..."

"What do you want?" Belle asked as she walked away, going into the kitchen, "I get to be your waitress for once."

Belle halted, her smile suddenly disappearing. She glanced sorrowfully at Ruby.

"Who's going to make my tea now?" She murmured.

Ruby shrugged, "One of the other waitresses, I guess. Tiana maybe."

"But...they don't know how I like it."

She looked at Belle helplessly, "I'm sorry, Rose."
Belle shook her head, "It's alright, just a petty concern. Now, breakfast."

"It's fine, I'll grab something on my way out."

Belle pouted at the lost opportunity to serve her friend, then turned to her husband, "So I've reviewed the details of the bet and, according to precedence, a cancelled date does not make the deal void. You still owe me a night out on the town."

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "Do I?"

"Yup, so start deciding which movies you're putting off the table."

"Well you already know anything made by Pixar is blacklisted."

Ruby smirked, "You don't like animated kid's movies?"

"Not after two of them made him cry."

"ROSE!" Mr. Gold roared.

"What?!" She exclaimed, "Only soulless monsters go through the first five minutes of "Up" without feeling anything."

"Lemme guess, the other one was the third Toy Story?" Ruby ventured.

Mr. Gold scowled, "Why would I cry over a bunch of toys? The ones about inanimate objects are dumb..."

"Finding Nemo" hit a sore nerve," Belle confided.

"He went halfway across the world to find his only son and he thought he was dead! That is some messed-up shit!" Mr. Gold insisted.

The room went quiet. Ruby shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"...I think I'm gonna head out. See you guys later."

Belle frowned, "Alright, see ya."

Mr. Gold waited until he heard the front door close, "...I think you're trying to undermine my carefully created imposing image, story by story, PDA by PDA," he said.

"Oh relax. It's just Ruby," she insisted, nudging his shoulder with her own.

He shook his head, "Word gets around Belle, and god help us if Regina finds out I cried during a kid's movie."

He sat down with his glass of orange juice as Belle got out a packet of instant oatmeal.

"Any word on the Kathryn front?" She asked.

Mr. Gold grimaced as he swallowed, "David Nolan was taken in for questioning but there's nothing definitive."

"If they're following your plan..." Belle murmured, "It's going to lead to Mary Margaret somehow."
"They probably are, and Regina's fingerprints are probably all over it."

She whipped around to face him, "You never told me how you planned to frame Mary Margaret," she realized.

He took a sip of his drink, "That's because I was still tossing around ideas. I didn't tell Her Majesty the how, so now we're going to have to think one step ahead of her."

III

The boots were a bit big on her, but they'd do the job, Belle decided as she slipped her stocking-ed feet inside. She had discovered them in the tack room, discarded in a corner and hardly even broken into. She tied the laces as tight as they would go, put on a pair of ill-fitting gloves and then grabbed a pail. She took a furtive glance around before leaving the tack room, crossing the courtyard, and slipping out into the night.

She knew it looked bad, the traveling cloak around her and all. Even with her relative freedom, Rumplestiltskin tended to keep a close eye on her if she strayed too close to an exit. But he had said himself that a mid-winter storm was coming, and she wanted to make sure they had enough water before the stream froze…

…or so was her excuse for seeing the freshly fallen snow in the woods surrounding the Dark Castle. Her heart hammered the further she went from the Dark Castle, but surely he wouldn't punish her for a quick stroll? He was lenient for the most part, so long as her chores were done on time. Such a strange master… Not at all like she imagined he would be. The forests of the mountains mimicked their sole occupant; dark, sharp and intimidating. Still, the snow softened the severity, and Belle even dared to think it was beautiful.

She continued on her way to the stream and was relieved to see that it hadn't frozen over yet. She bent down, steeling herself for an accidental brush of cold water if her hands didn't avoid a splash. Belle tensed at the sensation of eyes on her. She slowly lifted her gaze to meet unnaturally yellow eyes staring at her from across the stream. A shaggy brown wolf…but it was unlike the wolves she had seen before. Much larger, much more feral, with an aura of danger instead of majesty. Its lips curled back as a pink tongue licked over large fangs. Never breaking eye contact, Belle eased up from her crouch and slowly took a few steps back.

A cold wet nose prodded her back. Two…there were two wolves. The first leapt effortlessly over the stream and Belle instinctively bolted. One of them gave a chilling howl before they pursued. Snow churned as Belle ran for her life back towards the castle. The wolves gave sharp excited barks, nipping at her heels. She struck out with the pail but she missed, and it tumbled into the snow. She reached up for a branch to try and climb up a tree, but it broke off in her hand. She whirled around and saw there were now six of those mutant wolves cornering her. She held the branch up and swung it like a sword at the nearest wolf. It caught the branch in its mouth and snapped it like a twig between its powerful jaws. Belle was out of weapons and out of escape routes.

She screamed as a claw slashed into her arm, spinning her around before she fell. Her curls slipped out of their tie and she shook them out of her eyes, staring up at the pack. One lunged with its mouth wide open and Belle closed her eyes, prepared for the end. There was the snapping of bones, and an anguished snarl, but Belle felt no pain. She opened her eyes to see a familiar brown vest in front of her.

The wolf yelped as Rumplestiltskin tossed it away, standing in front of Belle like a challenge to any...
who dared approach. The pack lunged at him and in a blur he broke jaws, snapped necks and mangled bodies. Each body landed with a dull thud, staring blankly at the sky, until the only one left was the one that begun the attack, the one that had lunged at her before Rumplestiltskin stood in its way. With an unnerving aura, Rumplestiltskin stormed towards the whining wolf that lay on its belly, pleading for mercy. Rumplestiltskin's hand shot down and closed around its throat. Its whine cut off as it struggled weakly, trying to squirm away. Rumplestiltskin held fast.

The light faded from its eyes as it went limp. Its death apparently wasn't enough; he snapped its neck and its jaws and bashed in its skull with his bare hands. Belle glanced around and was shocked to see she was surrounded by human bodies instead of wolves. She shuddered.

"Rumplestiltskin?" She asked.

He paused his kicking in of the wolves' ribs, head turned towards the sound of his name. His hair blew in the soft breeze, snowflakes sticking to it. Slowly wild eyes met hers, staring as though he couldn't recognize her. It was in this moment that she finally saw the beast.

Without warning he charged and she braced herself. Snow flew up as he landed on his knees beside her, examining her body.

"Did they bite you?" Belle started to shake, her teeth chattering. "Did they bite you?!" He roared and Belle shook her head timidly.

He eased back onto his legs, emotions turning to a chilly apathy, "You're cold."

Belle lowered her head, fighting back a whimper.

"Stupid girl," he muttered.

Had she not been frozen stiff by the events and the temperature, she might've squirmed in shock as he scooped her up and held her uncomfortably tight to his body. Even as the snow started to fall harder and the wind picked up, Belle was soon at a comfortable heat. It was a nice warmth, one she found she enjoyed an uncomfortable amount.

She looked up at her rescuer, but his face was unreadable, hurriedly marching back towards the Dark Castle.

III

"I'm a deputy now," Ruby chirped happily as she came into the house.

"That's great, Ruby," Belle gushed, putting in a pair of diamond droplet earrings.

"Bout time the force got a bloodhound," Mr. Gold muttered. Belle kicked him and he winced, "That's not fair, you have heels on…"

"Yup. I get to help solve crimes and stuff," Ruby glanced over Belle, "What are you two up to?"

"Date night," Belle said happily, "We're going to have dinner and then catch a movie."

"That's neat. What movie?"

"The Hobbit," Mr. Gold grunted.

Belle shot him a glare, "Be grateful I didn't drag you to the last Twilight."
"Honestly, I prefer the pedophilia/beastiality/necrophilia clusterfuck. It's worth a laugh, at least."

Ruby arched an eyebrow, "A guy who picks Twilight over Lord of the Rings?"

"They bore him," Belle explained, her voice climbing into a high falsetto, "If I wanted to watch a group of adventurers face evil for a common good, I'd send one out on a quest myself. Or watch a Marvel movie."

"Two and a half hours is far too long to focus on short people with large hairy feet," he insisted. Belle waved her hand dismissively at him.

"Anyway, does that mean you're on the Kathryn Nolan case?" She asked curiously.

Ruby shrugged, "I would be, if there were any leads. So far there's zilch," Her forehead creased in concern, "Wait, am I supposed to not tell you that?"

"If there's nothing to say it can't hurt," Belle assured her, fighting back disappointment.

Ruby sighed, "Everyone's just so torn up about this Kathryn thing. Emma's stressed, Mary Margaret's worried… I think we all need a girl's night out."

"I don't think anyone's in the mood to go out… I think they'd rather have a nice night in with their pajamas and a movie."

Mr. Gold sensed a storm the minute Ruby brought up other people. His blood ran cold as the she-wolf's eyes lit up, a terrifying proposition spurting forth from her bright red lips.

"We could have a sleepover!"

"A sleepover?" Belle echoed.

"Yeah! You're right; a girl's night in would be totally fun, and you've got plenty of room here."

Mr. Gold couldn't speak. The very suggestion of his private home being swarmed with people he barely tolerated was the very definition of a nightmare. He shot Belle a pleading look…but she was long gone.

"That's a great idea!" Belle squealed, clapping her hands together, "We could camp out in the living room, watch movies while munching on junk food, share secrets and give each other makeovers… It'll be just like junior high!"

No, Belle, no. You did not go to junior high. That is a false memory implanted in your brain by a very evil woman…

"Great, I'll make some calls!" Ruby bounded past them, digging into her purse for her cell phone.

Mr. Gold had never felt so little in control over his own home. He turned desperately to his wife.

"Please Belle…stop her. Don't do this to me," he begged.

Belle smirked, "Should've thought of that before you dissed hobbits."

III

Rumplestiltskin let Belle down roughly onto the rug in front of the dining hall's blazing hearth.
"What the hell were you thinking?" He snarled. Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I went to fetch water... before the stream froze over."

"Stupid," he muttered, "Easy enough to melt snow but I can't bring back the dead!" His hand was suddenly enveloped in a purple mist, "Give me your arm."

Belle stared anxiously at the mist.

"Give me your arm!" He snapped and she flinched. He sighed, rolling his eyes and saying the word as though it hurt him, "...please."

Nervously she offered her arm towards it, the claw marks long but not deep. He waved his hand over it and for a moment it stung, then went away. She stared at the healed skin in amazement as he stood back up, stalking off towards his chair.

"Travelling while snow fell to cover your tracks might've been clever... Had you been escaping a normal master," he held up his pointer finger, "Might I remind you that you're weeks away from the nearest village on foot. You should have taken provisions even if I would have noticed, unless you planned to eat bark the entire time," he sneered, "Trying to flee is futile; you ever do it again and I'll hunt you down and make you wish the thought had never entered your head."

She stared at him, "...I wasn't trying to leave. I gave you my word."

"Right, because you just so happened to forget that snow has a tendency to... melt into water?"

Belle's cheeks flushed scarlet. It was time to come clean.

"...that was a cover," she admitted, "I... just wanted to see the forests in the snow."

Rumplestiltskin stared at her as if she had just said she had finally learned how to tie her shoes.

"...you should have stuck to the fetching water story," he pointed back at the curtained windows, "You don't go into the woods for any reason during Wolvestime."

Belle furrowed her eyebrows, "...I thought Wolvestime was a myth..."

He gave a mirthless laugh, "Only pampered city nobles think that. As you just witnessed dearie, the loup-garoux are very much real."

Belle's stomach churned at his words. There was something disquieting about finding out that the monsters in her stories weren't limited to words on a page.

He watched her a moment, staring in that unreadable fashion, before closing his eyes and turning away. His shoulder caught the light and Belle saw something oozing from Rumplestiltskin's flesh.

"You're hurt," she murmured, shocked.

"An astute observation," he muttered.

She got to her feet and hesitantly approached him. His shirt had been torn open and she could see something almost black leaking out from puncture wounds caused by the beast's teeth. The first snapping bones...

"It bit you."
"You are on a roll tonight, dearie," he hissed, opening one eye, "Better me than you; the last thing I need is a maid who turns into a raging bloodthirsty murderer once a month," he glanced down at the infection, "Biological curses don't mix well together."

Belle bit her lip, "…is there something I could get you, to help with that?"  

He stared at her with his one opened eye for a long time, then closed it, "Up in the tower, there's a rack of pre-made potions. Take the vial with the silvery fluid marked with a moon. It just dabs on." Belle bowed her head and quickly fled.  

She didn't want to make a big deal of it, even though it was. She had never been allowed up into his alchemy tower before. He must be worse off than he let on; exhausted wasn't a mood that he wore often. She went straight for the designated rack and only scanned until she found the right potion, not touching anything else as she left. She'd show him that she was trust-worthy, even if he accused her of leaving.  

Rumplestiltskin glanced up as she approached again, pulling a stool over to his side. He eyed the bowl of water, the rag, the scissors and the potion she had retrieved in her absence.  

"I hope you're not fond of this shirt," she tried to joke. Rumplestiltskin just shrugged moodily with his good shoulder, and Belle took it as permission.  

He tried not to focus too much on the fact she was cutting his shirt open…easy enough to do when every brush near the wounds sent spasms of pain through his body. Belle frowned, watching him intently as she dipped the rag into the water.  

"I'm going to clean it first," she warned him, "It might sting a little…" Rumplestiltskin gave a low rumble that was somewhat consenting and she moved forward.  

He withdrew as she reached towards him, cringing and shifting away from the threat. She sighed exasperatedly.  

"I haven't even touched you yet."  

She moved forward again and he let out a low whine as she began to cleanse it, squirming underneath her.  

"The water's too hot."  

"Hush."  

There was something that almost resembled fear as she began to dab the potion onto the rag. Rumplestiltskin hissed as the potion made contact, smacking her hand away on impulse.  

"Rumplestiltskin!"  

"That hurts!" He yelled.  

Belle was far too annoyed to be intimidated, "If you'd just sit still we could have had this done and over with by now."

"If you wouldn't have tried to run away I wouldn't need to sit still for that godsawful potion!"

"I didn't try to run away and you know that!"

Rumplestiltskin opened his mouth to retort…but fell silent. She took the opportunity to wipe at
another puncture before he went back to squirming like a child.

"Shouldn't have been out during Wolvestime…" he muttered under his breath, stilling long enough for Belle to finish administering the potion.

The pus stopped oozing out, and the wound started to heal on its own. Belle watched it for a moment, before bowing her head humbly.

"Thank you, by the way…for saving my life."

Rumplestiltskin was on the verge of saying something sarcastic…but the words died at the honesty on her face. He shifted into a more comfortable position, his irritation fading into something that bordered on timid.

"…you're welcome."

III

Mr. Gold evacuated the house before the invasion was supposed to begin, saving the only other Y-chromosome in an excuse to leave. The cat was pretty good for being without a leash, sprinting then stopping abruptly to investigate something, then attacking, then waiting for Gold only to sprint off again. It walked a lot like how Belle did, he mused, except for instead of attacking she found someone to chat with.

He was debating on whether asking David Nolan out on an out-of-the-blue bro-date was too creepy when he heard a sound like nails on a chalkboard.

"What are you doing here, Gold?" He turned to see Regina standing on the other side of her gate. He had unwittingly traveled into her territory; how odd.

He looked at her innocently, "Walking the cat." He pointed to Figaro, who was busy trying to eat a flower.

Regina lifted an eyebrow, but apparently didn't know what to say about Gold's activity, "And you just so happened to have come to this side of town?"

Mr. Gold shrugged, "The cat was leading, you'll have to ask him what his reasoning was."

Figaro paused and glanced back as if to say "you coming?". Mr. Gold waved him on and the kitten went back to exploring.

"You want a night to yourself, Your Majesty?" He asked, an idea forming.

Regina narrowed her eyes, "What do you mean?"

"I could look after Henry if you wanted, take a late night at the office, have some quality Regina time…"

"What are you up to?" She growled.

Mr. Gold smirked, "You want the truth?"

Regina paused, "…I'm not sure," she confessed.

He shrugged lazily, "Alright, I'm a big enough man to admit it… I am intimidated by large amounts of estrogen and I'm looking for an excuse to avoid it."
He watched as Regina tried and failed to process Mr. Gold's predicament.

"I don't get enough time with my son as is; I'm not sacrificing any of it for whatever reason, especially to you."

"Alright then, we can discuss the odd coincidence of Kathryn's disappearance a few days after our initial discussion instead," he offered.

Regina grinned, "What coincidence?"

Mr. Gold rolled his eyes and sighed, "Alright, because we're old friends I'll give you some advice," he leaned forward slightly, his voice lowering slightly, "Give up. Have Kathryn mysteriously appear before you get in too deep."

Regina cocked her head to the side, "This coming from the man who asked how far I was willing to go."

"It was a question, not a suggestion to go utterly insane."

There was a rapid fire of panicked barking, followed by Archie yelling desperately. Mr. Gold glanced down the street and grinned, Figaro having the much-larger Dalmatian cornered.

"That's right, cat, make Pongo your bitch."

"I think you should go get your pussycat under control before someone calls the pound," Regina suggested.

Mr. Gold shook his head, "Not my cat. Belle's." Maybe Archie wanted a guy's night out…

In the end, Mr. Gold decided he would not retreat from his own house. He was Rumplestiltskin, the Dark One, the most powerful man of their old world and Storybrooke. Why should he cower just because of a gathering of a particular gender? He knew them all and they should fear him.

He slipped in through the kitchen door, the cat darting around him to make a bee-line for the staircase. He should've followed its lead. Gold winced as a chorus of giggles and squeals erupted, a stream of women reverted into the mindset of teenagers running into the kitchen. It played out like the beginning of a joke; Red Riding Hood, Snow White and Beauty from Beauty and the Beast had a sleepover…

Not nearly as giddy, Emma Swan trailed behind them. Their eyes met and he could see the disbelief of this madness reflected in her gaze.

"I didn't expect to see you back tonight," Belle greeted him as Ruby peered into the oven.

Mr. Gold shrugged, "The cat got tired."

"You walked the cat?" Emma asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mr. Gold frowned, "Why does everyone seem so surprised when I say that?"

"Poor Emma's never had a sleepover," Belle pouted, looking as forlorn as if she had announced Emma had been half-starved and locked in a basement her whole life.

"It's not like I had many friends," Emma muttered, "And besides, most of them were boys."

"Don't boys have sleepovers?" Mary Margaret asked Mr. Gold, tilting her head.
He shrugged, "I guess…but by the time they realize girls don't have cooties they're too old for it to be appropriate."

"Pizza's done!" Ruby chirped, grabbing an oven mitt. Mother and daughter turned eagerly at the promise of food.

Belle looked so happy, having a night with the girls. She should go out with them more often.

"We're going to watch the first Pirates of the Caribbean movie," she informed him.

"That's nice."

"I'd be careful, Gold. Rose has got a pretty big crush on Johnny Depp," Ruby warned.

"Oh, I'm well aware. She's already threatened that she'd leave me for him."

"Only if he wanted me," Belle corrected, "And if he didn't turn out to be a total jerk."

"Rose, where's your pizza cutter?"

"I've got it."

It was kind of fascinating, watching the group of girls. Like studying natives in their natural habitat. They all seemed to speak at once, yet understand each other perfectly. If he stayed completely still, they didn't even notice him. They gathered their sustenance and retreated back to their den, a fort that seemed entirely composed of blankets and pillows. Truly fascinating. He glanced around, before silently making his way over to the stove, reaching for the scraps.

"Don't you dare," Belle called from the living room, "You don't help the hen, you don't get to eat the bread."

Mr. Gold glowered, waiting a moment before trying to take a slice again.

"I mean it! If you want pizza make your own!"

He grumbled, then retreated. If there was anyone who could defeat the Dark One, it was definitely his wife.

The office became the unintentional enemy base against the fort downstairs. The cat had curled up on top of his desk and slumbered contentedly while Mr. Gold amused himself with business. It was a full two hours before he was reminded of the group downstairs.

Footsteps raced down the hall and he glanced up before his sanctuary was invaded. Pressed against the doorframe, the intruder stared at him imploringly.

"If anyone asks, I'm in the bathroom," Emma begged.

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "Is it time already for the ritual sacrifice?"

"I am done with this sleepover crap," she declared, "We built a fort out of sheets, fine, they did my hair, nails, make-up, I'll live. But I am not playing this game."

"What game?"

Emma sighed, "Well it started out with good old Truth or Dare, but no one could think of any dares so it turned into Truth or Truth. Ruby started getting nasty, so it turned into Erotic Truth or Truth. I
needed liquor to get through that so it turned into a drinking version of sexual "Never Have I Ever" where you take a shot for everything you've done," Emma closed her eyes and shuddered, "As I left it, Mary Margaret was mostly sober, Ruby was slightly buzzed, and your wife's in Drunkville heading towards alcohol poisoning if she doesn't pass out soon."

Mr. Gold grimaced, a little concerned. Belle was a friendly drunk…a very friendly drunk. And depending on how intoxicated she was, if he went down there she might just snuggle up to him… Or try to claw his pants off in front of everyone.

Emma looked about ready to cry, "I'm glad you two are happily married…but I am so sick of your sex life."

Poor young savior, faced with the dirty deeds of the Dark One and his bride. Hopefully such trials would steel her for the battles ahead.

Three encampments formed by the end of the night; the Sheet Fort of Drunkards, the Guest Room of the Savior and a Cat, and the Bedroom Lair of Rumplestiltskin. Mr. Gold still felt offended the cat left him for the first blonde he set eyes on.

He was surprised when he came into the kitchen and not a single princess, noblewoman or wolf had left. He considered turning right around, but they had spotted him, which would make it a retreat. The Dark One did not retreat.

"This is entirely your fault," Belle grumbled, a hand over her eyes and a cup of strong coffee in her hand. Mr. Gold smiled softly, going over to her and kissing her temple lightly.

"You're the curious one," he murmured.

"Yeah, but you either agree to it or bring it up," she muttered. He rubbed her back and she slumped into his touch.

He glanced up to see the other girls staring at the display of affection as though it were a Bigfoot sighting. He removed his hand self-consciously.

"I dropped my book over there; can you pick it up for me?" Belle asked.

"Of course, dear." He turned around, spotted what he guessed was her latest paperback, and bent over.

There was a gasp, a whistle, and a "daaaang", and Mr. Gold felt their stares upon his backside. He straightened and wheeled around to see the trio quickly trying to look occupied.

Belle smirked, "Told you guys," she murmured.

He set the paperback down in front of her, feeling a little used, and she leaned up for a quick kiss. She then wrapped her arm around his waist, "And he's all mine," she said smugly.

III

Rumplestiltskin gazed down from the veranda, watching his little servant curiously. He had noticed she had taken a small bag of seeds from the stables and, since she didn't seem inclined to eat them, he had followed her outside.

Now she padded around the grounds, protected from the cold in a warm red cloak and dress, along with properly fitting boots he had placed in her wardrobe. She was tossing seeds out into the snow,
feeding whatever birds came along. His hand unconsciously went to his shoulder, tracing over the bite marks that had healed so quickly after she had administered the potion.

He had found a bucket near the stream, further cementing her "fetching water" story, but that only made the whole thing more confusing. Maybe she hadn't been trying to run away…but what did that mean?

Why the hell had he saved her? She wasn't even that good of a maid, to be honest. But there was something about her, something he couldn't put his finger on. She glanced up at him and smiled, actually smiled, like she hadn't had a brush with death just last night.

"That's perfectly good feed you're throwing away, dearie," he said gruffly.

She giggled, "Right, because you have so many animals in your stables." The birds started to hop nearer, one even jumping up onto her hand. She grinned, "Besides, no act of kindness is ever truly wasted on those less fortunate."

"I beg to differ," he muttered, walking down the steps and out into the snow-covered gardens.

The birds immediately fled and he frowned, feeling slightly guilty at driving them away. Belle wasn't deterred for long, closing the gap between them.

"Hold out your hands," she ordered. Rumplestiltskin looked at her warily, but obeyed.

She poured some of the seed into each of his palms, then gestured for him to crouch down. He did so stiffly and she knelt down beside him with a giggle.

"Not so rigid; you look like a gargoyle," she insisted.

"Don't birds rest on gargoyles?" He asked innocently.

"Perhaps, but they'll come to you faster if you're more natural. Relax your shoulders…straighten out of that hunch a bit…your hands look like steel traps. Here."

Rumplestiltskin fought the urge to jerk away as her fingers were against his, easing them from straight-up like extended claws to down like an offering. The sensation of her soft warm hands on his bare skin was doing funny things to his chest and head.

She was touching him. Voluntarily. And not so much as even flinching.

"There," she said confidently, stepping back, "Less gargoyle, more man."

He kind of wanted to go back to being a gargoyle so she would touch him again.

Within a few moments the birds started to return. A minute later, one landed on his palm. He stayed still to keep from startling it, and then another landed, and another. Soon, a whole flock of them had landed on him, causing Belle to burst out laughing. He shook them off, grumbling in irritation.

"See?" Belle said, "All it takes is a gesture…one little act of kindness…"

"Until you're swarmed by annoying fowl waiting to defecate on you?" He muttered. She shook her head in that "you're so silly, it's adorable" way before wandering off.

Rumplestiltskin glanced down at his hands. He still had some feed to go. Instead of letting them come to him, he went to them, throwing the food at them viciously. He trilled a laugh as they
dashed away, finding the pelting version much more entertaining.

"This is fun. Can I have some more-"

Something soft yet stinging hit him on the cheek. Rumplestiltskin was stunned, slowly coming to the realization it had been snow. A snowball. Thrown at him. The Dark One who caused peasants to tremble at his mere presence. Was hit. With a ball of snow. He turned to see a snickering Belle, who quickly turned away and whistled innocuously as he spotted her. He should've smited her on the spot for such an act of treason, or at the very least sent her to the dungeon for a time-out.

He grinned, narrowing his eyes at her, "Oh now you're going to get it."

Belle watched as Rumplestiltskin magically shoveled up snow and formed it into a ball the size of a small house. He hurled it at her and she squealed, ducking for cover behind a tree. The ball exploded around the willow, bringing down all of the snow that had gathered on the branches with it. Then there was silence. Rumplestiltskin frowned, fearing he had gone too far.

"Belle?" She didn't answer. He trudged over to the tree, peering around it, "Belle!"

For his trouble he was met with a snowball to the back of his head and a giggle.

"Here I am!" He spun around and she took off running. He snickered evilly and formed a wave of snow to engulf her for her insolence.

Needless to say, Rumplestiltskin won the snowball fight.

Belle was still shivering in front of the fire when Rumplestiltskin strolled in, her cheeks a delicious rosy color. She glanced up and her eyes widened.

"I'm so sorry… I didn't realize it was tea time, I should've-"

"No matter," he insisted, setting the tray down next to her, "You lost miserably and you're going to catch the mother of all colds… the least I could do was make some tea."

"Well thank you then," she murmured.

He poured himself a cup and retreated to the safety of his chair, watching as she took her own tea and sipped at with blood red lips. Yes, he quite enjoyed the flushed look on her.

She read by the fire and continued to try and dry off, and he took it as an excuse to spin at his wheel. With her, but not. Enjoying her company, but keeping his distance.

Yes, he decided, that was why he had saved her life. Because she was fun to play with, and no other maid would even laugh in his presence, let alone frolic with him like they were old friends. That was all.

III

Mr. Gold watched triumphantly from across the street as Ruby donned her apron again, over more appropriate clothes this time. The wolf had officially left their home to be with her grandmother again, and he and Belle could go back to having the house to theirselves without fear of being stared at. Yes, he would definitely have to do something about that friendship when the curse broke; Belle's life was more important than her relationship with Ruby. His phone buzzed and he pulled it out, saw Belle's number and flipped it open.
"Home. Emergency" was all the text said. Mr. Gold went to his car and drove straight to the house.

Belle was pale as death, slouched into a chair. She turned to him as he approached, her voice shaky.

"That crazy witch killed Kathryn."

Mr. Gold pulled up a chair and took Belle's hand as she threatened to cry. She took a deep breath before continuing.

"Emma just called not too long ago…there…there was a heart…in Mmmmmary Mmmmargaret's j jjjewelry box," she stared at him with wide eyes, "The heart…it's Kathryn's."

The tears came and Mr. Gold pulled her into him, holding her tightly and rocking her soothingly.

"It's alright dearie…"

"No, it's not alright, it's so far from right right now it's practically left! We know Regina and what she can do!"

"And what she can't do," he murmured, "She can't rip out hearts here… And I will not believe Kathryn's dead until I see a body. There's too many things for her to manipulate; DNA results, fingerprints, even the so-called reliable sources who aren't supposed to modify the truth."

Belle pressed her forehead against his shoulder, "But even if Kathryn's not dead, Mary Margaret's in custody. There's substantial evidence against her, and a perfect motive…"

"Then we're just going to have to get her out by proving her innocent," he said simply.
Mr. and Mrs. Gold involve themselves in the Kathryn Nolan case; one legally, one illegally.

Belle finds an unexpected mirror in the reclusive Crue Hunter.

Mr. Gold was a sneaky little bastard. One minute Emma was trying to calm Mary Margaret down from the fact that it was definitely Kathryn's heart in her jewelry box and the next he was there, standing off to the side as if he had been invited.

"I've been following the details of your case, Miss Blanchard," he informed Mary Margaret, "And I think you'd be well-advised to bring me on as your counsel."

"And why is that?" She murmured softly, pulling her cardigan tighter.

"Because you're not going to find anyone else with the certain…skills I possess," he said carefully.

Emma grimaced, "Asserting your influence isn't what's needed here."

"Exerting influence may be exactly what's needed," Mr. Gold argued.

"What's needed here…is to find the truth," Emma said slowly, folding her arms, "I'm not sure you're familiar with it."

Mr. Gold chuckled, "I do a lot of questionable things, Miss Swan, but I don't lie." He put on that fake innocent look that he liked to wear whenever Emma spoke to him, "I'm only here to help."

"Enough," Mary Margaret cut in, "Please go."

Emma jerked her head towards the door, "You heard her, go."

"No, actually… I was talking to you." Emma turned around, surprised and slightly hurt. Mary Margaret was quick to defend herself, "He's right; I need help. And you need to do your job, or else I'm screwed," she squeezed her eyes shut, "So, just please… Do your job the best you can and you'll prove me innocent. Until you do…" She opened her eyes, looking at Mr. Gold, "I need some practical help."

Emma wasn't sure which was pissing her off more; the fact Mr. Gold was even here or the fact Mary Margaret was agreeing to work with the scumbag. She'd find the truth, she knew she would, and she didn't need some shifty charlatan to help her…

…but hadn't she just been telling Mary Margaret that she should consider getting a lawyer?

"Trust me," Mr. Gold said gently, "This is in Miss Blanchard's best interests."

She glanced at her friend, the woman who had let her in to her home, who had convinced her to pursue a relationship with Henry, who had bailed her out of jail from one of Regina's lesser
schemes. Emma owed a lot to Mary Margaret…and to see her behind bars while her own hands were tied behind her back was more than she could stand.

"Good luck, Mary Margaret," she murmured, before turning to glare at Mr. Gold, "I hope your best interests are what he's looking out for."

Mr. Gold glanced away and Emma felt confident he understood that he'd have to watch his ass if he did anything to hurt Mary Margaret's chances of being released. She left the room, trying to fight off the feeling of hopelessness and reminding herself that she was going to stop Regina no matter what it took.

Mary Margaret met Mr. Gold's eyes, her guarded face so much like the Snow White he remembered.

"Rose put you up to this, didn't she?" She guessed.

Mr. Gold adjusted the grip on his cane, "Rose believes you're innocent, which is good enough for me. But I come here to offer myself of my own accord; she doesn't even know I'm speaking with you right now." A white lie; Belle knew he'd be speaking to Mary Margaret sometime today, though not exactly at this moment.

She folded her arms, "Since when do you do charity work?"

Mr. Gold shrugged, "Since I invested in your future."

Henry opened the door of the pawnshop nervously, but he had been right. Mrs. Gold was the one behind the counter today. She glanced up from her book.

"Hey Henry."

"Have you heard the news?" He asked, ignoring Figaro's attempts for attention.

Belle set her book down, "Of course."

"What are we going to do?" He asked, "We can't let the Evil Queen frame Snow White!"

Belle came around the counter, bending down to meet his eyes, "Mr. Gold and I are already on the case. He doesn't think Regina or whoever's working for her actually killed Kathryn; all we have to do is find her to prove Mary Margaret's innocence."

"How?"

She sighed, hoping that she wouldn't have to have this conversation with him. Apparently she did, "We start with less-than-legal intelligence gathering…"

"Recon?"

"Call it what you like," she muttered.

He straightened, "I can help. I know the security codes for the house and the office."

"Henry, I'm not going to ask you to help me spy on your mother," she insisted.

"Then I volunteer," he retorted, "Proving Miss Blanchard's innocence is official Operation Cobra business." Belle couldn't argue with that.
She stood back up, digging her keys out of her pocket. Henry’s forehead wrinkled in concern.

"Where are you going?"

"To see if an old friend wants to help us," she said casually.

III

Summons arrived in a variety of ways to the Dark Castle. Sometimes letters just appeared on the table via magic. Sometimes a gust of wind would blow one in. Most often a trained animal delivered them (and they were usually birds of some sort). The requestors were either too afraid to trek up the mountainside to face the Dark One and his wife face-to-face…or too lazy.

Belle heard a knock at the door and had no idea who it could be. She set down the honey-do list and went to answer it. Two rather attractive men stood before her, one short and muscular while the other was tall and lean. They were both dark; dark hair, dark eyes, dark clothes. They bowed before the short one passed her a rolled-up flexible substitute for parchment. They then turned to leave.

"Wait, don't you need a reply…or at least a rest?" She should at least offer them tea…

The tall one smiled and shook his head, "No thank you, milady. Ella wants us back in time for supper, and it's a bit of a journey." Ella…the name was sour to Belle.

"Alright then, travel safe."

"Thank you, milady." They tipped their hats and started back down the steps.

Belle pursed her lips thoughtfully as she watched them leave. They were handsome enough to be her footmen, but they didn't look like they came from Cinderella's kingdom. She unfurled the letter and read the spidery handwriting.

To The Caretaker,

*I wish to speak to you concerning transportation of some goods. Perhaps we could discuss this over tea or a meal? You may come to my residence, Enfer Hall, at any time that suits you. I look forward to meeting you.*

-Crue Hunter

Belle hadn't heard of a Crue Hunter, but the last name had cropped up before. Since she wasn't on the list of those she needed to solicit, Belle figured she'd knock her out of the way ASAP and visit her tonight. Hopefully she wasn't being too eager.

Enfer Hall was indeed quite the distance from the Dark Castle, near the far northern reaches of the realm. It was a stone manor built on top of a hill, intimidating but overall unassuming. Belle made the hike up the winding gravel path, wishing she had brought something warmer than a shawl to wear as a glacial wind bit into her. She came up onto the front steps and lifted the brass knocker. She knocked a couple of times before standing back, examining the bronze bear that held the ring between its jaws.

The short one answered the door and smiled, bowing his head, "Welcome, milady; impeccable timing. Ella was just sitting down for a drink."

He ushered her in and she wrapped her shawl tighter around her. It was just as cold within the walls
as it was outside of them. He led her through the dark corridors until they came to a large room with a hearth and two couches facing each other across a low-rising table.

"Thank you, Ace," A low voice murmured from one of the couches. The man bowed his head and slipped out, closing the doors behind him.

Belle tried her hardest not to stare at the thin cigar in the person's hand; it was obvious by her stature that it was a woman, but Belle had never seen a woman smoke before. Smoking was a man's habit, and only a crude man at that. Reminding herself that she was the Caretaker, Belle strolled forward and seated herself across from the woman without being asked.

"It's kind of you to visit so promptly," The woman murmured, putting out her cigar.

"I had a free evening," Belle said nonchalantly, glancing at Crue Hunter.

She could've been beautiful at one point in her life, Belle thought sadly; there were traces of it even though some trauma had seemed to rob her of it. She was tall, especially for a woman, and thin as a thread. Her lack of weight sharpened her features until they were more intimidating than desirable. Her black hair was cut short, a stark contrast from her pale skin and blood red lips. A thick fur wrapped around her shoulders, some sort of gray fox, and underneath was a simple black dress that clung to her body, sleek, otter fur maybe.

"I could have Jas get you something if you're hungry," she offered.

"No thanks, tea will be fine," Belle insisted. Crue turned her head and Belle saw the sharp division of her hair.

Right at the part line, her black hair stopped and the other side of her hair was as white as snow. Her eyes met Belle's and they were ice; not in a metaphorical sense, but they literally looked like ice, pale and partially opaque and only distinguishable from the white of her eyes from the slight gray in them. Belle didn't need to have Rumplestiltskin tell her that this woman was cursed.

"I'm surprised how fast your servants got back here," Belle spoke before she was caught gawking.

Crue gave a soft chortle, "They're not my servants. They help me, to be sure…but they have no obligation to stay."

On cue, the door opened and the tall man came in with a tray of fine china, as well as a bottle of what looked like wine. He set the tray in front of Belle, before placing the bottle and a glass in front of Crue.

"Thank you, Jas."

"Of course, Ella." They shared a quick kiss before he left.

Belle had no place to judge…but the arrangement between Crue and her men did seem a little odd.

"My full name's Cruella De Ville Hunter, but that's a bit of a mouthful," she explained as she poured herself a glass, "Only Horace and Jasper call me Ella…and of course you." Belle thought for a moment Crue was speaking to her, but she was looking off to one side. She turned back to Belle, "I don't care much for my maiden name, but being the last surviving De Ville has its perks," she gestured around at the building, "I had to give up my moniker as the Cruel Devil when they started calling you the Devil's Bride…didn't want any confusion," she joked.

The Cruel Devil… That sounded familiar for some reason.
"So now you're Crue Hunter?" Belle said, pouring herself a cup.

"It's my favorite of the names," she said softly, sipping at her own drink.

Belle picked up her cup as the other woman watched her.

"I've heard a lot about you, Caretaker," Crue murmured thoughtfully.

Belle smirked, "I find that most of what is said about others by others isn't true."

"What about the part where you were a noblewoman who fell in love with a cursed man, giving up everything to be with him?"

She almost dropped her tea cup, shocked by the accuracy of the statement. Belle had been braced for something either mildly accurate (unicorn slaughtering) or a complete falsification (she hadn't killed that werewolf; she had merely sent it away). She glanced down at her gloved arm.

"...that part is true," she admitted. Crue gave a soft nod before taking another drink.

She set down her glass, "You've crossed over, my dear, from the plain to the complex. There are many powerful women on this side, including yourself."

"Do you count yourself as one?" Belle asked curiously.

Crue smirked, "I suppose. I don't have magic like Regina or Maleficent…but I can hold my own if it comes down to it," she crossed her legs, "I like to make friends with such women, and I've been waiting quite a while for the chance to meet you."

"Then why haven't you made contact before now?"

Crue sighed, "I didn't want to take the chance of crossing paths with Rumplestiltskin… I hear he has lovely skin, but I don't think we'd get along very well."

Belle finished her tea and set her cup down.

"Shall we get down to business, then?" Crue inquired. Belle nodded and Crue motioned for her to rise, "Maleficent warned me that Regina planned to execute the Dark Curse," she stated, "I'm looking forward to the chance to take a break from my personal hell, no offense dearest," she addressed her side again, "But there's one thing I'm concerned about…"

Crue led her out of the room and further into the mansion, "Personal items. Will they stay here?"

"Most of them will, but not all," Belle confessed.

"Not good enough."

Crue started down a staircase, taking the steps two at a time. It fed down into a long hallway of mounted heads, claws, tails and miscellaneous other trophies from more beasts than Belle could name. She couldn't help but think of Gaston and how he would **drool** at such an expansive collection.

"I need to make sure they carry over," Crue insisted.

Belle's mind boggled, "All of these?" She asked, staring at a dragon's head that was easily twice her size.
"No, none of these matter," Crue gestured impatiently to the hundreds of priceless kills, "I just want to make sure my puppies come with me. I have to make sure they come with me."

She stopped in front of a dungeon door at the end of the hall, pulling out a small brass key, "Price isn't an issue; you can take anything you want so long as my puppies follow me to the next world," she fit the key into the lock and turned, pausing with her hand on the doorknob, "Regina and I, though not on bad terms, aren't particularly close either. This new land may cure me...or just be another variation of my hell. I need my puppies in case it's the latter," she pushed open the door.

Belle squinted in the dark, looking down at the ground. There was no barking, no scrabbling of claws on stone. Crue lit the torches on the wall and Belle glanced up at the walls. They were lined with costumes...no, not costumes, she realized with horror. Pelts, actual pelts of larger-than-life wolves. She could only gape at the amount, sick to her stomach as her mind fought to wrap around it.

"One hundred," Crue said offhandedly, walking towards the only bare spot on the walls, "I would have been finished by now...but by the time I came back around to Anita someone else had killed her," Her hand rested in the vacancy as she frowned, "It's said Anita had a pup of her own...but I haven't been able to track it down yet, and I really can't give that one hundredth and first spot to just any werewolf."

Belle's hand covered her mouth, "But...loup-garoux turn back to their human forms when they die..." She murmured weakly.

Crue nodded, "That's why you have to skin them while they're still alive."

Belle swallowed down a mouthful of bile. "So, will you transport them for me? I'd hate to start all over again, especially at the scarcity of werewolves where we're going." She caught Belle's expression and frowned.

Her heels clicked against the stone as she approached Belle, "I know that look... I've seen it far too many times since I took up the Hunter mantle. It's that "oh my gods, this woman's a psycho, I need to get out of here" look. Because you don't understand what could turn someone into such a cold-blooded killer." Crue twisted around suddenly, "Don't "Ella please" me, Radcliffe! She has a right to know!"

Belle couldn't see anyone except the two of them in the room.

Crue spun back around, as menacing as a jackal, "You may not realize it right now, but once upon a time I was you. I loved a cursed man and gave up everything for him because I knew he was more than his curse. And suddenly I was holding him as he lay dying because the woman I thought was my best friend turned out to be a monster!" She narrowed her eyes, "Have you ever considered what would happen to you if Rumplestiltskin died?"

Belle shook her head because honestly, the notion of his death was so odd it was a fleeting thought at best. Crue clenched her teeth so tightly Belle expected them to break.

"Then I honest-to-gods hope you'll be alright, that the Dark One's curse doesn't overtake you and turn you into a monster, that your true love's ghost doesn't haunt you every hour of every night and day as he begs you to finish the task so he may rest and you may move on with your poor excuse for a life," Crue's eyes welled up with tears, "From one cursed lover to another, I hope you two last, because the alternative's a fate worse than death."

III
Mr. Gold had been texting when Regina walked in to the interrogation. Mr. Gold had checked his phone during it. And now he was texting again as they prepared to wrap up the incriminating Q&A.

"Seem a bit preoccupied, Gold," she commented as they stood to leave, "Playing with your phone like a teenage girl."

Emma and Mary Margaret both glanced at the pawnshop owner quickly, as if she had called their attention to the action. Mr. Gold glanced up at Regina, eyes wide with surprise.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be rude. I assumed everyone here would be okay with it," he said, turning to glance at the whole other two people in attendance for the interrogation.

"I would think Miss Blanchard would be uncomfortable with her lawyer so obviously preoccupied with something other than her impending murder case." Each word was as pointed as Regina's nails.

Mr. Gold turned to Mary Margaret, "I assure you, Miss Blanchard, that I was paying attention to the proceedings the entire time."

"I believe you," she said, and meant it. The man could probably multitask like a fiend if need be.

He shrugged his shoulder, "Rose is just being a little needy today," he explained before shooting a pointed look at Regina, "Be grateful you're not married; it's like a never-ending game of Hide-and-Seek. Am I right, Miss Blanchard?"

Mary Margaret furrowed her eyebrows, "What?"

"Never mind."

Hopefully Belle had enough warning to get out before Regina drove by and wondered why her truck was at city hall…

III

"There she is," Belle said, pointing to her.

Henry straightened to see over the dashboard of the truck, squinting. "Isn't that Kit?" He asked.

"Yup. She's an old friend of Rumplestiltskin's," she elbowed him playfully in the side, "C'mon, you've got this. Tell me who she is."

He sized Kit up as the girl spotted the truck and headed over to them, "Her name's Kit…she wears boots all the time…she's helping us be sneaky… Puss in Boots?"

Belle beamed, "I knew you'd get it," she praised.

He frowned, "I always pictured Puss in Boots as a-"

"Guy?"

"No, a cat. Like, a literal cat wearing a pair of boots."

"Ah. Well, she was a werecat in our world if that makes you feel any better. She had a tail and everything."
Henry didn't have time for more questions before Kit knocked on the window. Belle rolled it down and Kit noticed the passenger.

"I was wondering why we were meeting at the mayor's house for study group..." She said slowly, eyeing the boy suspiciously.

"Drop the act, Kit, he's in on it," Belle told her.

"Really, Mrs. G?!" She snarled, "He's totally going to sell us out!"

"I am not!" Henry protested.

"Kid, she's your mom. One threat of grounding and you'll sing like a doped-up canary."

"I don't support evil's agenda!"

"Knock it off you two. I will call off the secret mission," Belle threatened.

Her phone buzzed and she pulled it out of her pocket. The message was a single word; "Go", "Alright, Mr. Gold sent the signal. Move in, Cobra Squad!"

Henry led them up to his house as if it weren't unusual at all that the local juvenile delinquent and Mr. Gold's wife were going into the mayor's home. Like a dutiful spy, he stood watch while Belle and Kit slipped into Regina's home office.

"So what are we looking for?" She asked.

"Anything out of the ordinary."

"Gee, that's specific," Kit grumbled as she plopped down into the desk chair.

Belle rolled her eyes, "Out of the ordinary for Regina; anything to do with Mary Margaret, Kathryn Nolan, murder, or kidnapping."

"So like conspiracy stuff, gotcha," Kit pulled out a flash drive and plugged it into the computer. She glanced up at Belle, "You gonna sit here and watch or are you gonna go find dirt on our lovely mayor?"

"I was going," she insisted, leaving Kit to her work. She had just wanted to see a hacker in action, was all.

Belle wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for either. Any little change of detail could hint at something amiss, and Rumplestiltskin was so much better at spotting anomalies. She moved quickly but quietly through the house, aware of any indication of her having been there and erasing it. She worked her way through most of the rooms, paying particular attention to the master bedroom and adjacent bathroom.

She tried not to get sidetracked by the intimate peek into the former queen's current life; a well-dented pillow on one side of the bed while the other was hardly used, horse figurines the only personal touch to a room that could've been copy and pasted from an interior design magazine. In fact the whole house had a sterile, barely lived in feel to it, especially considering she had been there for twenty-eight years, ten of those with a young boy. It made the Gold house look positively home-y.

Her gloved hands thumbed idly through a drawer, pausing at a receipt from Robin's Outdoors and
Sports Shop. Belle didn't peg Regina as an avid camper… There was only one item purchased; a hunting knife. She heard a whistle and shoved the receipt into her pocket, doing a quick last-chance scan before heading down to the foyer.

"There's not much to her home computer," Kit reported when they assembled, "The woman does play a mean game of Solitaire, though."

"So her office at city hall next?" Henry guessed.

Belle checked the time, "I think we can manage it." She texted the number 1 to Mr. Gold before they left the house, trying to act playful and casual.

Henry caught her eye as he slid into the middle seat, his Mary Margaret-esque face hopeful. Belle gave him a hesitant smile and patted his leg reassuringly.

The office took a bit longer, Henry having to keep Ms. Ginger at bay while Belle carefully rifled through more documents than even her lawyer/businessman/dealer husband had. Kit sat back as the computer did the work, watching Belle interestedly.

"Not to doubt your vigilante mission to prove Mary Margaret innocent, but why would Reggie go after her? I mean, I know the mayor hates happy people like the Grinch hates Christmas…but her kid's school teacher? Did she give him a bad grade on a project or something?"

Belle shook her head, "It's a long complicated history," she said, setting down a folder of old transactions, "I don't know what the going rate for a computer hacker is, and I forgot to ask for an estimate…"

"Oh come on, Mrs. G, you really think I'd ask for payment?" Kit could keep the smile off her face…but not out of her eyes.

Belle smirked, "I know you better than you realize, and you wouldn't pass up this opportunity."

The smile slipped on as Kit snickered, "Have a little faith in me. Maybe it's just a good deed for a friend."

"And maybe you'll just so happen to find a price later and charge it for your "good deed"."

Kit glanced at the computer screen, "Welp, I'm all done. Just waiting on you now." Belle smiled to herself and started going through the last drawer.

Dealmakers each had their own individual style. Rumplestiltskin gave people exactly what they asked for with a clearly spelled out price, the consequences their burden to cope with. The Evil Queen promised more than she could give to get what she wanted. And little Puss in Boots had a habit of doing a favor from supposedly the good of her heart, and take something later as "payment". Everything came at a price, and that was the only constant.

Belle was looking over a ring of skeleton keys when her phone buzzed. She opened it. "Leave".

"Alright, time to move out," she told Kit, finishing her count and setting everything back in order. Kit pulled out the flash drive and they slipped out of the office.

Kit whistled once they were in the clear and a few minutes later Henry joined them outside.

"Where are you supposed to be, Henry? Home?" Belle guessed.
"Yeah. Can we make it?" He asked worriedly.

"If I drive we can."

"No, Kit, you're not driving." The girl hissed, muttering under her breath about how Mr. Gold let her drive…

Only mildly speeding, they managed to make it to the Mills residence before Regina.

"Henry!" Belle called. He paused, ready to barrel out of the truck, and glanced at her, "We're going to find Kathryn. We're going to save Mary Margaret."

"I know," he said flippantly before running off.

The confidence of a child was a powerful thing, Belle mused as she pulled away.

Kit slid out of the despised middle seat, watching Henry out the window, "You really think you're gonna catch the rat?" She asked.

Belle nodded, heading back towards the house, "Good beats evil; it's the way of the world," she said simply.

Kit mulled the idea over in her jaded pessimistic mind, "…so Mr. Pimp sucks at board games, then," she concluded.

"I kick his ass at Scrabble," Belle boasted.

Mr. Gold arrived close to the time Kit had started up his computer, flash drive plugged in and ready to divulge its secrets.

"We certainly can't depend on her political demeanor; she wears her heart on her sleeve, and cannot tone down her anger towards Regina," he reported, leaning heavily on his cane, "The woman simply doesn't know the fine art of conduct upon being caught."

Belle straightened from her position beside Kit, "I'd be a little emotional too if I were being accused of a murder I didn't commit," she defended.

"And I'd pull you aside and tell you to get your act together if you ever wanted to see the light of day again," Mr. Gold stated, "But I can't very well do that with Mary Margaret."

"So hey, hi, I'm still here," Kit piped up, double-clicking on the computer icon, "Talk about M&M on your own time… Now we talk about Reggie," she pointed at the flash drive, "This little thing has all of her documents, e-mails, website history, deleted files, anything you could ever possibly use, loaded onto it. Browse at your leisure; she's not gonna notice that I copied everything on to here, and I've got a dozen more of these. You can't edit any of the files, though."

"We don't really want to," Belle pointed out.

Kit got to her feet, "Well, I'll see myself out. You got any questions, you know where to find me. And if she finds out what y'all are up to… Just remember snitches get stitches," she warned.

"Thank you for your help, Kit," Belle said.

She glared at Mr. Gold as she passed by him, "I mean it, knock her up already. I want baby bulge by the next time I see her or so help me I'll drag you both to the OBGYN."
"I'm working on it," Mr. Gold muttered defensively, "Babies don't grow overnight."

"Ovulation cycle. Get on that shit," Kit closed the door behind her.

Mr. Gold rolled his eyes as Belle sat down in front of the computer, "It's like she thinks I have nothing to do except for bed you 24/7," he grumbled, "I don't think she realizes how time-consuming a single round is, let alone if it's one of our more elaborate sessions. Bondage could take all night."

"Rum, I think you're dwelling too much on Katja's opinion," Belle said bluntly, typing in "Mary Margaret" and pressing enter, "Do you want me to go through all this while you be a sexy lawyer or do you want to do the honors while I work on something else that's relevant?"

He walked over to her, leaning against the chair and staring at the spinning circle as the computer processed the request, "You do realize we can't use anything we find in court? Searching without a warrant and whatnot?"

"I'm focusing on finding Kathryn's whereabouts," Belle murmured, disappointed as the screen declared that no results were found for her query. It'd been worth a shot, "We have Kathryn materialize and then there's no need for a court case and no need for evidence, now is there?"

"And Plan B?" Mr. Gold inquired softly.

Belle bit her lip, "I was hoping you had one."

Kit stopped beside the stand in the front hallway and glanced around. Coast was clear. She opened the third drawer and dug through gloves and scarfs until her fingers brushed against a key. She had hidden it there the day after the big storm, while she had been living in their house. Now that she had given them something, she could justify taking it. She glanced again at the staircase, slid the key into her pocket and left.

Now all she needed was her flash drive back and she'd have everything in order.

III

Belle set the vial she had taken as payment down into Rumplestiltskin's little carrying case of potions. She hoped she had chosen wisely; because Cruella hadn't been on the list, there wasn't anything in particular she needed to ask for as payment. The heiress had been reluctant to give it to Belle, but had caved when she thought of the alternatives to the deal.

She went to Rumplestiltskin's bookshelf and scanned the spines until she found a thick purple volume. She pulled it out and glanced at the title. "Index of Biological Curses". She sat down on one of the work benches and flipped through until she found an entry on "Hunter's Curse".

"The Hunter's Curse was developed by the first Dark One Kronos in response to a request to combat the growing number of monsters and cursed humans (i.e. werewolves). It is a lineage curse, growing in commonality with each new generation. Characteristics of the Hunter's Curse include polarized hair color of one side black and one side white, ice-like eyes, pale skin, violent temper and a decreased appetite. The ratio of cursed Hunters to non depend on the amount of monsters in the realm; the fewer the monsters, the fewer the number of cursed Hunters. The curse alters the mind of the person so that the act of murder is as pleasurable as…sexual arousal and… subsequent orgasm," Belle stumbled over the phrases, "It drives a Hunter to kill to obtain the high, leaving them without remorse towards their victim. Most Hunters, as was intended, choose to track monsters but others sate their need with animal or even human lives."
Belle had to pause for a moment, repulsed by the very idea of this killing curse. It was one of the worst she had ever heard about, and her heart went out to that poor large family. She turned the page.

"The Hunter's Curse is non-communicable, save in the event of a murder of a cursed Hunter. The curse is then passed on to the next of kin, typically a child or spouse, and the newly cursed Hunter is haunted by the deceased. A murdered Hunter will not cross over until they are avenged by their beneficiary with the death of one hundred and one of the species they were murdered by," Belle slammed the book shut, squeezing her eyes closed.

Crue's words echoed in her head. *Have you ever considered what would happen to you if Rumplestiltskin died? ... I hope you two last, because the alternative's a fate worse than death.*

**III**

"What do we have?" Mr. Gold asked as they sat at the dinner table.

"Not much," Belle confessed, pulling out her burger and fries before Mr. Gold took the bag, "Her cursed life was just as boring as ours, and being the mayor she has plenty of dull in her business computer."

"Sorted by date?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't rule anything out pre-conversation," she bit down hard on a fry, "Who knows how long she's been planning a frame job."

"And your physical search?"

"Just as little; all of her sentimental things are in her vault, and I'm going to have to be pretty desperate to go down there," she shivered at the thought of sleuthing in the mausoleum, "She's missing a skeleton key and I found a receipt for a hunting knife."

Mr. Gold raised an eyebrow, "Possible murder weapon?"

"Either that or she feels the need to arm herself and doesn't like guns." She sighed, finding herself not as hungry as she thought she was.

Mr. Gold watched her for a moment, chewing his bite of hamburger thoroughly.

"...Miss Swan came to the shop," he said, "She's come to the same conclusion as us with fewer details; that Regina's behind it. She's a bit more...accepting of my help than she was with the election."

"Of course," Belle insisted, "That's her mother behind bars, or at the very least her best friend. Sometimes the end justifies the means."

A smirk crossed Mr. Gold's lips as he shook his head sadly, "Oh how mightily I've corrupted you, my sweet," he mused.

Belle lifted her chin defensively, "I'm cute when I'm scheming," she declared.

He chuckled, "Downright adorable." He returned to his food. "If the hunting knife proves to be important, you can put the receipt back and Emma can obtain a search warrant so we can actually use the evidence. In the meantime, I'll continue to brush up on my law and coach Mary Margaret. A fourth-grade school teacher... Affair aside you can't ask for a better sympathetic character."
"I'll keep searching through those files… My gut tells me something's in there," she shrugged, "And probably some more sleuthing, this time without the kids."

"Kids?" He emphasized the "s".

"Henry wanted in," she explained.

He leaned back in his chair, shaking his head, "A few more conspiracy theorists and we could have a revolution on our hands," he warned.

Belle pumped her fist in the air with a giggle, "Off with her head!"

"Wrong queen, dearie."

III

It was really rather simple why Belle had chosen to approach this person first; she wanted it done and over with. This witch had probably been terrifying even before Charming's errand.

She held her head high as she entered the Forbidden Fortress, forcing herself into Caretaker Mode. She cleared her throat, deciding to be proactive in her confrontation.

"Maleficent!" She called, her voice echoing in the throne room.

She was met with silence, and then the shadows shifted. Large green eyes peered down at her as something reptilian moved towards her. The clearer the details, the harder Belle forced herself to remain calm. But how could she with a dragon in front of her?

The creature paused before her, huffing impatiently, *Who the hell are you?*

Belle managed not to cough at the smoke, though her voice croaked, "The Caretaker."

One lip curled up in amusement, showing teeth half Belle's size and sharp as swords.  

*Rumple's wife, how cute,* Her tail swished as she turned to walk away, *If you want your egg back, you're out of luck. I've been trying for months to get it out of me.*

Belle thought now would be an inappropriate time to admit that was the point of magicking the hell out of it.

"I haven't come to retrieve it yet, and I'm sorry if it causes you discomfort." Maleficent snorted, continuing in the opposite direction of Belle.

She padded up a flight of stairs, taking six at a time as she went towards a throne. She stared at the miniscule chair for a moment before curling up beside it. She looked less threatening now that light was on her, and Belle figured if Maleficent wasn't interested in talking, a column of fire would've already clued her in to that. She approached the staircase.

"It wasn't personal; we were asked to make sure you would remain in this form."

*So instead of a spell, you had a prince shove an egg through my gills so if I tried to change back the egg would cause my stomach to explode?* She tilted her head to one side, her voice laced with interest, *What kind of spells did he put on it? I can barely touch them with my own magic, and I have a considerable amount.*

It was the begrudging admiration of a magician one-upped by a colleague, a tone Belle heard often
from witches and wizards beguiled by Rumplestiltskin.

Maleficent returned to the question at hand, *Someone wants me trapped in my dragon form?*

"Regina," Belle murmured.

Maleficent recoiled at the name, her eyes shining with the pain of betrayal, *Why?* She snapped.

Belle bit her lip, "She didn't want any…distractions in this new land," she said carefully. Maleficent snarled.

*And what does she mean by that, I wonder. Is she worried about a little competition for power, or is she afraid that what's left of her feelings for me might get in the way?* She snorted in disgust, turning her head, *I knew where her allegiance lay when she stole the curse from me… Her own self, and no one else. If she wants to ruin herself over that little Snowflake let her. But when her shreds of happiness crumble around her I won't be there to lend her my shoulder.*

Despite her words, Maleficent's face was twisted with pain at the fact her supposed friend was forcing her to stay in the body of an animal for her own selfish gain. Belle took a deep breath, going in for the kill.

"You're right; her shreds of happiness will disappear, because the curse will break in twenty-eight years."

Maleficent glanced at her curiously, *And then what?* 

Belle shrugged, "Who knows? We might be sent back here, we might be trapped there. Either way, that egg isn't going anywhere unless it's…removed."

Maleficent sighed, *Lemme guess…for a price he'll remove it.*

"He'll have the egg removed by someone," she corrected, "And you'll be free of your scaly imprisonment."

Maleficent drummed her claw on the stone, sounding like a galloping elephant, *And the price?* 

"The orb from your staff," Belle said simply.

The dragon's eyes glittered in amusement; *Regina smashed it in order to obtain the curse.*

"And what about the orb you had there before you were traded the dark curse?" Belle asked.

A flicker of surprise moved across her large face and Belle held her breath. Of course Rumplestiltskin had a back-up should Maleficent not take the bait…but she was hoping she wouldn't have to resort to it. Oz didn't sound like a very cheery place.

*And you can guarantee that when we get to the new world, and the curse breaks, that you'll have the egg removed from me?*

"You have my word, and Rumplestiltskin's," she promised.

Maleficent considered the offer a moment …what about *my Sleeping Beauty and her dashing prince? Will they travel over as well?*

"Not if you don't want them to," Belle offered. Regina hadn't made any specifications on them; they were just another couple of townspeople, not singled out for any special treatment.
Maleficent stretched, trying to mask her obvious pleasure, *Let's hope you're more reliable than Regina... Now, I'm not as small as I once was, so you're going to have to go up into the tower and get the orb yourself.*

Belle would have to insist upon no more shoving of objects into bellies of beasts, no matter how badly the object needed to be protected. Maleficent, even if she was morally on-the-fence, didn't seem to deserve having to suffer walking around as a dragon for the rest of her life.

III

Nine Days Later

Was this how the slaves felt, with freedom within reach if they just ran? So terrified of consequences, but that opportunity so tempting that one couldn't resist if they had any desire to live? Mary Margaret wondered about that as she ran through the back alleys of Storybrooke, avoiding the light and people like the plague. She wanted to trust Emma, she really did... But the mysterious key left in her cell was a forbidden fruit Mary Margaret couldn't resist. She didn't know how it had gotten there, but she was grateful for it.

If she disappeared for a while, maybe it would give Emma the time she needed to prove her innocence. Then again, did she want to return to a town where people loathed her so much?

There was a wide expanse of open area near Gold's Pawnshop and Mary Margaret glanced around. There was a truck across the street from the shop, one she didn't recognize. Its headlights were off but there was someone sitting behind the wheel, a man. Mary Margaret froze and the man smiled and waved at her.

She had been caught.

He motioned for her to come over and, not seeing much of an option, she scurried to the driver's side door. He rolled down the window, grinning.

"Aren't you out after curfew, Miss Blanchard?" He teased. The color drained from her face.

"I..."

What was a slave's defense when they were caught? That they wanted freedom at any price?

The man laughed, "Don't worry; I'm not interested in selling you out. However she..." He pointed at the shop, where Rose was starting to close up, "...will most certainly pressure you to go back to your cage."

Mary Margaret's stomach dropped. If Rose saw her, that would be the end of it. She would face a trial. She might be proven guilty by evidence so compelling despite the fact she was completely innocent.

The man reached over and unlocked the passenger's door, "Where are you heading?"

"What?"

"Where are you running to, or do you even know yet?" He clarified.

Mary Margaret bit her lip, "...away," she murmured.

He grinned. How could someone smile so much? "I can take you part of the way there."
She was in no position to be picky about whom she accepted help from. She went around the truck and got into the passenger's seat, "Why are you helping me?"

"Who's to say I'm helping or harming you?" He shrugged, "Maybe I'm just doing something."

He shifted the truck out of park and flicked on the headlights. Mary Margaret tried to hide her face as he took the back roads out of town.

"I've got an extra cup of tea, if you want it," he nodded towards the cup holder, "Still warm."

"Thank you."

Mary Margaret took the cup and sipped at it. It was green tea, and not too bad, except for a kind of bitter aftertaste.

"You might want to put that back in the cup holder," he suggested.

"What?"

Then, a wave of drowsiness overcame her. She swayed before falling against the door, out cold by the time she hit it. The cup dropped to the floor and splashed open, and the man sighed.

"Now look what you've done, Snow White. Once I tie you up I'm going to have to scrub that out before it soaks in, and that's only if I have enough time before Emma shows up," he pursed his lips, "Then again, tea's not a bad car freshener."

Jefferson continued down the road, somberly reflecting on the fact that no one seemed to like his special tea.
Hat Trick

Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold is confronted with a no-win situation as Paige Stepford discovers that she is adopted.

Jefferson has only seen Belle a couple of times, but he's not too crazy about how Rumplestiltskin treats her.

Three Days Before Mary Margaret's Abduction

He could handle tears, both as Mr. Gold or Rumplestiltskin. A mother separated from a child that she promised him didn't tug at his heartstrings; he felt little pity as a father grieved his son's death that he sent him into. Desperate women, heartbroken men, newborn infants wailing at the injustice of being put into his care even temporarily, none of these things affected him after years of dealing with it. If it hit home, then he distanced himself, but never gave in when he saw those salty bits of water slip down a young boy's face.

But there was one chink in his armor; young girls. Perhaps it was a fatherly protectiveness; perhaps it was because he couldn't begin to fathom the workings of their minds. Perhaps it was some of that primitive fear of the power of estrogen drilled into his masculine subconscious. But young girls in tears could unsettle him easier than a mountain of decaying corpses.

Figaro jerked awake and let out a pitiful meow, as if sensing someone's agony caused him pain. With little more than that for a warning, the pawn shop's door flew open and sobs filled the air.

Mr. Gold froze in his polishing of a candelabrum, staring at the tearful adolescent. Hatter's girl. On instinct he started looking around, praying Belle would just appear and handle the situation. Apparently Paige was hoping for the same thing.

"Is, is Mrs. Gold here?" She stuttered through her tears.

"No, but I'll go call her," he said, fleeing to the back room.

He dialed the house number and panicked as it came to three rings. Thankfully, Belle's breathy voice answered in a huff, "Gold residence."

"You need to get here, now. Paige needs you," he said.

Belle took a minute to catch her breath, "Is it a homework question that you could answer? I don't think Jefferson will go after you if you just talk to her for five minutes…"

"She's crying," he said bluntly.

There was only a moment of silence before she responded, "Bring her here. I'll put some cocoa on."

Mr. Gold dutifully closed up shop a little early and took the distressed damsel to his home, where Belle was waiting with open arms and hot chocolate. Belle's comforting only made Paige cry harder and Mr. Gold retreated to the shed, deciding to organize tools or clean or something,
anything to stay out of that house with a hysterical teenager on a rampage.

It was a good few hours later when he saw the Stepford's car pull up and he dared to step out of the shed. He could hear muted voices, Belle talking to Paige's parents reassuringly. He watched Mr. and Mrs. Stepford leave with their only child, Paige's sobs merely sniffles now as she slid into the backseat. Mr. Gold waited a few minutes before he entered his house.

"Belle?" He called out. There was no reply.

He went into the living room and saw her collapsed into her reading chair, staring into space. Her hands were shaking as she folded them, bent over as if in prayer. He went to her side and rested a hand on her shoulder, letting her know that he was there.

It was awhile before Belle spoke.

"Paige found out she's adopted."

Mr. Gold's forehead creased, "What? How?"

"Apparently Henry's own situation got her curious… She's hurt, and angry, and confused. I talked her in to going home with her parents, but…" She swallowed, "…but she's asking questions. She wants to find her birth parents."

Mr. Gold was silent.

Belle turned to stare up at him, as though she were a lost child herself, "What do I do, Rumple? What do I say? What would Regina do to her if Grace started to remember?" She closed her eyes, "And what the hell do I tell Jefferson?"

"You tell Jefferson nothing," he instructed quickly, "You convince Paige not to look for her biological parents; you feign ignorance of any knowledge."

"But what if that makes things worse?" Belle croaked, "What if she looks for answers herself and finds Jefferson? What if Regina catches her looking through records?"

"Belle, you can only protect her so much."

"But Rum, I have to keep her safe…” She raked her fingers through her hair, "…I'm her fairy godmother."

III

It was a candle in the dark, a sudden flash of blinding unexpected light. It had been so long he scarcely knew how to react.

For the first time since Grace's mother, Jefferson found himself…attracted to a woman.

"How do you like your tea, Mr. Hatter?" She asked him, the spitting image of innocence.

"Jefferson," he corrected her on reflex.

"I'm sorry, Jefferson," she flushed. His host just smirked at her embarrassment.

"Lemon and honey, please."

He watched her. Not because she was graceful, oh no quite the opposite. She was firmly
concentrated on her movements, making sure she didn't spill or tip over the cup. She placed the tea in front of him.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"You're welcome," She gave a shy smile. Her eyes were as bright and cheery as the summer sky despite the dark room they occupied.

She then prepared her master's tea with the same mindful precision, but Jefferson noticed a chip in the cup she used. Her master didn't seem to notice it as she set his tea in front of him.

"Leave the tray," he instructed, "I'll send for you afterwards."

"Yes, of course." She did a small bob that was curtsy-like, before turning to look at him, "It was nice to meet you Mr. Ha-Jefferson," she corrected herself before hurrying out of the room.

Jefferson's eyes never left her as she disappeared, and he found himself wishing she would have stayed, or he had at least had a decent conversation with her.

"Thou shalt not covet, dearie," Rumplestiltskin chided, before giving his little "nee" of amusement.

Jefferson turned back to his host, "Who said anything about coveting? I've just never known you to have a maid, is all."

"She's new," he stated, blowing on his tea, "Got her for saving some little town."

He discussed her as if she were just another object in his collection. Jefferson smothered the anger that was threatening to grow.

"So you're leaving the business," Rumplestiltskin remarked, taking a drink.

"Grace lost her mother; she doesn't need to lose her father too," he said simply.

"What a good parent you are," Rumplestiltskin sneered, slouching in his chair, "Portal-jumpers are hard to come by… Who's going to run my transdimensional errands?"

"A werecat?" Jefferson offered.

Rumplestiltskin wrinkled his nose, "Obviously you've never worked with one."

He had… but that was another life, back when Wonderland lived up to its name. Before the Queen of Hearts heard of Alice and Chessa and they had to run for their lives. Before the three of them were forced into the Looking Glass War. When they were all just children and the world was a game.

"If you ever decide to don your hat again, let me know," Rumplestiltskin interrupted his musings.

"Of course."

The sparkly man pointed a finger at Jefferson, "And don't get any ideas about Belle. She's mine," he growled.

Jefferson held up his hands innocently, "Wouldn't dream of it."

And honestly, he wouldn't. A fleeting interest wasn't enough to make him go against the Dark One.
Eight Days Before Mary Margaret's Abduction

There was a timelessness about the trip; a young lady in a hood going through the woods with a basketful of goodies. Only the hood was a sweatshirt, not a cloak. She wasn't walking; she was driving on a road through the woods. The basket was full of goodies, but Belle wasn't visiting her grandmother (may she rest in peace). It was Thursday, coming up on three o'clock, and it was time for tea.

Belle pulled up to the mansion and parked, grabbing her basket before making her way up the stairs. She was just about to knock when the door flew open, causing her to jump.

"Jefferson!" Belle whined, miming a punch, "You scared me!"

The man snickered, smile as wide as a crescent moon, "That was the point." She shook her head at him and he stepped aside to let her in.

As usual they went to the living room, his home only slightly more decorated than Regina's. The tea was already set out and Belle pulled out her scones to add to it.

"So how has your week been?" She asked him.

He sighed, flopping down on the couch, "Oh you know, same old same old. Survive, watch over Grace, make another hat, wait for the curse to break, maybe eat something, watch over Grace, force myself to try and sleep, rinse, repeat." She sat down on the opposite side of the couch.

"Twenty-eight years, Belle. Twenty-eight years of conscious purgatory, and all I ever did was help her."

"Regina's a meanie," Belle agreed, pouring herself some tea and taking a scone. With what looked like a colossal effort, Jefferson sat up to pour his own tea.

Belle brought the cup to her nose and took a discreet sniff. It was clean. She drank some before setting it down.

"I can't even imagine dealing with the curse fully aware… Especially if Rumplestiltskin was still under. I'd lose my mind." Jefferson snickered and Belle covered her mouth, blushing, "I'm so sorry, I didn't even think…"

"It's alright, no offense taken," he bit into his scone, "It's true, though; the experience of having two lives fighting to be declared the truth, so sure of one while everyone insists it's the other, a waking nightmare where the faces are familiar but they don't recognize you…it's enough to drive even the sanest of our lot insane," he glanced at her, "At least I have you to suffer with, now."

Belle smiled at him, "True…and with the savior in town the curse is bound to break soon."

"Someone should push her," Jefferson mused, "It's been a few months."

"Henry's trying," Belle defended.

"It doesn't matter what comes from the mouths of babes, few believe their truths because of their youth," he shook his head, "As if age is what makes people wise…"

Belle poured herself another cup. Jefferson finished his scone.

"I have a couple presents for you," Belle said, digging through her basket. Jefferson straightened, peering curiously at her hand.
She passed him a folded-up sheet of paper, "All A's and B's. You should be very proud of her."

He unfolded the paper with reverence, eyes drinking in each word of the copy of the semester's report card. His hands clasped the sheet as if Belle would rip it away from him. It was a desperation that broke Belle's heart, a desperation that reminded her of Rumplestiltskin.

"Art's her best subject," he murmured, and she knew it would be another bead on his rosary of facts, "Her worst subject's science...where you have to prove everything."

"Her and Miranda are back to being friends," Belle said, searching through her basket again.

"I like Miranda," he commented, eyes not leaving the paper.

"So do I. She's a much better influence than that Lucy girl," she passed him a photograph, "They sent me her school picture, being her godmother and all. I already made a copy so you can keep this one."

Jefferson slowly released one hand to grasp the photograph. His eyes shifted to it and his face creased. His thumb stroked her hair as the girl in the picture smiled serenely at the camera, lost in her false memories, living with fake parents. Belle's gaze fell to her lap as Jefferson started to tear up.

"I'm sorry, Grace... I know I promised... I'm so sorry I missed the tea party... Give the March Hare and the Lost Princess and the Mock Turtle my condolences... I wanted to go... I wanted to go, I did!"

*I'm sorry, Bae.* Her husband down on his hands and knees, fingers digging into the earth as he wept at the small dip in the ground. *I'm so sorry... I wanted to go too.. I want to go too, I do! You mean more to me than power, Bae, more than anything in the world! Please, Bae, let me go with you!"

"Why are you doing this, Belle?"

She turned towards him. He was staring at her now, staring with that frightening intensity that made her want to guard her soul.

"Why are you giving me these things, and telling me these tantalizing facts, and helping me spy on a daughter who doesn't remember who I am?"

"It's just my end-"

"Don't!" He snapped, "Don't pretend that you are some female version of him! Tell me...tell me why."

Belle sucked in a steadying breath, "Because I'm Grace's godmother, so I'm watching over her anyway, and because losing a child is hell."

Jefferson's face softened, "And what would you know of losing a child?"

"Not as much as you maybe but not as little as you might be tempted to think," she crossed her legs. End of discussion.

Jefferson was silent for a long while, holding on to his picture of Paige.

"...I finished it," he said finally. Belle glanced at him and he rose to his feet. He offered her a hand and she let him help her up.
He took her over to the top of the piano where he had laid out a map of the United States, borders drawn but little else save for the occasionally marked city.

"All of the gate points are in the United States?" Belle asked.

"All of the possible entrances from our world are in the United States; different worlds, different countries they align with," he explained, "We can go over the finer points of the art of portal-jumping some other time if you wish, but I suspect you just want the bare bones right now."

Belle nodded as she leaned forward, examining names. Some she recognized, such as Manhattan or Seattle or Tallahassee… But others, like some small town in Kansas, didn't ring a bell.

"Why are you so interested in gate points?" Jefferson asked, hovering behind her.

"We might have to use a different path than the one we got here with," she half-truthed.

He frowned, "You mean…if the curse breaks we might be stuck here?"

"It's a reasonable concern," she glanced up at the clock and started rolling up the map, "I appreciate you doing this for us."

"I did this for you, not for him," he insisted.

She sighed, "You two used to be good business partners… Why the bitterness?" She turned to go back towards the couch.

She very nearly walked face first into his chest. She glanced up to see him staring down at her, that darkness rising up again.

"You always make sure to leave at five o'clock," he remarked, "And you arrive at three o'clock on the dot, every Thursday since you first realized I remembered. Why the strict schedule?"

Belle shrugged, "I work."

"For your husband." He took a step forward, pressing up against her, "Why can't you stay a half-hour later? Surely he'd understand, busy visiting with a friend and all?" He leaned down until their noses practically touched, grinning like…well, like a mad man, "We could play a game, see how long until your hubby calls the police."

"Jefferson."

"I say within the hour."

"Jefferson!" She stared him in the eye, "It's my choice to be so punctual, not his. So please let me through." He frowned, and reluctantly stepped aside.

Belle tucked the map into the basket.

"It's a pretty gilded cage you live in, isn't it?" He mused, "You want for nothing inside your golden bars. So long as you don't try to fly away, he won't even clip your wings."

"In case you haven't noticed, we're all in a cage," she muttered, "It's called Storybrooke."

"And what if the cage's bars weren't there?" Jefferson continued, watching her, "If you could leave Storybrooke, could leave him…would you?"
Belle tensed, refusing to look at him. Jefferson laughed softly.

"You would! If there was no curse, no magic, you'd run as fast as you could away!"

"Goodbye, Jefferson," Belle grumbled, making a bee-line for the door.

"Fly home now, birdie," he chided, "Your master's waiting."

It would have been easier if Jefferson had asked if she'd divorce Rumplestiltskin; then she could've told him off until she was blue in the face, screaming of her undying devotion to her perfectly imperfect true love. But he had asked her if she'd leave Storybrooke and she would in a heartbeat, with all the tools they'd need to track down Baelfire. He'd ask her if she'd leave Rumplestiltskin and, even if it broke her heart...she would, if it came to that. Because she had accepted long ago that finding Bae was their number one priority. If they had to split up in order to make the search more efficient...she would leave him. Not forever, but the answer to Jefferson's questions was still "yes".

Mr. Gold glanced up from the court documents as Belle stomped in, all but pulling her hair out and screaming in frustration.

"Jefferson pushing your buttons again?" He guessed.

She nodded, "Played me like an accordion today."

"I don't know why you bother with him," Mr. Gold drew his highlighter over a phrase, "You always come back either irritated or depressed. I know your heart goes out to him because he's alone and separated from his daughter...but is it really worth the emotional hell?"

Belle fingered the map, "...yes," she decided.

He glanced up at her, "How?"

All he saw was her going to visit a mad hatter, she knew. A mad hatter she didn't even trust, and as such had set up strict time limits. Mr. Gold had been instructed that if she wasn't in the shop by six, that he would start investigating, and just that fact made Belle feel safer. He did not know of her deal with Jefferson, information on Paige in exchange for the gate points between this world and theirs... It was going to be a surprise for the next time he started fretting about the grand scheme.

Mr. Gold saw nothing but the danger she was putting herself in to keep an acquaintance company.

"It helps keep me focused, and to stay on track," she admitted.

He furrowed his eyebrows, "Focused on what?"

"On why we're here in the first place."

III

Belle wasn't in the blue dress that he had seen her in last time, and that was Jefferson's clue that something had changed. Her dress was much less humble and more...like a noblewoman's. She made his tea from memory and set it before him, then she made her master's...and then she made a third cup and sat down in the seat beside Rumplestiltskin.

Jefferson glanced questioningly at her.

"Something wrong, dear Hatter?" The beast asked innocently, as if his maid joining in on his
business was common.

He caught sight of Belle's hand wrapped around her cup. A ring glittered on the proper finger, no simple diamond adorning it. Ambered fairy dust… A testament to how magic ruled her life.

"No, not at all," he said. Belle shot Rumplestiltskin a worried look, but he waved it off.

"You came to me for a favor," he stated.

"Yes." Jefferson shifted back into business mode, "It's come to my attention that my daughter Grace… Needs more than I can offer her. I want to give her a future… to hope for more and not just settle for the life I've given us."

"Gold," Rumplestiltskin spat, as if he had asked for something putrid, "You want gold."

Jefferson glanced down at his cup, "It makes the world go 'round, unfortunately."

Belle leaned forward, her eyes lit up. She looked so eager for this deal to go through, to know that a child would be better off from it. It was endearing, and Jefferson respected her more for it. Rumplestiltskin, however, didn't look nearly as excited.

"It would have to be a sizeable amount of gold for comfort… Something equally valuable should be given in exchange…" He thought for a moment, "Your hat, I think."

Jefferson's blood ran cold, "My hat?"

"Your hat," Rumplestiltskin repeated, "I think it would look rather nice on me."

He shook his head, "I can't."

"Course you can. If you're retired it shouldn't matter to you whether you have it or not," Rumplestiltskin insisted.

"I just…can't," he protested weakly.

Belle reached out and rested a hand on Rumplestiltskin's arm. He glared at her.

"You have more gold than you could ever possibly spend," she said softly, "…can't you cut him a break?"

Rumplestiltskin pulled his arm away, "That's not the point, Belle."

"Then what is?" She demanded, "He just wants to be a good father…can't you relate?"

Rumplestiltskin was on his feet before Jefferson could move, body rigid and teeth bared down at a frightened Belle.

"Out!" He roared, "If you can't hold your tongue then you can't sit in on my deals! Out!"

In a flurry of satin and jewels, Belle fled from her seat. She paused at the door long enough to shoot him a glare, and then stormed out of the room.

Rumplestiltskin didn't turn back around, silent for several moments as both of them tried to process what had occurred.

"…you should leave as well, if you refuse my offer," Rumplestiltskin murmured. Jefferson sat his
tea aside and stood, shaking his head in disgust.

"Poor girl," he muttered, before taking his leave.

He tried to seek Belle out, but she had vanished, her fearful expression haunting him. That poor caged bird…and she was actually being forced to marry the beast. He didn't deserve such a beauty, deal or not.

After the initial shock and fear of her fiance's mood swing, Belle was pissed. Bossed around as if she were a child… He actually told her to hold her tongue! If he dared show his face again she'd kill him!

Anger cooled to reflection. He had asked her not to interfere with his transactions…and she had brought up Bae, no matter how vaguely. Bae and the dagger were their secrets, never to be spilled in order for them not to be used against him. It was bad enough he had her out in the open, he complained; he didn't need vengeful villagers to go on dagger hunting quests or have desperate parents bring up his lost child whenever he went to collect a baby. She had forgiven him by sundown, but was still going to smack him if he dared show his face.

He did not come to bed at his usual hour, or even at his late hour, and she started to grow worried. She put on a dressing gown and left the bedroom.

She found him at the end of the hallway, curled up against the wall. His eyes opened as she approached and he quickly averted his gaze, adjusting his position.

"What are you doing?" She asked gently.

"Punishing myself by sleeping in the hallway," he stated, burying his face in his arms.

She tried not to laugh as she sank down onto the stone beside him, drawing her knees up to her chest.

"...I'm sorry I snapped at you," he murmured.

"It's alright."

"No, it isn't," he turned his head to the side to look at her over one arm, "Most of the time I don't want you to hold your tongue; I think it's sexy that you speak your mind. But other times it would be appreciated...like about my past."

"It slipped," she said, resting her chin on her knees, "As usual, we both messed up."

"Funny how we seem to be the only couple that are ever wrong at the same time."

"We're the only ones brave enough to admit it," she corrected.

Rumplestiltskin played with the laces on his boots, "...my point was it's a temptation. So long as he has that hat, he will never truly give up portal-jumping. And now the Queen's trap is about to be sprung because he wouldn't agree to my deal."

"What trap?"

He frowned, "It's the rule of the hat; same number in, same number out. And Her Majesty's already picked out her partner for the return trip."

Belle's eyes widened, "You mean...she'll leave him there? In some strange land?"
"At least he's familiar with the territory."

"But his daughter… What will happen to her?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

A few days later, a letter came for Belle, the first she had ever received since coming to the Dark Castle. It was written in pointed thick lines.

*I know we don't know each other well but please… If something happens to me watch over my Grace. Keep her safe, and happy, please.*

-Jefferson

"Of course," Belle murmured aloud to the letter, "Of course I'll look after Grace."

A week later, the Time Clock Dragon played Jefferson's fate. He was not coming home for the tea party.

**Three Days Before Mary Margaret's Abduction**

Belle quickly rifled through her fake memories for ones of Paige. Regina hadn't bothered with a solid reason, but Rosaline Gold was Paige Stepford's godmother. Sometimes she took the young girl out for ice cream, and on her birthday she sent a card and some cash. It wasn't a deep bond, but it was something.

The cocoa was ready by the time Mr. Gold arrived, eyes wide with alarm and even fear at the despondent girl beside him. He vanished the moment Belle guided Paige inside, and she wondered what would happen if someday they had a girl and she grew up to be a hormonal teenager.

Belle eased Paige down onto the living room couch, pressing a cup of hot chocolate into her hands. Paige made no move to drink, but gripped the cup tighter. Belle was silent, waiting for her to speak.

Her voice was rough as sandpaper, "I'm adopted."

Panic galloped through Belle's blood, "What?"

"Please don't act like you didn't know… You had to have," Paige stared down into her drink, "With all that's going on with Henry, I got curious… I don't look like my parents at all… Why didn't anyone tell me?"

Because no one knows their true story, that was why, but Belle couldn't say that. She was still reeling from the shock of Paige's statement.

"…to protect you," she said lamely.

Paige shook her head slowly, "From what?" She looked up at Belle, "Do they know who my birth parents are?"

"No…" she said slowly, glancing away.

Paige stared, "…do you?"

Belle's skill of lying all depended on her mood, and it was only a very specific blend of emotions that would give her success. But ninety-five percent of the time, Belle wasn't in the right mood, and
therefore was horrid at it. Why oh why couldn't she now, when she so desperately needed to?

She remained silent.

"I want to know the truth… No matter what it is," Paige said with a gravity beyond her years.

"…unfortunately the truth isn't mine to give," Belle murmured.

They drank their warm chocolate and Paige verbally sorted through her feelings, Belle listening and offering her input when it was appropriate. She eventually calmed down and agreed to let Belle call her parents to come pick her up.

She stood in the doorway coming back from the call (Mrs. Stepford was practically crying in relief, seconds away from calling the sheriff to find her daughter), watching Paige as the girl stared down at the mugs. The few times Belle suggested Jefferson reach out to her he violently objected to the idea, going on his old rampage about two lives coexisting in a single mind. Belle remembered, and she didn't think she was any less sane for it. But would Regina hurt Paige if she found out? She wouldn't put it past the vile woman…

They both glanced towards the window as headlights shone through the pane.

"I'm going to find them," Paige decided calmly, "I'm going to find my birth parents, whether anyone will help me or not."

"Curiosity killed the cat," Belle warned.

Paige gave a small smile, "Good thing I'm not a cat, then."

Eve and Adam Stepford met them at the door, their relief apparent. They moved to hug their daughter but Paige stiffened, rejecting the affection. They withdrew.

"Thank you, Rose," Eve murmured, "When she ran out the door…"

Belle waved it off, "I'm sure you'd do the same thing if you were in my position. It's important to have an adult to talk to that isn't a parent… Less judgment that way."

"We appreciate it," Adam said, "Have a good night."

"Thank you, you have a good night as well."

Eve and Adam Stepford turned to leave but Paige hesitated, meeting Belle's eyes. Belle gave a small pleading shake of her head and Paige firmly turned her back on her, following her "parents" back to the car.

Belle could only hope that if Paige really did go on a hunt for her birth father that it wouldn't end in tragedy.

III

Grace liked to sleep with the curtains drawn open, even if her father didn't. The night sky comforted her with its serene color and pinpricks of light, and she needed it now more than ever. Through her tears she stared at the North Star, a star that travelers used to find their way home. She wished it would bring her papa home.

A memory of an old rhyme surfaced, and Grace murmured the words aloud in her cracked voice, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight… I wish I may… I wish I might… Have this wish… I
wish tonight…"

There was a knock at the door and Grace jerked up in her bed. She comforted the March Hare before slipping out from underneath the covers and approaching the door.

"Who goes there?" She asked in the bravest voice she could muster.

"A friend," They insisted, and it didn't sound like it could be Her Majesty.

Grace opened the door to the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. She was dressed in a flowing silver gown that sparkled with the diamonds that were sewn into it. Long curling brown hair cascaded over her shoulders, and eyes as blue as a summer day peered down at her worriedly.

"Are you Grace?" She asked softly.

"Yes ma'am." She felt self-conscious, wearing only her nightgown. The woman didn't seem to mind.

"Hello Grace, my name is Belle." She hesitated, before continuing, "I have some bad news…about your father…"

"He's not coming back, is he?" Grace guessed.

Belle shook her head and, if Grace didn't know any better, she'd swear there were tears in the woman's eyes. Grace bowed her head.

"I had a bad feeling when the Queen came," she confessed.

"I'm sorry," Belle said.

Grace was silent. She couldn't say it was alright, because it wasn't. She couldn't say that it wasn't her fault, even though it wasn't, because it sounded like she was dismissing the woman's condolences. Even though it was well into the night, Grace could only come up with one response.

"Would you like some tea?"

If the question was odd, Belle didn't act like it, "Yes please."

There was always time for tea, her father had preached. Tea was civility; it was friendship. If someone didn't have time for tea, then they couldn't be trusted.

Grace had watched her father prepare tea enough times so that she could do it herself, though handling the larger porcelain items was difficult. Belle knelt patiently at the smaller table, between the Mock Turtle and the Lost Princess. Grace very carefully brought the tea set over when she was done, and then very carefully poured some for Belle and some for herself. A little splashed on the table as she poured Belle's cup.

"I'm sorry," Grace whimpered.

Belle pulled out her handkerchief and mopped it up, "It's alright. I spill tea all the time."

If the tea wasn't to her liking, Belle didn't show it, thanking Grace as she sipped from it. Grace took a sip of her own before asking.

"What happened to my papa?"
Belle frowned, setting her cup down, "He's...trapped. In another world."

"Can he come back?"

She bit her lip, "Hopefully...eventually..."

"He will, then," Grace said softly, "I know he will."

They drank their tea quietly, and it was only after they had finished that Grace spoke again.

"What will happen to me until he comes back?"

Belle stood up, coming around the table to Grace's side, "I don't know... Maybe your neighbors will look after you...maybe the Queen will take you in."

Grace grimaced, "I don't want to go with the queen! She's the reason he's gone!"

"I know, I know," Belle murmured, reaching around her neck, "I have a gift for you, then."

She unclasped her necklace and offered it to Grace. It was a simple thread of gold, worth more than several months of gathering mushrooms at least. It looked strong, though, and she doubted even an elf's sword could cut through it.

"As long as you wear this, Regina will not touch you, because she knows where this gold came from," Belle explained. Grace pulled her hair to one side and Belle clasped the necklace around her neck.

"Thank you...thank you so much," Grace murmured.

"Of course," Belle touched her shoulder, "Be strong, Grace. You will get through this."

Grace turned and met Belle's eyes, feeling foolish for her question but needing to ask it anyway.

"...are you my fairy godmother?"

Belle laughed, but it wasn't a demeaning laugh. It was more like she thought herself so far removed from the notion that it was funny to even consider it.

"No, I'm not a fairy. I don't even have wings, see?" She turned her back to Grace and no matter how hard the girl looked, she couldn't find any hint of them.

"Papa says that not all fairies have wings," she pointed out.

Belle didn't seem to have a proper response to that.

She spent the night with the daughter of the Mad Hatter, the two of them sharing Grace's bed with the March Hare. They had breakfast and then Belle went back to wherever she had come from. Grace felt safer after her visit, though nothing had really changed. She was still fatherless, and didn't know how she would survive. But the gold around her neck was like a charm, assuring her that all would be well.

One Day Before Mary Margaret's Abduction

Belle went that Thursday to prove that nothing was out of the ordinary. That Jefferson's words didn't get under her skin. That there was nothing going on with Paige. That just because her contract with Jefferson was up it didn't mean she'd stop visiting.
Apparently she forgot to bring her closed-book face to the meeting.

"You're upset." Jefferson remarked as he set out the tea.

Belle put her scones beside the teapot, "No I'm not."

Jefferson snorted, "Don't patronize me; I know you're upset." He sat down on the other side of the couch, watching her warily, "...is this about last week?"

"No," Belle said, though honestly that did nag at her in the back of her mind. She poured herself a cup and gingerly Jefferson followed, treating her like a horse about to spook.

She did like Jefferson, she really did... But he wasn't like Rumple. She could judge Rumplestiltskin's moods before he even knew that he'd have them. There were certain buttons that if they were pressed, he did certain things. He had guidelines and Belle knew from the bottom of her heart that he would never, ever hurt her.

Jefferson had no apparent boundaries, and that terrified Belle.

They drank and ate in relative silence, Belle taking an odd interest in the coffee table while Jefferson's eyes never left her. Finally, he sighed.

"So, how's my dear Grace doing?"

An innocent, logical question, but Belle's heart did backflips and somersaults. She roughly cleared her throat, "She's fine, just fine..."

The distance between them was almost nonexistent as Jefferson slid over, "Belle..."

"I think she might have a crush on Henry, can you imagine-"

"Belle."

She met his eyes. He didn't look mad, or even annoyed. He looked scared, a father concerned about his only daughter. Belle's nails dug into her legs.

"Jefferson...I need you to not lose your head over this."

He huffed, rubbing at his neck, "I've lost my head over less," he leaned forward, "Please...just tell me. What's wrong with my Grace?"

She was fooled into believing that he could be rational when it came to his child.

She bit her lip, preparing herself to deliver the news, "...Grace knows she's adopted."

In the time it took her to speak the words, Jefferson's face went from calm but concerned to half-mad, "What do you mean she knows? Who told her?"

"She figured it out," she said weakly.

Jefferson twisted up onto his feet, looming over Belle, "What else does she know?"

"Nothing!" Belle snapped, pressing back into the couch.

His jaw clenched, "But she wants to, doesn't she?"
Belle swallowed roughly.

His hands clenched down onto the cushion near both sides of her head, "She can't wake up, Belle, you can't let her wake up!"

"I'm trying!" She screamed desperately, "I don't know how to stop her from looking for answers, I don't know how to keep her from remembering, I don't know how to lie if I'm not angry…"

"You have to! Two lives in her head, trying to decide which one is the truth and which one's the lie, how to live in a town with the veil drawn over its eyes…" He shook his head, "She'll go mad, my dear little Grace will go as mad as I am."

"It doesn't have to be that way," Belle pleaded, "Two lives can coexist in one mind… I have two lives in my head. Am I crazy?"

Jefferson's lip curled back, "You married a man who thinks that you're nothing more than a possession. You didn't need a second life to make you crazy." He spun away from her, pacing around the coffee table and running a hand over his hair, "Emma needs to make it work… That's all there is to it. Emma needs to make a hat work, so Grace and I can go home. I need her to do it now, before I've lost my daughter forever."

Belle sat unmoving on the couch, mute at the flurry of Jefferson's motions and moods. He turned back to her.

"And you… What will happen to you if this curse ever breaks? Your chance to run will be gone… He'll smother you, little birdie, and frankly I'm shocked you've lasted this long," he pursed his lips, "You'll go with us, then. I'm sure Grace will appreciate having you."

"Jefferson, you're not making any sense," Belle murmured.

"Aren't I?" He laughed, "Trying to take an abused woman out of a bad situation, wanting my daughter to be healthy and with me again… No offense Belle, but I believe you're the one that's mad."

Belle knew there was no rationalizing with him now; she had visited one too many times with the Russian roulette that was Jefferson. She had seemed especially uneasy after their last encounter. He had every right to be concerned and go check up on her.

"Goodbye, Jefferson."

She heard the click of a gun and froze.

"No, Belle. No more goodbyes from you."

Mr. Gold glanced up at the clock on the wall. 6:05. He headed out of the shop, taking his time in flipping the sign to "closed". Belle had never been late coming back from a visit with the Mad Hatter. She had seemed especially uneasy after their last encounter. He had every right to be concerned and go check up on her.

But still… It was no secret that Jefferson desired Belle for his own and believed that Mr. Gold was a controlling abusive spouse. Checking up on her during a visit to a friend's house was typical controlling behavior, and he didn't need to fuel Jefferson's theories further. He sat in his Cadillac, torn. Belle had asked him to do this…

He closed his eyes, shutting out logic and focusing on his instincts. His instincts told him that something was wrong. So he went to Jefferson's mansion, perceptions be damned.
He rang the doorbell and noticed uneasily that Belle's truck wasn't in the driveway.

A familiar smiling face greeted him, belying the madness caused by the loss of a child. Mr. Gold knew that madness only too well.

"Hello there, Mr. Gold."

"Evening, Jefferson," he adjusted the grip on his cane, "I was wondering if Belle was still here."

He laughed, "Oh yes, she is. I'm sorry to have kept her, we just got lost in old memories. Hey, you like tea, don't you?" He gestured down the hallway, "Why don't you come in for a cup? We could reminisce about your love of corrupting young women."

"You're talking about the incident with Regina, of course," Mr. Gold said, making no move to step inside the house.

Jefferson rolled his shoulder in a half-committed shrug, "Sure, let's go with that."

Mr. Gold frowned, "Unfortunately I don't really have time for tea… Belle and I are quite busy with Miss Blanchard's case."

"Right," Jefferson drummed his fingers against the doorway, "Alright then. Belle!" He called.

Belle came down the hall slowly, looking nervous. She glanced at Jefferson, hesitating.

"Are you ready to go, dearie?" Mr. Gold asked. Belle bit her lip, staring at Jefferson.

"Are you going to let me?" She asked him. The fact she asked the Hatter for permission to leave made Mr. Gold's hackles rise.

Jefferson shrugged, "It's your life, Belle. I can't stop you from going."

She paused for another moment, then continued towards Mr. Gold. He held out his arm for her, and then Jefferson pulled something out of his coat.

Mr. Gold remained calm, completely still as Jefferson aimed the pistol at his head.

"Put the gun away, Jefferson…" Belle spoke shakily.

"I will in a minute," he said flippantly, "Might wanna step back; his brains are going to be flying every which way at this range."

"Is this because I interrupted your play date?" Mr. Gold asked innocently, and Belle couldn't fathom how he could possibly joke at a time like this.

"No, actually, this is because she thinks she has no way out, that she's stuck with you. And here, in this world…you hide behind an allusion of power. Just pay no mind to the vulnerable man behind the curtain, right?"

"Belle hasn't always had a way out," Mr. Gold admitted, "But ever since that first time I let her go, it's been her choice whether she wanted to stay or not. It's not my fault she keeps choosing me."

"You've made her sick, just like you made Regina sick," Jefferson snarled.

"As I recall you didn't mind that one so much," Mr. Gold murmured. He slowly lifted his gaze to meet Belle's, "I love you."
Belle's stomach lurched, "No… Jefferson no!" She threw herself at him.

Jefferson expected the assault and, with his free arm, shoved her back. He pulled the trigger and Mr. Gold moved with an unexpected agility. His cane shot up and slammed into Jefferson's arm, the bullet missing him by a hair's breadth. Jefferson swung a punch but Mr. Gold dodged it, his cane coming down with all his strength against the Mad Hatter's head. Jefferson slammed against the wall and crumpled to the ground, out cold.

Belle stood trembling against the wall, gasping for air as she stared down at Jefferson's body.

"…Rum," she whimpered.

Mr. Gold lowered his cane and cautiously approached Belle, "It's alright, love. He didn't hurt you, did he?"

Belle snorted at the absurdity. He had been seconds away from death and yet he wondered if she was hurt. She threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving out choked cries. Mr. Gold embraced her, rubbing her back.

"I shouldn't have come today… Oh god, Rum, if he had killed you…"

"It's alright, dearie, everything's fine."

"How can you say that?! I could've lost you forever, just because I tried to help a mad man!"

"But you didn't," he kissed her forehead, "Come now, I'll drive you home and we can get your truck later." He tried to guide her down the porch steps.

Belle shook her head, "How the hell are you so calm right now?" She asked incredulously.

"Because," he said, taking the steps carefully, "If I wasn't fighting to remain calm… I'd be bashing his brains out right now."

He eased her down into the passenger's seat before going back up to close the door on the assault. Even if Jefferson didn't have neighbors, he didn't need the scene of violence to be so blatant to anyone who came across the mansion. Hopefully he'd wake up in a few hours with a pounding headache and the realization that just because Mr. Gold didn't have magic, it didn't mean he was some crippled old thing.

He slid into the driver's seat, Belle still shaking as they pulled away. He rested a hand on her leg, "Nothing's going to hurt you, Belle, I promise."

Belle took his hand, squeezing it, "No, not now, not when I'm with you," she rested her head on his shoulder, "You are my protector, and I love you, and I stay with you because I love you, not because I'm afraid."

"I'm aware of that, dearie," he said, thumb running over her knuckles, "Jefferson underestimates your strength. I know no amount of fear would ever bind you to me… still am kind of curious what does keep you around, though."

Belle closed her eyes, "The amazing sex," she insisted. They shared a tense laugh.

**Day of Mary Margaret's Abduction**

Regina Mills had heard a rumor that Paige Stepford had found out rather dramatically that she was
adopted
It was an opportunity on both ends; she could use it to hold over Jefferson's head, coerce him into helping her, and she might even get something from Grace. It wasn't her fault if the girl came to her, the mayor, who would definitely have such records as birth parents and adoption forms in the city hall.

She stood in the typical pick-up area of the school, waiting both for Henry and Grace, see if she could talk to the young girl for a moment. Grace emerged first from the building, laughing with a group of friends. Her friends were about to go to the bus, however, and then she'd be alone. Regina prepared to approach when a glint caught her eye.

A gold necklace swayed as she walked, looking almost brand new but Regina knew it had been made several decades before. That morning she had come to honor her end of the bargain with Jefferson, to whisk Grace away to a life of luxury, she saw the spun gold around the girl's neck. It was as clear as any sign to back off, that Grace was under the protection of Rumplestiltskin and his lover. She still wasn't sure what had gone on there, but she suspected it was more Belle's doing than her husband's.

The necklace had the desired effect; Regina kept her distance.

Paige started running towards Regina and she thought for a moment that the girl would come to her, seeking out information that Jefferson would plead for her not to tell his darling Grace. The girl was too curious for her own good.

But Paige passed by Regina and the mayor turned to see her running towards a young brunette who had been casually leaning against a bike rack.

"Hey Mrs. Gold!"

"Hey Paige, ready to go?"

"Of course I am."

Regina watched as Belle casually wrapped a protective arm around Paige's shoulders, glancing back at the former queen. She gave her a very pointed look of "back off" before her and Paige continued down the street.

"How was school today?"

"Oh you know, same old same old."

It was such a natural scene, and the two looked so similar they could've been mistaken for family, though not quite mother and daughter. It made Regina jealous how she no longer could be so casual with Henry, who was so wrapped up in the lies his book spun about Snow White's goodness that he could not give the woman who raised him a chance to prove she wasn't the two-dimensional villainess that was portrayed on paper. She had her reasons for her actions, but she knew Henry would never listen if she told him.

Regina had to give credit where credit was due, however; it took a very special woman to protect a child like it was her own.
Mr. and Mrs. Gold race against the clock to try and prove Mary Margaret's innocence.

The Gold Spinner's Wife has the court eating out of the palm of her hand...but Princess Jasmine isn't so quick to trust Belle.

Discounting their anniversary, it was the first time in a while Mr. Gold was trying to push Belle away instead of treasuring their time together. And, as the evidence burned in Belle's pocket, she could see why.

Mr. Gold had come back from his meeting with the district attorney disheartened and slightly manic.

"Mary Margaret's a dumbass," he had stated bluntly, "Now take the receipt and go."

She had paused in her inventory check, "What?"

"You heard me. Regina's skeleton key was found in her cell, a hunting knife was used as the murder weapon, Miss Swan will have a warrant by tomorrow, now go!"

Belle didn't even think about lecturing him on tone and abrasiveness. She called Henry and he told her what time to be at his house that night.

Now here she was, back in black and ready to sneak around returning something she had stolen. She was just about to pull out her cell phone when she noticed she wasn't the only one sneaking around. Two other leather-clad bandits were making their way to 108 Mifflin Street.

The two groups paused to examine each other.

"Operation Cobra?" Belle queried.

"Operation Cobra," Emma agreed, eyeing the other woman, "I thought you two were supposed to be the law-abiding part of the investigation."

Belle shrugged, "He has to abide by the law, I don't." She glanced around Emma, "Hello again, mysterious stranger."

The man accompanying Emma smirked, "Well hey there, Carrie Underwood. How's your jerk?"

"He'll be better once this case is over with," Belle said flippantly, then tilted her head, "Henry recruited you into Operation Cobra?"

"Unofficially," The man admitted.

"Great," Emma muttered, "All we need is Archie and the whole team would be here."

The radio in Emma's hand crackled to life, "The eagle is in the nest, and the package is secure."
"Excellent," Belle said, trotting off towards the house.

Emma ran after her, "Wait, you speak Henry?"

"Regina's in the shower and the keys are underneath the front porch mat," Belle interpreted, "Didn't you get a code book?"

Emma shrugged, "I got a code name too, but that doesn't mean I use it."

The trio approached the front porch and Emma pulled out the key to the garage.

"Good luck you two," Belle said.

"Wait, you're not coming with?" The man asked.

Belle shook her head, "My mission's a bit riskier," she turned to Emma, "You might want to check Regina's dresser drawer when you do your search," she suggested.

Emma gave her a questioning glance before her and the stranger of Storybrooke disappeared around back. She envied how easy their task was before bucking up and slipping inside.

The blood roaring in her ears made it hard to think of a reasonable excuse as she stole up the staircase and to the master bedroom. Perhaps it was a panty raid…wasn't that a common dare for sleepovers? Maybe Henry felt like a bedtime story; Regina certainly didn't think much of fairytales. Or maybe she should just hurry up and put the receipt back so she wouldn't have to worry about a pathetic excuse?

Belle used the running water of the shower to mask the sound of the drawer opening and closing, the receipt tucked back into place. She turned as the water stopped suddenly, and heard Regina step out. Why couldn't she take a longer shower?! She hurried out the door, fighting the urge to sprint.

Henry's head popped out of his bedroom and he stared in alarm at Belle, "You need to get out of here!" He stage-whispered.

"Move!" She hissed, and he obliged.

She sprinted into Henry's room and started trying to find somewhere to hide. His closet had no space, and underneath his bed was cluttered with toys. She turned desperately to the window and hauled it open.

"Mrs. Gold!" He exclaimed softly, but Belle had already braced herself for the escape.

She clamored out onto the roof, sliding on the frosty shingles, and paused at the rain guard for a moment. She took a deep breath and then jumped.

She gritted her teeth together as the impact stung her ankles and she rocked forward, catching herself with her hands. The porch light flicked on and Belle had no time to lament. She ran for the nearest hiding place available, mentally screaming obscenities all the way.

In her gardens back home, before there were thoughts of her dowry or the best matches that could be made for a prosperous marriage, Belle had learned on the decorative trees. She had sustained many a bruise or scrape, and once had even broken a leg during an especially bad fall. But nothing had kept her from trying again, until she had to trade such pursuits for embroidery or other approved-of activities. Belle scaled the apple tree before her like a champion, hiding amidst its
branches and feeling the protection of its cover.

It was only after her mad dash that she realized that the porch light was motion sensitive. Regina had not caught her yet, and there had been no need to hurry. She slumped against a thick branch, listening carefully.

The sliding glass door opened and Belle heard Regina's voice call out.

"Hello? …hellooo? Is anyone out there?" There were a few beats of silence before Regina sighed, "Damn raccoons," she muttered, and the sliding glass door closed again.

Belle was not moving. She couldn't see the house no matter which branch she perched on, and therefore had no idea where Regina was. She huffed and leaned back against a thick branch, doing only what someone trapped in a fruit-bearing tree would do.

She reached out and broke off the ripest apple she could grab. It was actually pretty good, not rotten as Belle would have figured.

III

Mr. Gold hadn't glanced in a mirror recently, but Belle seemed to be a damn good reflection of how he felt. Her hair was a mess, her clothes rumpled with bits of bark sticking to them, and the bags under her eyes were suitable to pile up against a door in the event of a flood. She stumbled into the kitchen, skipping the tea and going straight for the coffee beans.

"I say this with love, dearie… But you look like shit," he murmured.

"That's ironic, because I feel like shit," she rubbed at her eyes, "I spent the night in Regina's apple tree."

He arched an eyebrow, "Is that a euphemism?"

"I wish. I had like, three apples for breakfast before I heard her car leave, and my body hates me for it," she shook her head, "Katniss made it sound so easy…"

Mr. Gold made his way over to her, stroking her hair. She looked up at him and registered his face, "Why do you look like shit too?" She asked softly.

He gently made her set down the coffee beans before taking her face in both of his hands, "…I'm sorry, Belle."

She stared at him, "…what do you mean you're sorry?"

The words caught in his throat and he had to clear it. Even then they came out like sand.

"…Regina cleared the evidence by the time Sheriff Swan got the warrant. There was no receipt for a hunting knife; there was an unbroken shovel in her shed."

Splashing her with cold water might've been an easier shock, "But…how…?"

"I don't know." His face creased, "The trial starts tomorrow… I'm going to do everything I can until then." He bowed his head, "…I'm sorry, Belle. I've been trying, I really have."

"I know."

They did about the only thing they could do at that point and hugged each other. He squeezed her
tightly and she could practically feel the weight on his shoulders. She wished sometimes he didn't take on her burdens; it was bad enough she had to carry them. She kissed his cheek and then pulled away, heading towards the hall.

"I thought you were making coffee," he said.

Belle shook her head, "I'm going to need something a lot stronger to get through this."

Sidney Glass stared down into the murky brown depths of his whiskey. He'd been drinking a lot more since he was fired from the newspaper, starting to rival Leroy as the town drunkard. It was escapism and he knew it, but how else was he supposed to deal with the loss of his dream job and the horrors of what he'd have to do to get it back?

He was vaguely aware of someone sitting down next to him at the counter, but didn't register who it was until she spoke.

"Long Island Iced Tea please, Ruby."

Sidney glanced up to see Rosaline Gold as depressed as he had ever seen her, dark bruises under her eyes as evidence to her lack of sleep. Her hair was slightly messy, her clothes a little rumpled, and she was barely holding herself upright. Ruby gave her a sympathetic glance, before turning to make the beverage.

"Hey Rose," he murmured.

"Hi Sidney," she muttered, glancing at his drink, "You too?"

He nodded. Belle sighed.

"I think half the town needs a drink to get through this," she pulled out a hair tie from her purse and attempted to make herself somewhat decent, "So you're the star reporter-"

"Ex star reporter," he reminded her.

"How do you think this will end?"

Sidney frowned, "Hard to say…" he mumbled into his glass.

"Come on, you're one of the most opinionated people in Storybrooke…"

He finished off his drink, "I don't know."

Ruby set down Belle's Long Island in front of her, but her stroke of Hemingway ambition faded. There was something haunted in Sidney's expression, something not quite hidden but she couldn't tell what. She tilted her head to the side.

"What's wrong, Sidney?"


Belle took a sip of her drink and Sidney played with his empty glass, spinning it around.

"…you're a woman," Sidney stated.

"I am," Belle agreed.
"So tell me…why do you girls play hard to get?"

Belle furrowed her eyebrows, "What do you mean?"

"I mean I've done everything to get her attention; been a shoulder to cry on, helped her out when she needed it, done everything but say it out loud… But it's like she can't be bothered with me."

Her stomach churned, and she suspected it wasn't because all she had for breakfast was apples and alcoholic iced tea.

"As corny as it sounds, sometimes love is blind," she said, "We don't believe that we deserve love and so we throw away any notion that someone is trying to reach out to us. Other times… It's simply not reciprocated."

Sidney turned away from her, lowering his head and staring at the empty glass, "…what if it hurts more to walk away than to pretend it's only blind?"

"It usually does hurt more," Belle said softly, "…but it still needs to be done if you're ever going to have your own life."

Silence passed between the two of them, and even the diner seemed quiet. Ruby chose not to approach for the customary offer of a refill, and hardly anyone else occupied the restaurant. Sidney slowly lifted his gaze and met Belle's, his dark eyes watery and his face both pained and exhausted.

"I'm in too deep now, Rose. I have done things no man should have to do for the woman he loves. I am lower than scum…I'm the dirt under scum…and to think that I did all this, for nothing?" He fought back tears, "It would shatter me."

III

The young princess lounged in the shade her cabana offered her, stretched out with her bodyguard amongst dozens of cushions. Her eyes scanned the parchment before her, soaking in the poetry. It was an indulgence, she admitted to herself, but it was also a welcome break from the heavy philosophy she was prone to.

Her bodyguard lifted his head and harrumphed before rising, stalking towards the door.

"Hey Rajah."

She lifted her eyes from the page to see her bodyguard, who had been trained from birth to be a killer, murr and rub his face against her fiance's outstretched hand. He scratched Rajah behind his ears and tousled his fur before moving towards the cabana unscathed. The Bengal tiger padded along behind him.

She set her reading aside and sat up, unable to keep the smile from her face. A few days were all it took for her to fall for the charismatic young man with the smile that could light up the night sky. Caste alone couldn't keep them apart; it felt as though their souls had known each other for a thousand years.

"Jas, there's a woman here from the far west, you have to see her," he insisted.

"Why's that?" She asked.

He grinned, offering her a hand, "Her skin…you've never seen a person so white. And she's got these eyes that are as blue as sapphires."
Jasmine took his hand, allowing him to help her up, "And let me guess; waves of golden locks?" She remarked boredly.

"No, they're brown," he laced his fingers with hers, "She's here, all by herself."

This caught her attention and she pursed her lips, "No husband, no friends?"

"No one. She traveled alone."

Jasmine frowned disapprovingly. What kind of woman traveled alone? And from the far west, of all places.

"Your father already loves her," he continued, leading her inside the palace.

She smiled softly, "Of course he would."

Rajah followed the pair dutifully as they made their way through the back hallways, moving towards the throne room.

Jasmine glanced curiously at her love, "Have you ever seen a Westerner before, Aladdin?"

He shook his head, grinning, "She's my first," he cocked his head to the side, "Are they all that pale?"

Jasmine shrugged, "Some more than others; the sun's not as fond of the north and west as it is of the east and south."

Aladdin snickered, "I think we have sun to spare, if they need it so bad."

They paused behind one of the pillars, hidden by inquisitive courtesans. Plenty of curious Westerners had come to Agrabah before; was this woman really that different? Even if she traveled without a caravan to protect her… It just meant that she wasn't a true lady. Jasmine tried to ignore the pins-and-needles sensation in her stomach the thought of this stranger brought on…the same sensation that Jafar had often evoked.

"You have come a long ways from home just to shower an old Sultan with gifts." She heard her father say, a short jolly man who didn't seem to find evil in anyone.

There was a melodic laugh, "I'm just a tourist, Your Majesty, but I find that a bribe never hurts." Jasmine peered around a man to get her first glimpse of the Westerner.

She was indeed very pale, and very beautiful. She was more covered than most guests unaccustomed to the sun, those who preferred comfort and being burned to practicality. Jasmine had to give her a measure of respect for her discretion, at least.

Servants came forth to take the baskets of presents, and they didn't seem to be the usual array of jewels. They were filled with novelties, toys that spun when wound up and games that even children of their land did not know how to play.

"She's done her homework," Aladdin remarked, but Jasmine was too distracted by what she had just seen to agree.

Spools of gold were nestled like cushioning in some of the baskets. As if it had been spun.

"Perhaps you would like to join us for dinner?" The Sultan offered, "I think a banquet is in order to greet such a lovely, generous guest."
"Oh, I couldn't intrude so much," The woman insisted, "The boldest I could be is to ask for lodgings for tonight, and to meet your princess and her fiancé. I've heard there's quite a story behind them."

The Sultan laughed good-naturedly, "Oh yes, my precious Jasmine couldn't settle with just anyone."

Aladdin smiled warmly at Jasmine and they exchanged a bemused look. She nuzzled her cheek against his shoulder.

"Dearest, why are you hiding back there?"

Jasmine's head jerked as her father brought attention to her, the courtesans parting to form a clear path between her and the guest.

"This is Belle of Avonlea," he told her, "And Belle, this is my Jasmine and her Aladdin."

The woman's eyes turned to Jasmine and any respect she had for the woman faded. There was darkness in those blue eyes; not prevalent, but there all the same. Belle smiled and curtsied.

"It's nice to meet you, Your Highness, and you as well Aladdin," she said politely. Rajah stepped very pointedly in front of his mistress, emitting a low growl.

"Raj!" Aladdin scolded, before laughing, "Don't mind him; he's really a big softie deep down."

"Either way, I think I'll keep my distance," Belle joked.

Jasmine silently turned on her heels and left. She ignored the objections of both her father and fiancé, heading straight towards her chambers. Rajah trotted beside her, letting out low grunts of disdain every once in awhile. She heard footfalls running after her.

"Jasmine! ...Jasmine!"

Aladdin grabbed her by the arm and she spun around, glaring at him.

"What was that about?!" He exclaimed.

"She brings nothing but danger," Jasmine growled.

"All she's done is give the Sultan presents and ask to meet us!" He insisted.

"I saw her eyes, Aladdin, and I saw in them that same darkness that lurked in Jafar's."

Aladdin quieted at her words, that longstanding war not yet a thing of the past. Jasmine took the opportunity to continue.

"Did you see what was in those baskets?"

"Trinkets?"

"Gold, spun gold," she shook her head, "There is only one monster that spins gold, and he's from the West as well!"

Aladdin furrowed her eyebrows, "You think she's an agent of his?"

"No simple tourist comes to visit the Sultan and ask to meet with his daughter," Jasmine touched
his arm, her tone softening, "I know what I feel. I was right about Jafar…and I was right about you."

He wrinkled his nose, "Yeah, you have a knack for catching liars."

"No," she brushed his hair back with tender fingers, "I have a knack for seeing what's inside of a person…and I saw how handsome a heart you had."

Aladdin smiled crookedly, "I guess…but I still think that we should meet with her, only if it's to see what she wants with us," he shrugged, "If she turns out to be another Jafar then we always have Rajah to protect us. Right Rajah?"

The tiger gave a solemn nod, standing as if readying for an attack already.

Jasmine appreciated Aladdin's charisma and way with people…until he started using his powers on her.

Later that evening they sent for Belle and she arrived promptly to the designated room. She curtsied, looking concerned.

"I'm sorry if I upset you earlier, Your Majesty. I haven't read up on your customs as much as I should have," she admitted, biting her lip. Jasmine got the sense that, much like Aladdin, this woman had a way with people, and was trying to have her way with Jasmine.

Jasmine offered her a seat on a cushion facing them and Belle sank down onto it. Rajah growled a warning from his corner of the room before lowering his head and sighing. He was not allowed in diplomatic relations, and he knew it. Belle shifted uncomfortably under Jasmine's scrutiny.

"How do you know the Gold Spinner?" Jasmine asked flat-out.

Belle frowned, "Oh… That's what I've done wrong," she glanced down at her lap, "I'm his wife."

"Wife?" Aladdin echoed in disbelief.

Belle smirked, "Yes, wife," she pursed her lips, "The Gold Spinner is one of the gentlest titles I've ever heard him called. I should try to get that going in our own land."

"Why are you here?" Jasmine continued.

She folded her hands, "I guess visiting time is over," she mused darkly before looking back up at the couple, "He asked me to come here to…retrieve something."

"If it's a magic lamp, we're fresh out," Aladdin stated.

Belle laughed, "Not sure why he'd need a genie, but alright. It was a…tool that Jafar stole, in order to control an aspect of his plan."

Both Aladdin and Jasmine's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"I smashed his staff," Aladdin said.

Belle sighed, "Let's stop with the guessing games, shall we? You don't even need to know what I'm here to get," she shifted, "Why I bothered with coming to the palace at all, besides visiting the nobility, was to ask for a guide."

Jasmine arched an eyebrow, "You managed to make it here on your own."
"Yes, but the place I need to get to now is a bit less well-known." Belle took a deep breath, "...I need to get to the Cave of Wonders."

Jasmine was on her feet before Belle finished the name, "No! He's not going to risk his life for you!"

"I wouldn't ask him to," Belle insisted, "I wouldn't ask any of you to risk your lives. I just need to find it."

"Why?" Jasmine pressured, "You can't take anything from there without being trapped for all eternity."

"I'm aware of the enchantment of the forty thieves' lair," Belle said calmly, "But I still need to check to see if that something was left behind. Unless you want history to repeat itself."

Aladdin met Jasmine's eyes and Jasmine bit back a scream. It wasn't the look she was hoping for... the exact opposite, in fact. Instead of silently agreeing that they should send the Gold Spinner's wife on her way, he was trying to convince her of the adventure that could lay ahead. Jasmine tried to convey just how much suffering he would endure if he agreed to this but her eyes sadly were not that powerful. Only enough to ensure that it would not be a pleasant thing at all.

He turned back to Belle, beaming, "We'll head out first thing in the morning."

III

"Does Sidney own any other properties besides his house on Lakeway?"

Mr. Gold knew that he should expect any sort of question coming from Belle, ranging from what he was wearing to why the sky was blue to what would happen if electricity just ceased to exist. She still managed to catch the old trickster off guard.

"Off the top of my head, dearie, I can't say," he admitted, cradling the phone between his cheek and shoulder as he flipped through the photocopies of the evidence, "You know where the rental agreements are, don't you?"

"The black filing cabinet in the office?"

"Yes," he pursed his lips, "You don't sound like you took the Hemingway approach..."

"I was going to, but then something else reared its head," He heard clicks and typing, "Honestly, I don't know whether I want my hunch to be right or not. I do because then Snow's in the clear, but I don't because...well... Yeah. See you tonight."

"See you later, dearie." He hung up and went back to scanning.

Loopholes were Rumplestiltskin's specialty, and Regina usually had one or two things she overlooked in her plans. Still, the shark was hoping that his wife's hunch would be fruitful.

Belle was still perched in front of the computer when he arrived home that night, dry eyes scanning the screen. They broke away only as he entered with a couple of strong cups of black coffee, his own materials to study, and a dark chocolate bar.

"God bless you," Belle murmured fervently as she took one of the cups and reached for the chocolate.
He pulled the chocolate out of reach, "Eh! That's for whoever gets the eureka that frees Mary Margaret," he chided, setting it on top of one of the book cases. He made his way over to the plush reading chair in the corner, turning on the light, "What's so important about Mr. Glass's real estate ventures?"

"If he has other places, I want to know," she said simply, switching windows, "He and Regina have been e-mailing back and forth about some kind of vague arrangement. Listen to this… "I want to thank you again Sidney for all of this. Stay strong; it will be over soon. Love, Regina'."

"She's never signed any of her messages to me with love," Mr. Gold grumbled, sipping at his brew, "You think she's using her old Mirror to help her out with this scheme?"

"Almost positive… All I need is evidence, and I don't think "I would do anything for you" is a strong enough statement for old George to take seriously," she minimized the copied e-mails and turned to Mr. Gold, frowning, "If we do find Kathryn…” She trailed off.

"You have to consider which means more to you," Mr. Gold continued, "Your long friendship with Snow White, or the bond you had with the Magic Mirror."

Belle bit her lip and glanced down at her hands, wishing she didn't have to choose.

Mr. Gold took another drink, then flipped his packet open, "Why are women so evil?" He asked wearily, "You don't see men framing each other for murders that didn't occur to get back for a spilled secret…"

"Right, because having a brawl over it is so much more productive," Belle muttered, opening the filing cabinet.

"Less paperwork, at least," Mr. Gold pointed out, twirling a highlighter around his fingers. Belle rolled her eyes and started leafing through the various real estate agreements he had collected over the years.

Nothing new was revealed to him, as he doubted would be, but he kept trying, kept hoping. Not for Snow White's sake; to him she was little more than another pawn on his chessboard to play with. But she was Belle's friend, and he wasn't sure he could live with himself if something happened to her. Belle's heart would be broken again, and he couldn't have that.

They drank more coffee than was healthy, read, and occasionally conferred with each other. It was a tense atmosphere as the clock ticked down towards the scheduled time Mary Margaret would be transferred from Storybrooke's station to the nearest actual prison.

Belle sucked in a little breath at around dawn and Mr. Gold glanced up, twitchy from the caffeine.

"I think this is it," she said, getting to her feet and holding the folder, "…this is it," she decided, and Mr. Gold wondered if the sleepless night had driven her batty.

She grabbed the candy bar off the book case and dashed out of the room, scrambling for a coat and shoes.

"And where are you off to?" Mr. Gold asked mildly, pinching at the corners of his eyes.

"A little rental property in the woods that was recently leased to a Mr. Sidney Glass," she popped her head into the office, "If I were to hide someone, it would definitely be at a place like this."

"Good to know," he murmured, not even bothering to point out that it was 6:30 in the morning.
6:30. Mr. Gold frowned at the clock. They only had a few more hours to pull something out of their combined asses or Mary Margaret was going to be the corpse.

III

Jasmine pulled the headscarf around, covering her nose and mouth. The thin fabric breathed, but also guarded her face and neck against the elements. It may have been dawn right now, but by the time they reached their destination it would be at its peak. Rajah whined as she hugged him farewell.

"I'll be back," she promised the feline, before going out to the courtyard.

Her timing couldn't have been better. Servants were just bringing out two camels for the journey to Aladdin and Belle, both of them with similar head scarves to Jasmine. Jasmine wondered if it was enough protection for someone as pale as the Gold Spinner's wife; someone that pale might actually get a sun burn through fabric.

Belle caught sight of her first, and the corners of her eyes crinkled with a hidden smile.

"I was hoping you'd come along," she said emphatically.

Aladdin glanced towards her, seeming less thrilled, "Jas, you don't have to come. It's going to be a quick trip, there and back."

"I want to come," Jasmine said firmly, "It's not often I have an excuse to leave Agrabah."

"It could be dangerous."

"More dangerous than what I've already endured?" She queried.

"I just want you safe, is all," he murmured.

"And all I want is to make my own choices."

Belle turned to the camel, trying to give the couple the privacy for a spat. The handler had urged the mount to kneel, and Belle wondered how she was supposed to go about clamoring on. Was it like a horse, where you just swung yourself on? Did she sit directly on the hump, and which hump was better to sit on?

She watched Aladdin out of the corner of her eye and mimicked his actions, choosing to take the back hump. That way if she lost her balance she had another hump to grab onto. Jasmine settled onto the back hump as well and the handler to Belle's camel clicked his tongue.

Belle was positive she'd immediately fall off as the large mammal got to its hooves, gripping the reins tightly as they were passed up to her. Her mount turned its head to glare at her, and she got the sense camels weren't exactly patient with beginners.

Aladdin's laugh broke through her panic.

"Relax," he insisted, "You've ridden horses before, haven't you?"

"Yes," Belle said.

"Camels aren't too different. Just move with them," he said, before urging his camel forward. Hesitantly, Belle followed.
Camels were vastly different than horses. Their giant lurching steps weren't nearly as graceful, and balanced so precariously on its hump she swore her uncoordinated body couldn't handle it. She longed for Philippe, and knew within strides that she was going to be sore for a week after this excursion.

Aladdin didn't pressure her past a walk, not seeming overly concerned with getting there quickly. Jasmine however seemed more than ready to be done with the whole business, and Belle wondered how the sour future sultana could be so bitter towards someone she hardly knew.

…except for maybe what she had heard of Belle's mate. Belle had been hoping his reputation would not precede her here.

"So how do you like the scenery?" Aladdin asked a few hours into the silence.

"It's fine, I guess. I'm still not used to the lack of trees…or grass and dirt," Belle admitted.

"Scenery is only what the eyes see," Jasmine muttered.

"The mind fills in the rest."

Jasmine straightened and looked over at the other woman, "You read Zhao Pon Yu?"

Belle giggled, "I read anything."

Jasmine's unease towards the Gold Spinner's wife faded; no one who enjoyed reading could be completely evil.

Aladdin groaned, knowing he was in for a long camel ride. Jasmine had found someone to talk to about her books; she'd never shut up now.

They eventually came upon an unassuming mound of sand, one which didn't look at all that different than the rest of the desert. Aladdin reigned in his camel and Belle followed suit.

"This is it," he murmured. Belle studied the ground. "Do you know the incantation?"

"Yes," she agreed with a nod, "Just a bit…nervous."

"Nothing to be nervous about. Just put your hands in your pockets and it'll be fine," he suggested playfully.

Belle dismounted her camel, approaching the hill warily. She cleared her throat and, as clearly as she could manage, she spoke the magic words."

"Aperi sesame."

The ground trembled beneath their feet and mounts, the camels tossing their heads and backing away. The hill rose until it was as tall as a dwelling, a curtain of sand falling down to reveal a gaping black entrance. There was no light coming from within, no way to tell the size of the cave from this side. Belle glanced back and gave an uncertain smile to the couple.

"Thank you very much Aladdin, Princess Jasmine. The rest I must do alone."

"Are you sure?" Aladdin asked.

She laughed, but the laugh did not reach her eyes, "I'll be fine." She didn't seem to believe her own words.
Belle disappeared into the Cave of Wonders, swallowed up by the darkness within moments. Aladdin and Jasmine frowned in unison.

"What do you think she wants to see?" He asked softly.

"I don't know," she murmured, "But no one goes into the cave just to look."

They stayed there, waiting to see what would happen. Would the Gold Spinner's wife return, or would temptation be too much? It was a good twenty minutes before the earth trembled, groaning as if in agony. The gigantic entrance did not close and shrink; instead it tumbled in on itself like a statue shattering to the ground. They stared in horror as the swollen hill disintegrated into a dip in the earth, not merely closed but destroyed off the face of the earth.

It was Jasmine who leapt off the camel, running to the dent and digging at the hot sand.

"Belle… Belle!"

Aladdin held a fist over his heart the way someone might remove their hat respectfully. Not only did the poor girl touch… she had managed to destroy the cave and likely her with it.

III

Maybe the lack of sleep and tons of coffee were getting to her, Belle considered before she pulled up to the cottage in the woods. Maybe a conspiracy with Sidney was just some silly notion her desperate mind had dreamed up. But her gut insisted upon checking it out anyway, and her gut had a tendency to be right.

There were no vehicles around, no lights or other signs of use. It looked abandoned, and she doubted Sidney would rent it just to have an asset. She circled the cottage, peering into windows with drawn curtains, but no one appeared to be home. She sighed, going up to the front door and, glancing around first, picked the lock. It wasn't an especially hard one, thank goodness. Edgily she walked through the small rental, noting the sparse decorations. There were only four rooms; the living room, the kitchen /dining area, the bathroom, and a bedroom. She searched vainly for something, anything, all the while feeling a bit like the sister in "The Lovely Bones".

There was nothing. Not a single thing. Despair washed over her as her last hope vanished. Her friend would be put on trial for something she didn't do. They'd try to send her out of Storybrooke. At best, she'd be severely injured by the part of the curse that kept them trapped.

Belle tensed as she heard something coming from beneath the floorboards. She glanced down at a rug in the dining alcove and kicked it aside. There was a slit in the hardwood floor. She crouched down and pried at the crack. It lifted, revealing a step ladder and a basement. Belle did not hesitate to climb down.

There was a lamp in the corner, on the table next to a cot. An empty plate and half-drunk glass of water sat next to it, the blankets crumpled. Tossing restlessly on the cot was the former Princess Abigail.

Glazed blue eyes looked at Belle without really seeing, the poor dear drugged senseless, "Please…" she croaked, "Please let me go."

Belle fought back tears at the state of the poor woman, not wanting to believe that Sidney had really, truly done this, "Of course I'll let you go."

Emma was beyond pain as she watched the only woman who had felt like family escorted out the
door and towards an impending trial. She was beyond sadness. She was just plain pissed. She grabbed the vase of flowers Sidney had given to her and threw it against the wall, the crash only mildly satisfying.

"I don't think tossing around pots of flora is exactly the best outlet for your emotions, Miss Swan."

Emma wheeled around to see the son of a bitch standing in the doorway of her office. She bared her teeth at him like a wild animal.

"You told me you could help her, you told me you could fix this!" She snapped.

"We still have time," Mr. Gold said gently, "She's being put on trial, not death row. A little magic can still be worked."

She stared at him, trying to see past her haze of rage. Mr. Gold's usually smug superiority wasn't to be found. In fact, if Emma thought that he could possibly have a heart she might say he looked upset over Mary Margaret being taken away.

The silence stretched between them for a moment before the phone rang. If that was Regina, Emma would go over to her house and shove every last goddamn apple from her goddamn tree down her goddamn throat.

"Sheriff's station," Emma said blandly.

"I found her," A voice said breathlessly.

Emma's forehead creased, "Found who, Rose?" Mr. Gold perked at the name of his spouse.

"Kathryn."

It wasn't exertion that was making Mrs. Gold out of breath; it was shock.

"My god… Are you okay?"

"Yes, yes I'm fine but she's not, she's drugged to near incoherentness. She needs to get to a hospital-
"

"Wait, Kathryn's alive?"

"Yes," Rose breathed.

"Where are you?"

"If I tell you, will you promise to just resolve Mary Margaret's case and not look into Kathryn's abduction?"

Emma frowned at the odd request, but figured it was better than running around Storybrooke trying to track her down, "I'll do what I can, but if Kathryn wants a case then there's nothing I can do but my job."

Rose took a deep breath, "Alright, I'm at…"

Mr. Gold was fighting to keep his aloof composure as he pieced together the conversation. Belle had done it. His wonderful lovely Belle had pulled through and proved beyond a doubt that this was a frame job. She was such an incredible woman, and he'd have to spoil her for this somehow.
Belle wasn't all too comfortable with how dark the Cave of Wonders was. She always imagined magical light to illuminate the way, but she supposed that was too much to ask of a cave no one really used. She snapped her fingers to ignite a small flame to use as a light, using her free hand to pull out the map she had copied from the Honey-Do List. The cave was highly booby-trapped, which was probably why Jafar hadn't wanted to go in and get the lamp himself. False floors, venomous snakes, pressure points… It was a puzzle to stay alive, and Belle wondered how Aladdin had managed.

She wove deeper and deeper into the cave until she came to a small cage. She put the map away and flicked her wrist. The lock on the cage fell to the ground and she opened the door. A gold scarab beetle skittered around inside as though it were alive, glowing brightly. It didn't react much to Belle picking it up, moving around her hand as if curious.

Belle took a deep breath. This was the tricky part, tearing the heart of the Cave of Wonders in half and managing to magick out before she was buried alive. Rumplestiltskin's notes had assured her the magic that kept teleporting from happening would fall away once the scarab was separated. She was sad that she wouldn't get to say goodbye to Jasmine and Aladdin, and they would probably assume she died in the collapse. Maybe she could send a postcard.

She sucked in a deep breath, found the crack that divided the golden scarab, and snapped it in half. The walls immediately started to fall and Belle forced herself to concentrate on the escape.

The roaring of a cave collapsing stopped and Belle dared to open her eyes. She was back in the dining hall of the Dark Castle. She breathed a sigh of relief, and went to go put the two halves of the beetle in the basket of collectibles. Another task down, several more to go.

Sidney hadn't returned any of Belle's calls. She wondered if he was mad at her about exposing Kathryn. Kathryn hadn't pressed charges and Emma hadn't prosecuted, though, and Belle had been briefly mentioned in yet another issue of the Daily Mirror.

Belle knocked on his front door a few times before sighing.

"Sidney, can we talk?" Silence. She huffed, "Okay, fine, just let me know you're alright and I'll leave you alone," she promised.

"He's not home, and he won't be for a very long time."

Belle turned to see Regina coming up the walk towards her, looking particularly venomous.

"What did you do to him?" Belle growled.

Regina laughed, "What did I do? I'm not the one who got Mr. Glass in trouble, finding out his dirty little secret."

Belle bristled, "At least I didn't make him kidnap Kathryn."

"I didn't make him," Regina said innocently, before her lips curled into a devilish smile, "I merely suggested it would be a large enough story to get him back on the Daily Mirror, just like how your husband merely suggested that something tragic should happen to Kathryn."

"What did you do to Sidney?" Belle repeated.
Regina stepped up onto the porch, facing her like an executioner eyeing up a prisoner before the beheading.

"He had a mental breakdown, so he had to take a trip down into the basement of the hospital… Where you'll be if you don't keep out of my business."

"Then stay away from my loved ones," Belle said simply.

Regina snickered, "You speak as if you have power over me."

Belle folded her arms, "My intentions are good. That might be enough."

Even as Belle stayed strong in the face of the witch, inwardly she was falling apart. Another poor soul she had failed to save…but it hurt more because he had saved her from her imprisonment.
The Return

Chapter Summary

Mr. Gold wants to believe that August is really Baelfire, but Mrs. Gold is more skeptical.

Rumplestiltskin takes Belle to visit his home from before he lost his son, and Belle begins to love a boy she's never met.

It was one of those wakings when she wasn't sure what had caused it. Belle's eyes blinked open and glanced around. It was still dark outside… She turned to her husband.

Mr. Gold's bare chest rose and fell rapidly as he gasped for air, his body twisting and jerking as though he were being beaten by an invisible enemy. His lips parted in an incoherent murmur. Belle sat up, touching his shoulder lightly.

"Bae…" He grunted, his face contorted with pain, "BAE!"

He jerked up as his eyes flew open, gulping in air and trembling. Belle stroked his sweat-soaked back and he whirled around, staring at her. It took him a moment to recognize her but when he did he clung to her with all his strength. She held him as he struggled to breathe, her cheek pressed against his head.

"It's alright, Rum, Bae's fine. No one's going to hurt him, he's alive and well I promise," she assured him.

Slowly he calmed down, giving a few hard shudders as if to shake off the nightmare. He tried to laugh.

"It's been awhile since I've woken up screaming, hasn't it?" He mused.

"Not long enough." She kissed his forehead and leaned back against the headboard, rubbing his shoulder.

He relaxed against her, pressing his face against her collarbone. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"This one was a doozy, wasn't it?" Belle guessed. He nodded and she sighed, running her fingers through his hair, "I think if he knew about these nightmares, he'd laugh."

"I don't think so," Mr. Gold muttered.

"Why not? You're in Maine worrying that he's hurt while he's in Florida soaking up the sun."

He opened one eye, "Florida?"

Belle nodded confidently, "He snorkels on the weekends."

"And what's his job?"
"He's a naturopath, one of those hippies that doesn't believe in prescriptions and instead gives his patients herbal remedies." Mr. Gold growled and Belle giggled, encouraged to continue, "He has a soul patch, and owns a hybrid car, and his name here is Rico…"

Belle was cut off by her own laughter as Mr. Gold tickled her sides, effectively shutting her up as she squirmed. Once he was certain she wouldn't go on about Hippie Bae he stopped, smiling up at her.

"I like the version where he's a crossdresser better," he said.

She snickered, "You'd rather have a crossdressing son than a hippie son?"

His smile softened, "I'll take Bae whatever way he comes."

He sighed softly and they both settled back down onto the bed, Belle still holding on to her lover. Her heartbeat was as comforting to him as the familiar creaks of his spinning wheel, his fingers kneading gently into her to reassure himself that she was there, that she wouldn't disappear as well.

"I don't know what I'd do without you, Belle," he murmured, "You have this power to make me laugh when I don't even want to smile."

"I'm just glad I can make you laugh," she said.

He stared thoughtfully at her right breast for a moment, "…do you think Bae has someone?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like…a girlfriend, maybe even a wife? For all I know I could have grand-"

"No," Belle cut him off quickly, "I'm ready to accept a lot of possibilities, but I will not accept the fact that I would be a grandmother before being a mother."

Mr. Gold gave a throaty chuckle, "You'd still have children to play with, though."

Belle frowned up at the ceiling, saying nothing. She supposed if Baelfire did have kids in the time it took Rumple to get here, then she would love them… But she'd still prefer to have her own little one to raise first.

The next day, Belle snuck around the back of the shop, trying to be as quiet as possible as she worked on his desk. Did she believe she could spend any good amount of time there while he was mulling around the main section? No. Was she going to try to sneak some time in before Mary Margaret's party? Yup.

She froze as the bell rang.

"Hey, Mr. Gold."

"Good morning, Henry. What can I do for you?"

Belle breathed a sigh of relief before shifting through some papers, trying to determine which were important and which could be stowed away in a labeled folder.

The back door creaked and Belle glanced up from her work. If it was a customer who had inadvertently used the office entrance, they were sure being quiet about it. She eased up onto her feet and peered over a stack of boxes.
It was that man again. The one that had zipped up her dress and the one who had been sneaking around with Emma. Mysterious Motorcycle-riding Operation Cobra Agent Man Who Could Come And Go From Storybrooke. He seemed edgy as he scanned the shelves, thorough but trying to be quick. Belle pursed her lips.

"Can I help you?"

The man's head turned towards her, trying to hide his surprise.

"Hey there again," he said cheerily, smiling, "And actually you could… I'm looking for some maps. I'm a bit of a collector."

"Really? Well from what I've heard you do travel a lot," Belle walked over to him and he shifted stiffly, "There are maps, but they're in the front of the shop," she said, nodding towards the curtain, "This is the office."

"Oh, I thought this was the entrance," His gloved hands dug into his pockets, "…so you work here?" He asked casually.

Belle was getting the sense that Henry looking for a bell and the stranger sneaking in through the obviously-not-entrance weren't a coincidence. She could play along, though.

"Yes, my boss," she gestured towards Mr. Gold's voice, "Is also my jerk."

He smirked, "Small world."

She tilted her head to the side, "This is the third time I've met you and I have yet to learn your name," she pointed out.

He nodded his agreement, "And I've yet to hear yours, though apparently it ends in "Gold"," he bowed his head slightly, "August, August W. Booth."

"What does the "W" stand for?" She asked.

He grinned, "It's a secret."

Not a very big one, as far as secrets went. She folded her arms, "I'm Rose, Rosaline Gold."

A light came on in August's eyes, "Rose…a fitting name."

Belle tensed, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, I heard you were the florist's daughter," he backpedaled, "Rose, flowers, yanno…" He shrugged.

"Right," she bit her lip.

August looked about ready to ask something when the curtain fluttered angrily.

"What are you doing back here?"

Belle turned to see that Mr. Gold was asking her, not August. She shook her head quickly, "Nothing…"

He glanced down at his desk, "…you were cleaning, weren't you?" He accused.
"Of course not," she said in a squeaky voice, shaking her head emphatically, "I would never-"

"Woman, that is organized chaos!" He jabbed a finger angrily at the desk top, "It's practically my man cave back here; do not touch!"

"It needs to be cleaned up!" Belle protested, "Half the time you were working on the case you spent searching for things!"

"I did not! I know exactly where everything is!"

"Really?"

"Really."

"Find your book of accounts, then."

Mr. Gold was still for a moment, rubbing his fingers thoughtfully, "...well I would know where it is if you didn't move everything around," he muttered.

"Your book of accounts isn't even on your desk!" She insisted.

"...I'm just going to go look at the maps now," August excused himself, retreating to the front.

Mr. Gold huffed, "You have exactly one reason to be back here, and even then I'm supposed to be with you."

"That's mighty chauvinistic of you."

The bell to the front door rang and they paused, listening to make sure the coast was clear.

"What was he up to?" Mr. Gold murmured, taking a few strides closer to Belle.

She shook her head, "Not sure. His name's August W. Booth though, and he set off my bullshit detector."

"August W. Booth? Obviously a false name," Mr. Gold mused, glancing towards the curtain, "...we'll have to keep an eye on him; Emma's supposed to be the only one to cross the town line. In the meantime," he jabbed a finger at her chest, "Don't touch my stuff."

Belle let out a low grumble, "I'll remind you of that in bed tonight..."

There was no more time for snarkiness though, because the bell had rung again. Very angry high heels clicked against the floor.

"Gold!"

Mr. Gold closed his eyes, "...dearie...?" He pleaded.

"I'm off the clock, and Regina's already plenty mad at me," Belle insisted.

"Can't you just...make a suggestive moan or something?" He whined, "I don't want to deal with Her Majesty either."

"GOLD!"

The curtain flew open as Regina stormed into the back room.
"You broke our deal," she insisted.

Mr. Gold turned around deliberately, studying the enraged Regina as if surprised by her words, "I broke one deal in my life, dearie," he winked, "And it certainly wasn't this one."

"I see you're busy," Belle said to him, grabbing up her coat, "I'll leave you two be."

Mr. Gold shot her a glare and she grinned, blowing him a kiss before beating a hasty retreat from the war about to erupt. Some days it was good to be the wife instead of the actual dealmaker.

III

Fisher wasn't quite sure what to make of his passengers. They were quiet and solemn folk, with hoods drawn over their faces. A man and a woman, if their voices were any indication.

"We'll be docking any minute now," he said cheerily, "You just visiting Norrisport?"

"Hyksos, actually," The man corrected, his hood a deep red.

Fisher tried not to show his reaction. Why anyone would want to visit that dinky little village was beyond him.

"You from there?" He asked. The man nodded and the woman, in a blue cloak, rested her hand on his thigh reassuringly.

Fisher decided not to press; his mum always told him he pried too much, and that it would get him into trouble one day.

He docked the small sail boat at a free port and tied it up.

"There you have it; thank you for your business, and enjoy your visit."

The man smoothly stepped out of the boat, then turned to offer a hand to his mistress. Fisher tried not to stare at the scaly glittering skin that was exposed. No wonder he preferred to wear a hood.

"You know my cousin had something similar," he offered, "Yak's milk cleared it right up."

The man seemed to glower at him and the woman giggled, accepting his hand with her own pale smooth one.

"Thank you," she said to Fisher, her free hand offering him a pouch.

"You already paid me, miss," he insisted.

"It's a tip," she said, continuing to hold it out. Unable to refuse a lady, he accepted the bag with a "thank you", and with her companion's help she stepped down onto the dock.

Fisher waited an appropriate amount of time before opening the pouch. He shouted in surprise as the thing was chock full of threads of gold.

Hearing his shout, Belle snickered, and Rumplestiltskin shook his head.

"You're going to be my downfall, giving out my gold like that. People are going to start calling me generous..." He complained.

"Oh hush. You secretly love making people happy too," she insisted.
Her fingers threaded through his and she squeezed as they made their way out of the port town and up the dirt path further inland.

As if wanting to remedy the Milah Incident, Rumplestiltskin had invited her to come along with him to visit his old village. Belle had instantly accepted…but she was starting to see the effect this journey had on him. There was a heaviness to his steps and a gravity to his person, not at all like the buoyant Dark One she was accustomed to. He actually seemed old, and tired.

"How often do you come back?" She asked softly.

He shrugged, "I used to visit quite a bit… Now I only come about once a decade," he frowned, "It’s odd, seeing the descendants of old neighbors, watching the memory of the crippled spinner who suddenly fell into power fade away. They know and yet they don’t know Rumplestiltskin."

It was a good hike to the small village of Hyksos. Belle had always considered her own town small, but Rumple's? She could easily see from one side of it to the other. Fields of sheep surrounded the community like a gate, simple houses built around a tiny marketplace. It all seemed so basic, so…primitive.

"That's new," Rumplestiltskin remarked boredly as he looked at the small cobblestoned area where vendors sold their wares.

The people… They were the only ones in color, and all the others seemed just as tired as Rumple. They appeared older than they actually were—even the children. Belle had thought she knew what peasants and farmers were, but apparently she had no idea.

"It’s improved a lot in the last three centuries," he mused, continuing forward. He was favoring his right leg due to old habit.

Belle watched the curious people, how they hurriedly glanced away. She checked her hood but it was still pulled up; perhaps all they knew was fear.

"Did you used to live in one of these?" She asked.

"No, I…moved it." He held on to her hand tighter, leading her through the village and occasionally pointing out things of interest.

He was leading her out into a forest near the town, a not-especially cheery one. It was quiet, as if even the animals were afraid to make noise.

"I keep it as a symbol," he said, "To remind me of where I’ve come from…where I’ll go back to if I'm not careful. Of the man I used to be and what truly matters to me."

They came upon an old stone hut with a thatched roof. It wasn't especially wide, but it was long, preserved from decay by magic rather than care. It overlooked a depression in the earth that Rumplestiltskin was trying very, very hard to ignore.

"Quite the difference between this and our castle, eh?" He joked darkly.

"It's quaint," Belle defended. He snorted and shook his head, leading her to the door.

Belle's attempt to like the house faded as she stepped inside. The floor was dirt and uneven, straw spread out in the attempt to make it nicer. The furniture was ill-made and basic, everything dusty and filthy. Old rags served as drapes, and she didn't want to think about the condition of the dishes. She lowered her hood, staring in horror at the shack.
"...how can someone be allowed to live like this?" She murmured.

"Not all of us are born to wealth and privilege," Rumplestiltskin flicked his hood off, "And not all of us live in a fiefdom with a ruler who cares whether his people suffer or not so long as they pay their dues and provide soldiers for their wars." He went over to the fireplace, picking up a bit of flint and a knife to strike against it, "The Duke of the Frontlands was nothing like you or even your father. He sent mere children out to fight against ogres." His face twisted in a snarl, striking against the flint passionately.

Belle tiptoed her way towards him, feeling a great deal of warmth for her father. None of his people ever lived like, like animals in a stable.

"Take the right way around the table, dearie," he murmured softly as a shower of sparks fell onto some kindling, "There's a pothole I'm sure your klutzy feet would find and trip over."

She obeyed, finding her way carefully to the bench beside him. He stirred the embers, coaxing them into flames until he need not care for them any longer. He refused to look at Belle.

"...you can see why she left now, can't you?" He murmured, his face drenched in shame.

She shook her head, "No," she said honestly, "It's a horrible living situation... But what does that matter when you love someone?"

Rumplestiltskin gave a rough bark of a laugh, "She never loved me. Only Bae ever loved me before you."

Belle did not attempt to reach out or touch him. He did not want her touch right now, she knew instinctively.

"...thank you. For bringing me here," she said gently.

Rumplestiltskin clenched his jaw, "You insist upon knowing all of me, so here I am. Every little stain and crack," he stood up abruptly, walking away with that same phantom limp, "I'll make us some tea."

Belle gazed around the house, letting her eyes look past its shabby surface and into a glimpse of her husband's past life. She had to stick by her claim that it was what no human being should live in, but it was still a part of her husband, a past that he did not talk about for the pain it caused him. She did not know how to chase those ingrained senses of worthlessness and being unloveable away; she could not go back in time and keep him from enduring the torments he had. She could only love him as he was now, and hope that it would help him see himself through her eyes.

He filled a metal kettle with water and set it over the fire, digging around for some herbs. Belle stood and habitually began to explore.

"I could've used you back then," he said, some of his usual joking self coming back, "Cleaning wasn't one of my top priorities."

"No?" Belle teased.

"No." He held up two cups, acting as if he were a human balance, "If I wasn't working, I was taking care of Bae and if I wasn't taking care of Bae I was working. Sometimes," He crossed his arms and held them parallel to each other, "I did both at the same time."

Belle ran her hand over a sheepskin blanket, "You didn't consider remarrying?"
He snorted, unwinding his arms "Not after what she did to me. I learned my lesson about marriages of convenience… Perhaps it was selfish to not try to give Bae a new mother figure-

"No," Belle cut him off quickly, "If he was old enough to remember his mother, then marrying simply for a new one would be a disaster."

Belle eased herself down on the bed, running her fingers through the fur. Rumplestiltskin took the kettle off and started pouring the hot water into the cups, picking them up and glancing at her. His eyes softened.

"…that's Bae's bed," he murmured.

Belle flinched, "I'm sorry, I'll get off-"

"No, no, stay," he urged, smiling, "It's fitting."

He sat down beside her and passed her a cup, "Let it soak in a bit," he advised.

She did as he suggested, but it didn't make the bitter water taste any better. He gave a helpless shrug, continuing to drink his. He reached down and stroked the blanket lovingly.

"Bae liked to watch me spin," he recalled, "I'd think he'd be asleep so I'm start to put the wool away…and all of a sudden I'd hear this little voice say "Papa don't stop"," he stared down into his cup, "It's…just something I've always been good at. It helps me forget who or what I am."

Belle sipped at her brew, trying to get a taste for it. It wouldn't be too bad, with a bit of honey or something. She thought this was all she would get; it was already the longest running conversation they'd ever had about where he had come from and who he had been. She was surprised when he gestured towards the other bed in the hut.

"There was only one…good thing that happened there and that was when Baelfire was born."

She set her cup aside, "…when?" She breathed.

"Sometime in May, I think… He was my little spring lamb," he played with his cup, a nail digging at the rim as if trying to chip it, "I had to wait outside… It's bad luck for the father to be present during a birth. But I heard every scream… Dear gods that woman had a mouth…" He cradled the cup, "It was late when the midwife was through, mother and son washed up. Milah looked like hell, but she seemed…content with Bae. Not especially happy or sad, as though she wasn't holding a miracle."

Not even the fact his wife barely cared about the child she had just birthed tainted the love in his eyes. The pain of his past seemed to vanish in light of his son and Belle unconsciously moved closer, drawn to the warmth of the memory.

"I was so afraid, Belle, when she said I could hold him. He looked so small and frail in that blanket, and I thought for sure I would drop him. Dense little things, babies are…" His thumb caressed the clay as if he were touching his newborn son, "I took him from her and I looked down at Baelfire, and my entire life changed in that moment. I know you don't understand yet Belle, but the world turned on its head. Nothing mattered, nothing except for that helpless infant. He was my everything, and I knew I was put on this earth to protect that precious boy, to care for him," he laughed as tears ran down his face, "And he loved me, Belle. I can count on one hand how many people actually gave a damn whether I lived or died and he was one of them…that precious lamb."

He turned to her, his chin trembling. They weren't tears of pain, or anger; they were tears of
homage, remembering a life that had been woven to his and that he was grateful to have touch him, despite how it ended.

"There's no such thing as a good parent," he told her softly, "As long as babies are raised by imperfect humans that will be true. But I think even the most despicable person on the face of this earth could come close. The mark of a decent parent isn't who your child grows up to be or how few mistakes you make…it's what you would do for your child. If you would move the mountains and stop the rain and go through the very fires of hell for them…then that's a true parent."

Belle just stared at him a moment, drinking him in. She had experienced almost every layer there was of Rumplestiltskin; the trickster, the beast, the coward, the spinner. And now here she was, at his core, seeing the truest form of himself that anyone could ever see; the man. A father who loved his son and his wife and would do anything for them…even burn down a castle and stab the Dark One through the heart to be cursed for eternity.

She wanted to be quiet and good; she wanted to let him take the lead and let him slowly tell her the whole story. But she was still Belle, and she felt questions bubbling up until the first one slipped out.

"Did he sleep through the night?"

Rumplestiltskin looked as though he had never been asked questions about his son before, which he probably hadn't. Then, he gave a wide grin.

"Yes, he was a very good baby. Except for whenever he was hungry…"

III

"For the love of god, Rumple, it's a party, not your execution. Behave yourself and we'll pull the Rubric out when we get home."

"Belle, I'm not Pavlov's dog. You cannot condition my good behavior with sexual favors."

"Tell the Dark One that. He pokes his head up if you so much as help an old lady cross the street."

The door to Mary Margaret's apartment swung open and the guest of honor herself was beaming at Belle.

"Rose, I'm so glad you came!"

"I brought cookies!" Belle said proudly, holding up the container. She glanced back over her shoulder, "…and Eeyore."

Mr. Gold stood behind his cheery wife, back to his usual brooding self. Mary Margaret had been pretty certain that Rose wouldn't have been able to drag him to a happy gathering of people celebrating, but apparently she held more sway over the man than Mary Margaret imagined. Either way, she linked her arm with Rose's and ushered her inside.

"I can't thank you enough, for all you and Mr. Gold have done," she said, leading her to the refreshments, "I mean, if it wasn't for you two and Emma…"

"Someone else would've found Kathryn," Belle said dismissively, setting her cookies down beside the cake.

Mary Margaret set a hand on Belle's shoulder, turning the beauty to face her, "Rose…you believed
in me, even when the evidence was overwhelming."

Belle shrugged, "It's what friends do, they believe in each other," she wrinkled her nose, "It's not exactly trust if you have to use your eyes."

Mary Margaret was pulled away by an enthusiastic Ruby and Belle helped herself to some punch. "I think you're my favorite princess now."

Belle glanced over to see Henry grinning at her. She laughed and shook her head, "I'm not a princess, Henry, but thank you. I'd think Snow White would rank higher."

"Yeah, but she's my grandmother," he said, pouring himself a cup, "Coming in at the last minute with the twist that Kathryn really isn't dead, foiling the Evil Queen's plan to frame Snow White... You're really good at this secret agent stuff."

"Well I had some help from the rest of Operation Cobra," she pointed out, before raising her glass, "A toast, for good triumphing over evil."

Henry beamed, raising his cup, "To good!"

They clinked their plastic together and then drank in unison, Belle draining nearly half her cup. It was really good punch, whoever had made it.

Henry studied Belle thoughtfully, "...how'd you get the beast to help?"

Belle fought back a smirk, "What, you don't believe he did it out of the kindness of his heart?"

Henry glowered and she snickered, "You're still a little young for that talk."

"...is this the birds and the bees talk that scares my mom every time I bring it up?" He asked.

She pursed her lips, "...it's related to it, yes."

"Rose, he's old enough," August insisted, sidling up to the conversation.

First off, Belle wasn't sure when he had been invited into the conversation. Second, even though Belle didn't know what the proper age at which to give The Talk was, she was pretty sure it wasn't ten.

"You see Henry, since the dawn of time women have been puppet masters," he began, "They know exactly how to pull a man's strings to make him do what they want, and half the time he thinks he's the one in charge. A woman is a powerful thing, Henry, especially when she has a man wrapped around her finger," August smirked, "Even the best of us fall prey... Poor Mr. Gold probably doesn't even realize how his little beauty's calling the shots." He rocked a hand back and forth, miming playing with a marionette, "Dance puppet dance..."

"Now Henry knows who not to go to for relationship advice," Belle muttered into her cup.

"Hey, I gotta go," Henry said quickly, jerking his head back towards a nervous Emma, "I'll see you later Mrs. Gold, August."

"See you, Henry," Belle said, before giving her full attention to the delicious punch in her hand.

August smirked, but didn't speak until Henry was out the door, "Tell me you don't pull your husband's strings."
Belle arched an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Look at him," August rolled his shoulder back towards Mr. Gold, "He doesn't seem particularly happy to be here. Are you really going to say you didn't persuade him to come? Are you going to look me in the eye and say he helped Mary Margaret because he wanted to?"

She narrowed her eyes, "What are you getting at?" She wondered.

August shrugged innocently, "I just want to hear you say the words, that you control Mr. Gold."

She rolled her eyes, "Fine, I control Mr. Gold, happy?"

"Insanely," he sized Belle up, "I'm glad he has you."

Belle blinked, "What?"

"You're helping him become the man he used to be…before the darkness," he glanced at his watch, "Anyway, I need to get going. We should talk some time… Beauty."

He was walking away before Belle could fully process his words. It took every ounce of restraint she possessed not to run after him. Beauty could be excused, Operation Cobra name and all, but no one here knew the man Rumplestiltskin used to be. No one but her…

…and…

She hurriedly turned to the cake before she could finish that thought, cutting two pieces. She made her way to the corner Mr. Gold had situated himself in and thrust one of the plates at him.

"Come on. Leroy's here, and we don't need two Grumpys," she teased.

He took the plate with little interest of its contents.

"What did he want?" Mr. Gold asked gruffly.

She arched an eyebrow, "Really? All the men that harass me on a consistent basis and you're worried about him?"

He met her eyes and gave her a "cut the crap" glare.

"He was looking through the back room for something…and now he's trying to single you out. Am I not allowed to be concerned?"

There was more than concern in his eyes. There were questions, fear, and even some shards of hope. Even without hearing August's words he was jumping to that same vague conclusion. She knew what he was thinking, what he was longing for…but Belle shook her head.

"No," she murmured. Mr. Gold grimaced and turned away, embarrassed at his thoughts.

It was so tempting to believe that Baelfire had just strolled into their lives, that their journey could end and all of the heart ache could be dealt with in order to gain resolution and a happily ever after. But Belle had known from the moment she looked into his eyes that there was no way August could be Bae.

"Eat some cake and mingle," she commanded.

"I am mingling," Mr. Gold insisted, cutting into the cake with his fork, "With you."
Belle rolled her eyes, "You used to be such a party-goer. Two, three times a week."

"Well it's a bit different when I'm actually invited," he took a bit of the cake, "Ruins my fun."

She tried to take her mind off of the stranger; after all, she did just help save her friend from a terrible fate. But August's words lingered and irritated her. Did he actually know what he was talking about?

The words continued to bother her through the night and into the morning, when she took Figaro out on a long walk to the docks. The kitten was fascinated by the rolling water and the fish swimming about. He mewed down at them and reached out his paw as if to try and pull them up. Belle couldn't help but smile.

"I'm not going after you if you fall in, Figgy," she warned, though she probably would.

Figaro's attention was stolen as he sat up, tail swishing as he glared at something down the pier. Belle followed his gaze and saw August heading towards her, grinning.

"Your cat felt like having seafood?" He joked.

Belle folded her arms, "Unless you're just taking shots in the dark, let's stop beating around the bush."

He smirked, "And here I was about to ask you why you seem more…alert than the other residents."

"A loophole," she said vaguely, "What about yourself?"

"I wasn't part of the curse."

That explained how he could come and go at will…somewhat. As far as Belle knew only others from their land could enter Storybrooke, or else there'd be a lot more visitors. He took a couple of steps closer and Belle noticed he was carrying a small portfolio with him.

"Can we be honest with each other?" He asked quietly.

Belle's heart picked up its pace, "…I hope so."

August gave a sad smile, "Well, I don't really have a choice." His gloved fingers moved over the opening of the portfolio, "…I came here looking for my father after a long separation."

Belle forced herself to remain calm, "Good for you. I'm sure he was happy to see you."

"I…haven't met with him yet," he frowned, "It was a difficult parting…we have a lot of things we need to resolve, and I'm not sure if he's ready."

She felt as though she'd start screaming, or cry, or hug him, or all three. Luckily Figaro pressing up against her protectively prevented her from losing her composure.

"I find that if you trust the people you love, they'll surprise you," she said.

August was silent for a moment, his blue eyes glossy. He finally reached into his portfolio.

"I'm looking for something…and it's not a map," he added, pulling out a sheet of paper, "Because of that mark on your arm, I think you know what it is."
He passed her the piece of paper and she glanced down at it. It was an illustration, a well-done illustration in fact, of a dagger baring the name "Rumplestiltskin". Belle felt sick to her stomach and had to turn away from the water and close her eyes.

"You do know, then," August murmured.

Belle took a few shaky breaths, "...there are exactly three people in this world that know about that. Me...Rumplestiltskin...and..."

"Yes?" August urged.

She crumpled the drawing in her fist, scooping up a distressed Figaro and storming off. August stared.

"Wait, where are you going?!" He yelled, his voice a few octaves too high.

"Away!" Belle snapped, "I need to think!"

August worried that he had pushed too far and that she was off to tell Mr. Gold that someone was impersonating his son. But Belle hadn't even been around when Rumplestiltskin lost his son...how would she know if he was or wasn't him?

III

In the coming weeks after the visit to Rumplestiltskin's old hut, Belle became insatiable. She wanted to know everything about Baelfire; what he liked to eat, what he liked to do, who his friends were, what did he dream of becoming. It was as though the talk on Bae's bed had opened a floodgate of Belle's ever-questioning mind, but there was such urgency and tenderness to her questions, as if she literally hungered for these pieces of information.

At first, Rumplestiltskin felt awkward and stumbled through the questions with stilted words. He wasn't used to talking about Baelfire; Bae was his, and he didn't like sharing him. But sharing the child he loved with Belle felt so right, as though she were his real mother. In turn the stories he remembered tumbled from his lips, and he couldn't stop telling her about how wonderful Bae was and everything he could possibly recall about the first love of his life. Belle, bless her soul, listened intently, hanging onto his every word as though it were the secrets of the universe. Some of Rumplestiltskin's favorite nights were of them sitting around the fire after a long day of dealing, he recalling new information he had remembered about Baelfire and she curled up beside him, drinking in the stories.

And then her questions stopped. She no longer asked about Baelfire, and seemed uncomfortable if Rumplestiltskin brought him up. Her thoughts seemed troubled, and from time to time she'd hide in some place in the bowels of the castle. He started getting worried; it wasn't very Belle-like to be sad for any length of time.

So during one of her disappearances, he went to look for her. Careful about using too much magic and thus alerting her to his quest, he followed Belle to one of the vacant bedrooms, one he hadn't thought to close off from her when she had first entered the castle. He didn't expect her to wonder about a few miscellaneous child things, since he supposed stole children and all. He slowly opened the door.

Belle was on a large bed, holding a wool cloak in her hands. She stared down at it as her fingers caressed the rough warm fabric, lost in her thoughts. He tentatively approached, sitting down beside her.
"I've never heard of a good stepmother," she murmured, sliding it between her fingers, "No one talks about how much they love their stepmother, or how their stepmother was good for them. You only get stories like Snow White's or Cinderella's."

Rumplestiltskin frowned, tilting his head to look her in the eyes, "...is that what this is about, then? You think Bae won't like you?"

Belle bit her lip, "He hasn't seen you for gods know how long and you're going to show up with another woman as your wife and his new mother? Of course he's not going to like me."

"Belle..." He brushed her hair back over her shoulder with a gentle sweep, "You're being ridiculous. He'll fall in love with you instantly because of who you are, just like I did."

"I'm not Milah, Rum, and nothing can change that," she said flatly and Rumplestiltskin winced at the name, "And no matter what he will always remember his birth mother...and I will always be a step."

He watched her hands, as gentle as they were on his skin when they cuddled, or when she had to tend to him for some reason.

"...you love him, don't you?" He murmured.

Belle's face crinkled as she shook her head, tears reluctantly falling, "How can I, Rum? How can I love someone I don't even know?!" She clung to the cloak, "But I do! I love Baelfire! I love him as though he were mine, all because of your stories!"

Rumplestiltskin wrapped his arms around his wife as she sobbed and yet he could feel nothing but awe. She loved his son without even knowing him...she loved him simply because she loved his father and because of what his father had said about him.

III

Belle wasn't ready for this. She knew it, but it had to be done. She hadn't even seen August yet and her throat ached from unshed tears. Her speech, which she had started the day after Rumplestiltskin had first told her Baelfire's name, was as ready as it would ever be. And so she went into the woods.

August was rumored to go out into the woods often, at times wandering or looking for something respectively. Belle's sources also said that he always looked sad and haunted, a pain that wasn't in his body showing on his face. And that was the way she found him, walking along the shore of the lake, staring out at it.

"I know who you are," Belle said, her voice slightly defensive.

He turned to look at her. She made her way down to him, facing him head on.

"Do you?" He murmured.

Belle clenched her jaw, "There are three people who know about the Dark One's dagger in this world... Me... Rumplestiltskin... And Rumplestiltskin's son," she forced the words out, her eyes watering, "I want you to just listen to me before you say anything, alright? Can you give me that?"

August nodded and Belle took a deep breath, her mind clinging to its script.

"I'm sure you're angry and hurt about how your father let you go, and you feel abandoned by the
one man you should be able to trust. You are scared to love him again because the man you left
behind wasn't your father; the father you knew was a kind loving soul," she swallowed roughly, her
voice cracking, "But I have been with him for many years now, and I have seen how much he
loves you. Nothing matters more to him than you and yes, this whole curse seems over-the-top, but
he'd do anything to be with you again. He loves you more than you could possibly imagine."

August had turned away, hiding his own eyes. Belle couldn't hold the tears back any longer and let
them fall.

"He's learned his lesson… Please, just come home. Please let us be a family."

He reached up and wiped at his eyes before turning back to her.

"I want to come home," he whispered, fighting to keep his composure, "…I want to be with my
Papa again."

Belle closed the distance and hugged him, sobbing. August held her tightly, stabs of remorse
sending splinters under his skin.

"Oh Bae…oh we finally found you, precious Baelfire…" She sniffed, drawing back. She laughed
softly, "I'm sorry, you don't even know who I am. My name is Belle…" Her hand came up to touch
his cheek, "And I'm your stepmother."

Back home, Mr. Gold wondered what the hell Belle was up to. She had been up in the office all
day, only coming down as she was walking out the door. She made a point of kissing him softly
and slowly as they crossed paths in the hallway.

"I'll be out late," she warned him, "Don't come after me."

He had arched an eyebrow, "I haven't spied on you in a while, dearie. You off on a date?"

"Yes, Captain Hook invited me over for some fish and chips," she said dryly, stroking his cheek,
"…I love you."

"And I love you too." Maybe it had been too casual a farewell, in hindsight.

He went up to the office and knocked first, even knowing she was out. He opened the door and
walked over to where she had left the desk lamp on. The computer had been pushed aside, a
notebook spread open on the desk. Two pictures were propped up and he recognized the larger one
immediately.

It was the only picture he had of Baelfire, a magic-conserved portrait done by Milah. Right next to
it was a color photo of August W. Booth. Mr. Gold's stomach churned as he recognized, now,
how dissimilar the two people looked. Hope was a funny thing, making him forget the facts in favor of
a comfortable truth.

He lifted the cover of the notebook. It was labeled "Operation Cobra" and as he flipped through it,
he saw notes ranging from people's Storybrooke counterparts to Kathryn's supposed murder…all
the way to the current page labeled "August W. Booth". A list had been made of phrases, not all of
which Mr. Gold understood.

"Eyes. Wouldn't know about "Beauty". Wouldn't know much. Knows about dagger (?). Compulsive
(good?)."
There was a sticky note further along, like a tag. He flipped to the designated page, titled "The Unaccounted". At the very top of the list was Baelfire, along with a few other names. Some had been crossed out, while others remained. One name had been circled over and over again.

Pinocchio.

The sticky note had words on it. "Rum, I don't know what I'm going to do, but he will not get away with this. I love you, and if you bail me out I swear to the gods you will never see my naked body again. Always yours, Belle."

A sick sensation formed in his gut…especially as he heard sirens.

Belle had ushered August to their cabin and he stood awkwardly as she went out to get some firewood. He was starting to regret this entire plan but if there was one thing he knew about lying, it was that there was a point where you became too invested to come clean. He had reached that point the moment he had shown her the picture of the knife.

She came back in with an armful of logs and a hatchet, setting the hatchet down by the door before beaming warmly at August.

"Please, have a seat," she nodded towards the couch, "It'll only take me a few minutes to get the fire started. You want anything to eat, or drink?"

"No thanks," he sank down onto the couch gratefully, his legs acting up again.

She set the logs down and reached for the barbecue lighter. She put some of them into the fireplace and started balling up newspaper to use as tinder.

"Come, you spirits; unsex me here," she murmured to herself, "Fill me from the crown to the toe full of direst cruelty; make thick my blood, stop up the passage to remorse that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between the effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief. Come, pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry "hold! hold!"."

August wasn't sure he liked the sound of taking a woman's breast milk.

"What's that from?" He asked.

Belle looked startled, as if she didn't imagine he would be listening. She smiled sheepishly, "Macbeth," she answered, getting back up now that she was confident the fire would keep going of its own accord, "One of Lady Macbeth's famous speeches, basically asking for her maternal and feminine instincts to be taken away so that she can complete the task of killing King Duncan. It's really quite fascinating from a gender studies perspective."

"I'm sure," August tried not to sound too put off at the mention of Shakespeare.

Belle timidly approached the couch, "...you were looking for your father's dagger."

"I thought if he still had it... It meant he hadn't changed," he explained.

She gave a half-smile, "I don't think that's true, necessarily. But now that you're back, I don't think he really needs it anymore," she confided, moving towards the closet.

August didn't dare to watch as she pulled out her trunk, slowly setting aside each item she had
brought with her. She picked up the bundle at the bottom and smiled, going back towards him. August slowly got to his feet, gazing at the package.

"He gave it to me on our wedding day," she said softly, unwrapping the cloth slowly to expose the blade, "As a symbol of how I did truly mean more to him than his power." She held the dagger for a moment, staring at the engraving, "I almost took his power once, accidentally. But he held onto it, refused to let the power of true love take his curse away, because as wretched as his curse was, he needed it. He needed his power to get to you."

She offered him the dagger, beaming, "Go on, Bae… Take it. Take it and destroy it so we can all forget this dreadful nightmare."

August reached out and took the blade from her, admiring the craftsmanship. "Rumpelstiltskin" gleamed in inky letters at him and he could feel the darkness coming from the blade. She had just handed over the weapon to her husband's destruction…all because she didn't know what the Dark One's son looked like.

"It's remarkable," he murmured. Belle smiled and nodded her agreement.

He almost regretted raising the blade very deliberately towards her, the point aimed at her chest. But he needed the control…he needed to get better…he needed to be reunited with his real father…

"By the power of the darkness, I command thee… Servant of the Dark One."

She didn't react with fear or confusion as he figured she would have. She just gave him a sad little smile, "You really aren't Baelfire, then?"

"I command thee!" He shouted.

She shook her head and sighed, "I thought I'd seen your nose grow a little…"

One minute August held the weapon towards her, and the next she had a fistful of his hair, pulling at the roots until his wooden legs gave out. She tore the blade out of his grasp and held it to his throat.

"One move I don't give you permission for and I'll slit your throat," she snarled.

Even in his fog of confusion, August felt the beginnings of terror rise up. He had made a grievous err of judgment.

She hauled him back up onto his feet and half-dragged him to a nearby table, throwing him on.

"Lay on it!" She snapped and he scrambled to comply.

Something dribbled down the side of his neck and as he looked at the blade pointed at him, he saw his own blood on one side.

Belle paced like a caged animal, all the while her eyes and the blade pointed towards him. He couldn't tell if it was the lighting or if a darkness had physically made her eyes appear black. There was a barely constrained fashion to her movements, something hopelessly manic and yet something icily detached in her manner.

"I know you left our world as a little boy, but do you remember stories about the Caretaker?" Her voice was level, as if she were soothing a frightened child.
"I…heard things," he confessed, "Nothing specific, just that you were evil…merciless… unforgiving and bloodthirsty."

She nodded, smirking, "That sounds like the rumors I remember… Unfortunately for you, they're true." She approached the table, the blade tracing its way up his leg and cutting at some of the fibers of his jeans, "A lot of people think they aren't, and that's because I'm usually a decent person. But when I feel that my family and friends are threatened…" She pressed the point into his soft stomach and he grunted, squirming, "I can make Regina look like a saint."

She raised the blade again and gestured towards his head, "You know about how my mark makes me a servant to the Dark One, and how it also binds me to the owner of the knife, though not as firmly as the Dark One himself. So you must know that in the ceremony some of his blood entered my veins… It created a dark, twisted, sick part of my mind that I can usually control," she shook her head and sneered, "But not when someone pretends to be my stepson."

"How long have you known?" He murmured.

"Since the moment our eyes met," Belle said frankly.

"Then why the hell would you give me that knife if you knew I wasn't Baelfire?"

Belle shrugged, "The optimistic part of me was hoping that you were wearing contacts, or you had read Henry's storybook and that's how you knew about events that took place centuries after you left," she twirled the dagger around, "Besides, it's not like you could do anything with it. It's a fake."

August stared at her, "…you hid…a fake dagger?"

"I've hidden dozens of them, this world and our home world, in case something like this should occur. The location of the real dagger is my little secret," she laughed bitterly, "Really, you think Rumplestiltskin would marry an idiot? That I would just hand over the key to his destruction to any Tom, Dick, or Stanley claiming to be his long-lost son?" She held the engraving towards him, "It isn't even spelled right, wooden head. So who's fooled who?"

August imagined this was how a mouse felt when it walked over a glue trap, trying to get to foo, only to find itself caught fast. Belle tucked the fake dagger into one of her belt loops, glaring at him before heading towards the door.

"Now we get to play a little game," she said, picking up the hatchet, "It's called "Tell the Caretaker What She Wants to Know Or Else You Get Your Legs Chopped Off"."

No. There was no way she'd do that. This was Belle, the Beauty, the kind-hearted young maiden who tamed the beast.

"First things first," she said coolly, "How do you know about Rumplestiltskin's dagger?"

August snorted, "You really think I'd tell you?"

Belle raised the axe, "How do you know about Rumplestiltskin's dagger?"

"I am not going to squeal."

She laughed hoarsely, "I'd say otherwise, dearie."

August screamed as Belle brought down the hatchet on his leg. He didn't feel pain per say because
of the wood, but there was still a message to his brain that something was terribly wrong. Belle dislodged the hatchet and raised it again.

"How do you know about Rumplestiltskin's dagger?!"

"The Blue Fairy!" He exclaimed, "She told me about the dagger, about Baelfire, about everything so that I could write that book!"

"What book?"

"Henry's, I wrote it!"

Belle frowned, "Does Mother Superior remember as well?"

August shook his head, "That was all before we came over… I had to know so that I could tell the savior…"

"And how do you remember?"

"The wardrobe."

Belle narrowed her eyes, prepping for a swing, "The wardrobe could only take one."

"That's what she told Snow White and Prince Charming so that Geppetto would agree to make the wardrobe…" August teared up at the memory, "…he didn't want to lose me…didn't want me to turn back to wood…"

If Belle was moved by the story, she didn't show it.

"Why did you want the Dark One's dagger?" She continued.

"Because I need help. I'm sick, and I need magic."

Belle glanced down at his leg, "To keep you from reverting."

"Yes," he agreed breathily.

She considered it for a moment, "You could've just asked… Told me the truth… But I guess that would be out of character, wouldn't it?" She sighed, "You should've thought about that before you lied…"

The hatchet came down again on the other leg and August screamed, rocking from side to side.

"Do you have any idea the pain you would have inflicted if you got away with it?!" She screeched, swinging down again, "The agony of false hope?!" She swung again, "How the hell would you feel?!" He screamed again, "How would you feel if someone did that to Geppetto?!" She struck again, "Pretended to be you to hurt him?!" One more hit, "How could you do that to someone?!!"

Belle's swings were farther and farther from their target, hitting the table, the floor. Sobs were jerking out of her now as a line of uneven axe hits decorated both of his legs. She dropped the hatchet and pulled at her hair, walking away from him.

August was too stunned to take advantage of the opportunity, his legs throbbing with sensation but still attached. Actually, none of the gashes were that deep. He didn't need to act, though; sirens broke through Belle's sobbing.
She turned to look out the window, seeing both a cop car and an ambulance pulling up. She sniffed, smoothed her clothes and hair, cleared her throat, and tried to put on a poker face.

"I suppose we made too much noise," she confided.

There was a rapid knock at the door, "Open up, police!"

Emma Swan had considered that either a) Regina was a liar or b) the Golds were up to their crazy sex shenanigans, this time away from home, when she got the call. But with the panic in Regina's voice as she insisted a woman was accosting a man with an axe, Emma couldn't take any chances, and sped to the cabin in the woods.

Mrs. Gold answered the door, looking out of sorts. Not sex out of sorts, I-just-got-done-bawling-my-eyes-out out of sorts. She gave the blonde a thin smile.

"Evening Sheriff Swan," she said smoothly, "I was just chopping up some firewood."

"Indoors?" Emma countered. Belle shrugged.

Emma glanced down to see a sixteen-inch grooved blade through one of Rose's belt loops, fresh blood on one edge.

"…were you butchering a pig too?" She tried to joke.

Rose shook her head, "I suppose you'll want to see him," she murmured, "Don't worry; I don't think he's beyond repair."

Emma thought Rose was joking too…until she saw August spread out on a table bleeding. Emma's nonbelieving eyes saw that the hatchet was bloodied as well, and that August's legs were cut up as though he were an ordinary man. Emma could only gape in horror as August sat up shakily.

"What the hell did she do to you?" She hissed. August was mute, eyes wide with terror.

The sheriff turned to see Mrs. Gold standing patiently, not running off or spewing dumb excuses.

"I suppose you'll want to arrest me, then," Rose said as calmly as if Emma had just issued her a parking ticket.

"…yeah…" She numbly got out a pair of handcuffs, "You know your rights?"

"Yes."

Rose didn't resist as she was handcuffed, or as the dagger was taken from her. She just calmly allowed herself to be escorted out of the cabin.

Mr. Gold knew he was too late, as he took in the flashing lights and the open door of the cabin. He almost forgot to put the car in park before stumbling out. There was only a few bystanders right now, one of which being Her Majesty. Something was off about Regina, though. She almost looked…concerned.

His heart sank as he watched his Belle being escorted out by Sheriff Swan, hands cuffed behind her back. She was calm despite her bloodshot eyes, keeping her head held high. Regina was on them the minute they got off the steps.

"Miss Swan, she needs to be locked up for good! She just went after an innocent man with an ax, she's clearly mentally unstable!" Regina was practically hysterical.
A team of paramedics were helping Pinocchio, AKA: August W. Booth, out as well. Except for a scratch on his neck and a few cuts in his wooden legs, he appeared to be fine, almost walking without aid. He seemed just as stunned as Emma.

Mr. Gold moved forward as they came close to passing him by.

"Rose..." He said weakly.

She glanced at him, a mix of shame and self-righteousness on her face.

"Don't you dare post my bail," she threatened, before Emma led her to the police car.

Being a bounty hunter had prepared her for a certain...reluctance that criminals had about being caught. But Rose had complied peaceably, and Emma had no idea how to deal with that.

"You're, um...kind of not what I'm used to, you know?" Emma confessed, glancing in the rearview mirror.

Belle gave a small smile, "Would you prefer it if I ran?"

"No, I'm just saying... Feels like punishing the good kid."

Belle glanced out the window, "I broke the law, and so now I must deal with the consequences of my decision, that's all."

"That's responsible of you," Emma remarked.

She shrugged, "I suppose. I've just been taught that everything comes at a price."

Emma pulled into her parking spot and turned off the engine, twisting around in her seat to look Belle in the eyes, "...why'd you do it, Rose?"

Belle didn't blink, "I was protecting my husband."

"From what? Was August going to hurt him?"

"Not physically," she sighed, "Let's say there's a gunman... You see the gunman, and you see that he's pointing his weapon right at Henry's heart. Henry doesn't see it, though, and you know that the bullet will only hit you in the shoulder or arm or something. Wouldn't you take that bullet for him?"

"Of course I would," Emma insisted, "But that doesn't mean I'd go after the gunman with a hatchet."

Belle shrugged, "To each their own."

III

Tomorrow the curse would come. Belle's hourglass had run out and, even though she had made it through the Honey-Do List, she was nervous that she had made a mistake somewhere along the line. One little mistake, and everything might be for naught. It was a lot of pressure.

So she went to the village of Hyksos, only briefly passing through on her way to the woods. She found the old hut that stood beside the site where Baelfire had left their world, crossing the barrier spell that barred unwanted visitors and stepping inside.
It didn't disgust her nearly as much as it had the first time she had visited; it almost felt home-y in a way. She avoided all the concave bits of earth as she made her way to the fireplace, stirring up a few flames and filling the kettle with water. She got out some of the nasty tea leaves and set them at the bottom of a clay cup. When the kettle whistled, she poured the hot water into the cup, added some honey she had brought along, and let it soak as she made her way to Baelfire's bed.

One hand ran over the sheepskin blanket as she cradled the cup of tea in her other, staring thoughtfully at the spinning wheel.

"...tomorrow's it, Bae," she said to the air, "Tomorrow we cross over to where you are. Rumple warns me we won't be able to set out right away...but it's closer to you than we are right now."

She sipped at her tea. It tasted slightly better than the cup she had shared with her husband a few years ago. Years...time slipped by.

"I'm...scared, Bae," she admitted, "I don't know what it will be like when we meet up with you. I have these nightmares, horrible nightmares, where you get mad at your father for breaking his promise about loving no one else and you run away. I chase after you, but it doesn't matter. You hate me. You always hate me."

She stared down into her tea.

"...I hope you don't hate me in real life, Bae. I hope you don't feel I'm a replacement for Milah... I know that she is your mother and I cannot change that. All I want is for you and your father to be happily reunited, and for his suffering to end," she bit her lip, "But I could love you, if you let me. I do love you already, as strange as that sounds. But what our relationship is, what it will be...it's up to you. I promised your father I wouldn't make him choose between us, though..." She shrugged, "I suppose we'll discuss all of this when we meet, and I'll try not to hug you immediately."

She glanced back up at the spinning wheel, "...I love you, Baelfire," she whispered.

She finished off her tea and flicked her wrist. The wheel began to turn of its own accord, and Belle slipped underneath the covers. She watched the wheel turn, listening to its creaking until she fell asleep.

It was all well and good if spinning made Rumplestiltskin forget, but personally it made Belle remember.

III

After a stay in Regina's prison tower, the jail cell seemed like a hotel suite. She had a bed with a blanket, a window, bars to peer through, and human contact that didn't involve being beaten to a bloody pulp. If she had a nice long book it wouldn't even be punishment.

"There's a visitor for you," Emma announced and Belle glanced up from her lap, "Do you want to see him?"

"Who is he?"

There was a sharp "mrawr" as a streak of black and white darted towards the bars.

"Oh Figgy..." Belle murmured, getting off of her cot. The kitten continued to mewl as it squeeze itself inside the cell.
Emma shot a dirty glare over her shoulder.

"I tried to hold onto him," Mr. Gold muttered defensively.

Belle picked Figaro up, kissing his head as he started to purr.

"I don't want you to see me like this, baby boy," she cooed to him.

She glanced up at Mr. Gold, who shifted his weight uneasily.

"I thought you could use some cheering up," he explained.

There were a few beats of silence before Emma folded her arms.

"Alright you two, I'll give you some privacy…but no funny business," she warned. They nodded their heads and slowly, Emma left the office.

Mr. Gold's brown eyes seemed larger than usual as he stared at her, "I don't like this the other way around," he decided.

Belle hugged Figaro before setting him down, much to his displeasure, "I do," Belle argued, coming up to the bars, "I think it's always easier when you're the one going through something instead of your loved one."

Mr. Gold reached his hand inside and cradled the side of her face. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes.

"Why?" He breathed.

"It's not often I get to be the one to protect you," she whispered. Her face pinched up, "I couldn't let him do that to you, to cut you so deep… Especially when you were so willing to believe."

"When did you know?"

"The moment I looked into his eyes," she opened hers, "Besides his name, the very first thing you told me were that Baelfire had your eyes. And those weren't the eyes I was looking into."

Mr. Gold rested his forehead against the metal, gazing down at her with love and admiration.

"You could face being behind bars for quite a while, assaulting a puppet."

"Can I make a deal with you then?"

Mr. Gold's lips twitched, "Always."

"If this goes to trial, I'll allow you to work your magic…but I don't think that'll be necessary."

"Alright."

His thumb rubbed against her cheek as he watched her sadly, "I try to tell you every day, but "I love you" doesn't seem to encompass everything I feel towards you. Words themselves can't express what you are to me… You are such an incredible woman and I am a lucky bastard to have you."

Her hand came up to rest over his, "I wouldn't break my code of conduct for just anyone." She leaned forward, "We'll find him… I promise."
She caught his lips and they kissed, long and leisurely. In that kiss, Belle found assurance and comfort.

She didn't sleep much that night, giving up when Emma walked in the next morning for work.

"It's kind of crazy out there," she told Belle, tossing her keys onto her desk, "Like, no one can believe you went at August with a hatchet. Some people are even saying you were framed or blackmailed into doing it."

Belle laughed, "People come up with the strangest things."

"To be fair, I would think it was a rumor if I hadn't been at the crime scene. Here," Emma stuck her hand into the cell and Belle hopped off the cot, "Compliments of Ruby. She figures you had a good reason."

"Thank you," she took the tea and sipped at it, "…how is August doing?"

Emma arched an eyebrow and then shrugged, "He was released within hours of being admitted to the hospital. Surprisingly little amount of bloodshed for those gashes."

"They still sting pretty bad, though."

Belle and Emma turned to see August strolling in. He carefully avoided Belle's gaze.

"Speak of the devil," Emma muttered, "What's up?"

"I want whatever charges Rose is facing dropped."

Belle stared at August.

"What?" Emma said.

He lifted his gaze to meet Belle's, "I want her released without consequences, whatever paperwork you have burned… I want a clean slate."

"August-"

"She had a good reason to attack me."

"With a hatchet?!"

August tilted his head back, "She needed to make her point. I can be a bit…wooden-headed sometimes."

Emma continued to stand there, dumbfounded.

"Or you could just go through with it and see how Mr. Gold handles the case. Something tells me he won't just bypass the charges, but go after anyone responsible for locking his wife up," August warned.

Emma hesitated a moment longer, before going to get her keys. Belle glanced at August as she left them alone.

"He didn't threaten you, did he?" She growled.

"No," he assured her, "And honestly I think I'm a bit more afraid of you now instead of him."
Belle smiled bashfully.

Emma returned, unlocking the cell, "You're free to go then I guess, Rose."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Belle approached August, "I would take an escort now, if you're still offering."

He smirked, "Of course," he bowed his head and waved her forward and Belle giggled, leading him out of the office.

Emma would never understand this goddamn town...

August and Belle walked a few paces without a word, making sure they were out of earshot before he spoke.

"I thought a lot about what you screamed at me last night," he said, "About how I would feel if someone did that to Geppetto... And I could not imagine facing that person and not trying to kill them," he shoved his hands into his pockets, "The truth is I'm terrified of being the toy I was before, and that terror blinded me. I'm sorry."

Belle bit her lip, "I'm sorry, too, that I let my pain get the best of me. How are your legs? Do you heal?" She asked, glancing down.

August chuckled, "I don't, but I don't really feel pain either so it's an even trade. Lucky for me you aren't that great of a woodchopper," he joked, then cleared his throat, "I'm hoping once I'm with my papa again he can sand the cuts out."

"Or maybe when the curse breaks you'll become a full man again."

August paused just outside of the sheriff's station, looking Belle square in the eye, "That's another reason I came here... Operation Cobra doesn't have a whole lot of members. Secret agents can't afford to be squabbling if we're going to do our job and get the savior to believe."

Belle nodded enthusiastically, "You're absolutely right."

He rocked back on his heels, "So...we can sweep this whole incident under the rug now?"

She glanced out into the parking lot and grinned mischievously, "One more thing..."

Mr. Gold did not want to be in the shop today, he really didn't. Not with his wife in jail for beating up a man for pretending to be their son. He should be over at her favorite bookstore getting her a whole shelf full and designating a new room in their house for another library. Every time he thought he was at his limits of his capacity to love her, she went and did something like this.

He glanced up as he heard a motorcycle, and prepared his best glare...only to see Belle holding on loosely to August W. Booth as he stopped in front of the shop. She hopped off and handed her helmet back to him. The cat swished its tail from its perch on the counter and Mr. Gold had to concur; it was an odd scene.

She skipped into the shop, beaming.

"Can we get a motorcycle? Pleeceeease?" She begged.

Mr. Gold just stood and admired his wife for a moment, "...I do believe you are the only one who can take a hatchet to a man one night and be friends with him by morning, my dear."
"It's hard for me to stay angry for very long," she explained.

He rolled his eyes, though it was probably good for him that she couldn't. She leaned over the counter.

"So you did manage to grab Fake Dagger Number 34, right? Because Emma didn't have it."

Mr. Gold frowned, then shook his head, "Regina probably has it then, after she was done trying to convince Miss Swan that you were insane."

Belle looked concerned for a moment, then grinned, "Dishes for a week says she tries to use it once magic comes to Storybrooke."

Mr. Gold snickered, "Oh please, dearie. Ironing for a month says she doesn't even last *that* long before waving it in my face."
Belle was nervous, and understandably so. After all, she was just about to kill herself.

She lay on their bed, trying to psyche herself up to drink the poison potion in her hand. She had been cleaning out Rumplestiltskin's alchemy tower (she had finished the Honey-Do List with a week to spare, and now was just waiting for the curse to be enacted) when she had found a discarded scrap of parchment near a workbench. It included details on how someone could possibly find out Bae's age in the other realm, and knew immediately why he had tossed it aside. Death was the final mystery, a closed curtain without an encore. Even immortals could die permanently.

And yet Belle had witnessed her own invincibility. Shouldn't she have been fried to a crisp by that dragon attack on that village? Shouldn't she be six feet under after she was impaled through the heart by a man upset with Rumplestiltskin, trapped to a wall for days until Rumplestiltskin realized Belle should be back home by then? She knew the condition of being able to truly die, and death was cheated regularly by ordinary mortals. So she read all of Rumplestiltskin's notes on what was known about the afterlife, prepared a small purse of essentials and then got comfortable.

She took a deep breath. She wouldn't need the potion if he knew what she planned to do; he'd kill her himself for putting herself in the greatest danger imaginable. She couldn't help but feel it could work (maybe all this invincibility was making her cocky), and the payoff would significantly narrow down the Baelfire candidates.

Baelfire… She took a deep breath, closed her eyes and gulped down the potion. It was thick and bittersweet, but she swallowed every drop. She turned over the day glass on her nightstand, closed her eyes, and felt a heaviness come over her. She clutched the purse tighter as her thoughts blurred, her body floating in syrup. The last thought before her heart, lungs, and mind stopped were of Rumplestiltskin's face.

III

Belle woke up nauseous, as she had every morning since Kathryn's disappearance. She was about to wave it off, but it felt more urgent today. She jumped out of bed and ran for the bathroom, opening the toilet's lid just in time. Belle's retching drowned out Mr. Gold's sleepy "dearie?", and then his cane's soft thuds as he entered the bathroom.

Belle's forehead rested on the seat as he eased himself down beside her, rubbing her back.

"Sweetheart…"

"I'm fine," she lied, reaching up for some toilet paper to wipe her mouth off with.
"Do you want me to stay home with you?" He offered.

She shook her head, "It's just stress," she insisted.

He kissed the back of her head, "If you insist… I'm only a phone call and a five minute drive away."

"I know."

He slowly rose to his feet, as much hesitating as being careful about his leg.

Belle flushed and got up, wondering how long her body would betray her when she needed to be at her strongest.

The nausea faded enough so that she could go grocery shopping in the afternoon. Belle scanned her list, noticing Mr. Gold had added some items such as "chocolate syrup" and "apricot/strawberry jams". She should get maple syrup and grape jam just to irk him…but knowing him he'd probably accept the lesser alternatives so long as they used them for the purpose he was hoping for. She picked up a container of chocolate icing and allowed her mind to wander to how it would taste lapping it off of Mr. Gold's body. She tossed it into the cart and grabbed some strawberry icing for him. They needed to spice up their routine, anyhow.

Then, her eyes lay upon them. Pretty much the most appetizing thing she had ever seen. They looked so perfect….she had picked up a bag before she even realized what she was idolizing.

Potatoes. Raw Idaho potatoes. She was insane…but the irrational part of her mind overpowered logic. Those potatoes looked amazing, and she had to have them.

She washed one off the minute she got home and then, without further preparation, bit into it. It had to be the best thing she had ever tasted, even as her rationale protested she had gone crazy. Maybe she had, but that didn't make that raw potato taste any less incredible.

Mr. Gold figured he would be on dinner duty, seeing how Belle had been that morning. Something easy on the stomach, like soup. He was surprised when he walked in and smelled steak.

"How are you feeling?" He asked as he came up behind her chair, kissing her cheek.

"Fine, just like I told you," she said, shaking her head, "You baby me too much."

"Excuse me for caring," he muttered, taking his seat, "Next time you start vomiting, I'll turn over and yell at you to flick the fan on."

"Exactly."

They started dishing up their plates.

"That Pinocchio kid has no idea what he's doing," Mr. Gold complained.

"It's not like the Blue Fairy gave him a guide on how to get a savior to believe," Belle defended.

He rolled his eyes, "It's not like she actually does anything useful when she "helps"… I've done more good than her," he pointed his fork at Belle, "My methods are questionable, but one can't argue with my results."

"How did she even come into power?" Belle wondered, "…do fairies have elections?"
"I think it's based on seniority," he mumbled uncertainly.

They lapsed into silence as Belle cut up her steak and Mr. Gold took a drink of water. He set his glass down.

"Despite my lack of faith in August," he began, "I do believe things are coming to a head."

"You think Emma's close to believing?" She asked, taking a bite of the meat.

"I don't know about that…but she's trying to gain custody of Henry."

Belle choked on her food, coughing into her napkin before swallowing, "Regina must be losing her mind…"

"I'm not sure if Miss Swan's informed her yet. If she has, she's not doing anything too obvious to prevent it."

Belle sat back in her chair, shaking her head, "Poor Henry… He must feel so torn."

Mr. Gold snorted, "I doubt it. He recognizes her wickedness better than half the town."

"She's been his mother for ten years," Belle insisted, "Even knowing who she is and what she's done he must love her."

"Are you actually siding with Regina?" He asked incredulously.

Belle sighed, "I'm simply acknowledging a mother who has loved only her son for twenty-eight years, and a son who has had only his adopted mother for family for almost his entire life. It doesn't matter who's experiencing it, pain is pain."

Mr. Gold fell silent for a few minutes, cutting into his steak.

"…I know we've agreed on honesty, but if you're making yourself sick…" He began tentatively.

"I'll be okay once the curse breaks and we can get going," she assured him.

III

It was instantaneous. One minute Belle was spiraling down into a black oblivion of sleep, and the next she was in some sort of ship's hull with seats. Other glanced about just as confused as she, though some seemed perfectly resigned. They were all semi-transparent, ranging in shades from white to very dark gray. Belle glanced down to see her own ghostly hand, one of the lighter shades of gray in the spectrum she observed. She was also wearing some sort of thin nightgown, though it hardly came to her knees.

"Miss?"

Belle glanced at the seat next to her to see a young girl no older than six looking up at her. She was an almost blinding shade of white, her eyes large.

"Miss, where's me mum and da? Me mum was 'ere a second ago, and I was in me bed, sick as ah dog…"

Belle bit her lip, "Sweetie… I'm pretty sure we're dead."

Her face drooped, "…oh."
Someone started crying.

There was a three-note chime before a crackly voice echoed around the galley.

"Welcome, newly departed. We will be arriving at our destination at the gates of Hades momentarily. Please have your fare ready for Charon as you exit the ferry, and go directly to the sorting terminals. Thank you, and have a pleasant afterlife." The voice crackled off.

The little girl gazed up at Belle fearfully, "Me thinks that lady don't know a lick ahv English," she confided.

The ship stopped and on instinct the passengers rose to funnel towards the exit. The girl gripped onto Belle's hand with all her might, and Belle noticed the lack of sensation. Like civilized folk, they formed a line up the stairs to the dock.

Belle tried to get a glimpse of Charon, but he wore a black cloak with a hood that covered his head. He rested against a scythe, seemingly bored as the passengers tossed their fare into a wooden box. A man tried to pass by without paying and the scythe cut him off.

"You can't receive without giving," he muttered, as though he had said the same phrase a million times.

"I don't have anything," he whimpered.

"That is not my concern."

With a single sweep, the scythe hooked the man and sent him tumbling over the side of the boat. He had time to yell before there was a splash.

The ferryman returned to leaning on his scythe and the line began to move again. The girl gave a soft whine.

"I don't 'ave nuthin'," she confessed.

Belle squeezed her hand, "It's alright," she assured her. Slowly, they made their way to the front.

Belle glanced up underneath Charon's hood and saw a bleached white human skull watching—but-not-watching her. She pulled out a handful of drachmas from her purse.

"I'm paying for the girl as well," Belle informed him. Charon inclined his head in a nod and she tossed the drachmas in the box, walking the plank to the island.

There wasn't much time to mill around, souls being herded into winding roped lines that lead towards large metal frames that seemed like doorways without a door. Ethereal beings wove through the crowds, always searching, guiding spirits to one line or another.

A woman with floating pale hair and completely black eyes appeared, leaning down towards the girl.

"Hello," she whispered, extending a hand to the girl.

The girl seemed unafraid, her hand slipping from Belle's to take the strange woman's hand. The black eyes glanced at Belle.

"She will be fine," The thing said airily, before leading the girl away. Belle still wasn't sure.
She watched the girl as she was taken to a free-standing door. The woman opened the door and Belle saw a glimpse of the children's heaven; a meadow of flowers drenched in sunlight, all of the loyal and good pets who had earned the chance playing eternally with happy laughing children. The girl ran inside without a glance back and squealed happily before the door slammed shut. Belle was brought back to her dilemma as she heard snuffling.

A three-headed wolfhound was sniffing around the crowd like a hunting dog. Belle tensed as one nose began to sniff at her left arm. It started barking, which made the other heads bark as well. Belle hurriedly pulled out a honeycake and offered it to the first head. It snatched up the treat, gulping it down and licking the crumbs off of her hand.

"Good boy…good boy…" She cooed, glancing around. The alarm hadn't been raised; she was still just another dead soul in a sea of them.

Six eyes began to droop and the creature stumbled away. It wouldn't be long before the hound of hell would be out cold, not drawing unwanted attention to Belle. She was shifted into one of the lines and there she waited.

And waited. Then she took a few steps forward. And went back to standing in line waiting. For hours. Without a book. And no one to talk to because everyone was freaking out about those metal walk-throughs.

The closer she got to the walk-through, the better of an idea she got of the Final Judgment. Rumplestiltskin's notes had been scarce, only that it would happen to decide which of three afterworlds a person would go to depending on their deeds in life. Those on the other side of the walk-through were screaming and crying, objections flying wild. There were wet suctioning noises, a brief pause before a dominion was called out.

"Tartarus! …Asphodel! …Asphodel! …Elysian! …Asphodel! …Tartarus!"

Belle got a glimpse as she stood on the threshold, the next one in line. A woman whimpered before a table with a scale, a man with the head of a jackal standing behind it. He raised a massive claw and drove it into the screaming woman’s chest. He pulled out a heart with a "schlorp" sound and dropped it onto the scale. The scale dropped about halfway.

"…Asphodel!" He declared, offering the heart back to her. She shook her head and he tossed it into a pile behind him, motioning towards a box of dog tags. She took one and shakily walked down a narrow hallway to the left.

The jackal-man’s eyes rested on Belle and she continued through the metal frame towards the table. Even here it seemed heart-ripping was a popular trend. She braced herself as he raised his claw and drove it into her chest, giving a warbled gasp.

He tugged. Then tugged again. He tugged a third time, and then growled.

"We have a live one!" He barked towards the wings.

Belle didn't even have the chance to beg for death before she was carted off to a strange metal wagon without horses, locked in the back of it and driven away.

III

The next morning, Belle threw up again and had to wrangle her car keys from Mr. Gold in order to go to work. Couldn't he see that she was perfectly fine…after a couple of hours of nausea?
"A new bra?"

Belle glanced up from "Where The Heart Is" at the question. Mr. Gold shrugged, setting down the glass orb he had been handling.

"Either that or your book's a bit steamier than the summary lends itself to imagine."

"My boobs hurt," she complained.

Mr. Gold stared at her, dumbfounded, "...breasts can hurt?"

"Apparently so."

"Huh," Mr. Gold wrapped up the orb in a cloth, "Well if you want me to massage them for you, to see if that alleviates your suffering, I could try."

"I should file for sexual harassment," Belle muttered, flicking her book back open.

Mr. Gold sighed and shook his head, "Try to be helpful and what do I get? The threat of a lawsuit..."

"You're a pervert."

"You're a pervert, groping yourself at work."

"My freaking boss keeps trying to sleep with me..."

"You're leading me on!"

"You're lucky I have a crush on you!"

Mr. Gold tilted his head, "...you have a crush on me?" He asked shyly.

Belle frowned, covering her face with her book, "I said nothing... But seriously, my boss is a sex god."

He sighed, "Too bad you're married, or I'd totally bend you over the counter right now."

"Too bad," she turned the page.

She expected to feel him on her at any second, pressing himself against her or running his hand over her backside. But when she glanced up, he had turned back to his work. Sometimes she really hated how considerate a husband he was.

**III**

"...are you eating a raw potato?"

Belle jerked up guiltily from her snack to see Mr. Gold watching her uncertainly. She glanced up at the clock but alas, it was indeed 9:15. An ill-timed snack.

Mr. Gold shrugged, "Still not the weirdest thing I've seen all day," he assured her, heading towards the sliding glass door. He grimaced, "Regina tried to seduce her stepson-in-law."

Belle's mouth puckered as if she had sucked on a lemon, "Ew..."

"Exactly. I don't even want to touch that with psychoanalysis." He paused at the door, readjusting
the grip on his cane, "I was going to go make my list and check it twice, if you wanted to join in…"

"Of course I do," She made her way out of the kitchen, linking her arm with his.

Mr. Gold studied his wife for a moment, and Belle wondered if the half-eaten raw potato in her hand was hurting her "I'm fine" case. Either way, he opened the door and they both headed out to the shed.

Items too valuable for the shop were kept amongst gardening tools in the shed; potions and spell books, items that would help them track down Bae's location and finally pinpoint who exactly he was here. Mr. Gold hadn't spent much time in the shed; there wasn't much of a reason to, being surrounded by useless items. Belle curled up on the bench of his spinning wheel, her back resting against the large spokes. Mr. Gold started to set some stationary out, going through the items they would need for their eventual journey.

Her eyes shifted as she studied each part of him in turn. The curve of his back as he bent over to examine things. The way his soft hair hung in his face like a curtain. His strong hands carefully handling each object, the way his right hand moved across the page as he wrote in his tight script…

"Dearie, you're making it very difficult for me to concentrate," he rumbled.

"I'm not saying anything," Belle protested.

"You don't have to. You simply existing distracts me."

He set down his magnify glass and turned around, making his way over to her. His eyes timidly scanned her face, frowning.

"…you can tell me the truth, Belle. It won't hurt me."

She furrowed her eyebrows, "What do you mean?"

"About your sickness," he glanced down at the floor, "You've handled stress magnificently before… I'm just wondering if it's because you don't want to tell me the real reason."

"Rum, I have no idea what you're on about," she insisted, crossing her legs.

He met her eyes, shoulders hunching inwards defensively, "…are you nervous about finding Baelfire?"

Belle stared at him, "…what?"

"It's alright if you are," he said quickly, "I understand…if your old insecurities are surfacing now that we're close to actually going to look for him. …I'm scared too."

She stood up, resting her hands on each of his shoulders, "Yes I'm scared…but that's not what's causing this. You want the honest truth?" Mr. Gold winced as if he expected it to be painful. "…I don't know. I don't know why I'm sick, but stress is the easiest scape goat. Maybe it's just a bug that's going around."

Mr. Gold nodded, but didn't look entirely convinced.

The next morning, Belle vomited yet again, this time without Mr. Gold's knowledge. She took a shower and went to change into a pair of pants, only to find they weren't fastening. Belle pouted,
trying on another pair. They were too tight. Eventually Belle had to surrender to her last resort; her fat jeans.

She came down for breakfast dejected.

"Rum…" She began hesitantly, "…have I gained weight?"

Mr. Gold glanced up from his toast and stared at her, "How the hell should I know? I don't pay attention to those things." He quickly reassessed the situation, "…those jeans look lovely on you, though."

"I was looking for the foot-in-mouth answer," she assured him, not feeling particularly hungry for anything…except for a raw potato.

Satisfied that he had not just flunked the stereotypical man test, he finished spreading his jam, "Maybe you're just bloated, dearie."

It was a simple, practical answer, and yet Belle felt as though he had just splashed cold water on her face. She should be having her monthly soon…She should have had it by now, actually. When was the last time she had bled?

"…I'll be right back," Belle mumbled, before going back up the staircase.

Mr. Gold hoped he hadn't just stepped on a landmine; he figured he had been safe, since she complained of retaining water often enough in the past. It was so difficult to figure women out.

Belle went to her purse and pulled out her date book, flipping to the back. She dutifully tracked her menses on a calendar, praying each month to miss but like clockwork it came. Except…She glanced over the last month. Except it hadn't come last month. Or the month before. She had missed two whole cycles, which was highly unusual.

The nausea in the morning…the odd cravings…the tenderness of her breasts…the slight weight gain…

No. No she couldn't possibly be…And yet it was the most practical solution, much more practical than stress.

She rested her hand over her mostly-flat belly and, as impossible as it was, she could have sworn she felt something move within her.

III

Death was boring, Belle decided. After being taken away from Judgment, she was transferred to a lobby, where she was instructed to a box with multiple buttons. She scanned the options…no, she wasn't here to beg for another chance at life, no she didn't want revenge…She supposed the closest one was that she was still alive. She pressed the button and a ticket was spit out with a number. She took a seat in the lobby and waited.

And waited. And wished she had a book to read. And waited. And then thought she had been called but it was 0256J, not 0256K. And fidgeted. And waited. And waited.

Finally, she was called, and she followed a woman in white clothes and a funny hat back through two heavy double-doors. The woman led her down a long tiled corridor, taking a sharp turn into one of the rooms and gesturing towards an elevated cot.
"Name?" The woman asked as she pulled out a clipboard.

"Belle."

"Cause of death?"

"Suicide."

"And do you know why you aren't fully dead?"

Belle bit her lip, letting her legs swing, "...because I'm immortal?"

She didn't even bat an eyelash, "Why do you think that?"

"The Dark One's blood."

The woman glanced down at Belle's arm, "...I'll go get the doctor."

So Belle waited. And waited. And planned how she was going to find what she needed to get. And waited. And waited. And wondered why it was so white and cold and smelled like old people. And waited.

Hours later, a man came through...or what she supposed amounted to a man. He looked human enough save for his unnaturally red skin and the twin horns coming out of his temples like a goat.

"Hello there, Miss Belle, how are we doing today?"

"Fine," she said reflexively, though obviously she wouldn't be there if she was indeed fine.

"That's good," The doctor, which she supposed was his species or something, sat down on a stool, reviewing a clipboard, "So it says here that there's a mistake with you passing on... Can you tell me how you managed to get to Hades?"

"I killed myself," Belle said.

"Uh huh..."

He didn't ask how. Perhaps it wasn't important.

"...so you're immortal, because you accepted the Dark One's blood into your body."

"Yes sir." Why was he asking the same questions as the woman? It looked like the same clipboard, and Belle could've sworn she'd seen the woman jot down notes...

The doctor pulled his stool closer, "Could I see your arm?"

Belle offered it to him and he examined it, hemming and hawing.

"Well, dark curses aren't exactly my expertise... I'm going to have to get the surgeon in here to see if we can operate. The Big Guy doesn't really like people going back above ground, especially since you're probably already buried."

She hadn't given much thought to her body's unoccupied state. She was pretty sure she had locked the door to the bedroom, at least.

Without further ado, the doctor left and Belle got to wait some more. She lay down on the cot. She
thought about how she should've brought a book in her purse. She waited. She waited. She waited. She waited. What the hell was taking so long?

Belle swore it was a full day or that she had been forgotten completely by the time she saw the surgeon. The first thing she heard was his voice shouting down the hall.

"I AM SURROUNDED BY INCOMPETENT FUCKHEADS!"

A tall man in a lab coat stormed into the room, yelling over his shoulder, "Someone better find out who the hell drugged my poor puppy by the time I'm done with this consultation or so help me Kronos... I do not get enough power to deal with this shit!"

He was tall and lean, with thick wavy black hair and ashen blue-gray skin. He might've been attractive, if she hadn't just heard what he had been yelling. He finally seemed to notice Belle and grinned, offering his hand.

"Hey, I'm Hades."

Belle timidly slid her hand into his, "...the god of the underworld?"

"Yep, that's the one," he shook her hand enthusiastically.

She glanced up as Hades glanced down at the perpetual clipboard, a young woman entering the room. She was small and curvy, dressed similarly to the first woman. Her long auburn hair was pulled back in a loose tie, peridot green eyes peering from behind long lashes. Her bright eyes were emphasized by gold glitter, much more apparent than Rumplestiltskin's. She watched the proceedings with a mix of disgust and pity.

"So you sold your soul to the Dark One once upon a time, huh?" Hades finally surmised. Belle nodded. "I hate that bastard."

He sat down on the stool and gestured for her arm. She gave it to him and he turned it over, examining the scar that remained even in death from every possible angle. He clucked his tongue.

"I'm gonna give it to you straight, even if you're a few feathers short of a Pegasus. You're not dying. You're not going to die. You are stuck in the land of the living until whatever Dark One's running around dies, then you get your mortality back, then you have the chance to die, alright sweetheart?" He pulled a pen out of his pocket and clicked it, "I'll sign your release forms so you can get back to the aboveworld ASAP. Don't think it's always gonna be this easy leaving."

"No, please!" Belle exclaimed, trying to work up some tears, "I can't go back! I couldn't live with him anymore, that's why I killed myself! I hate him!"

The woman's eyes softened at Belle's words, but Belle tried to focus on Hades. After eons of soul-begging, though, the lord of the dead's sympathy didn't exist.

"Sorry, babe, that's what happens when you make a deal with the devil. Ha, you like that, Persi? Deal with the devil?" He turned to the woman, grinning.

She gave him a "rot in hell, bastard" glare. Hades waved his hand dismissively.

"She doesn't appreciate grave humor. What about that one, huh?"

"Fuck off," Persi grumbled.
"You love me…" He insisted, before scribbling something on a form and ripping it off the clipboard, "Here, take that to the front and they'll do the rest. Sorry 'bout your stupidity in selling your soul; hopefully next time you'll actually be dead when you get down here."

Hades whistled as he got to his feet, heading for the door. He gave a lecherous smirk towards Persi before groping her blatantly. She hardly even reacted.

"And I'll see you, wifey, after I check on our pooch, mmmkay?" He kissed her cheek, yelling over his shoulder as he left, "I loooooooove you!"

"I can't wait until spring solstice," Persi muttered.

Now. Now was Belle's opportunity. She stared forlornly down at the sheet of paper before starting to sob.

"I can't go back…I can't go back to him!"

Through blurred vision, Belle watched Persi move towards the cot, sitting down beside her and setting a hand on her knee.

"It's okay, hon… I'm sure he's not really that bad," she cooed.

"Of course he is, he's the Dark One!" Belle exclaimed, sobbing harder, "He took me away from everyone I love, my home, my life, just for someone to bed! I didn't even get to say goodbye, and now I'm stuck with him for all eternity!"

Persi frowned, "It is that bad then, huh?"

Belle nodded.

Persi sighed, before glancing around and whispering in Belle's ear, "I think I know how to help you… Even immortals can die if they can figure out their thread."

Belle sniffed, looking up at her, "…thread?"

She rolled her eyes, "Yeah, everyone's got a thread. The Fates spin it, measure it, then snip it when your time is up. Even if immortality gets slapped on it, it can still be taken off."

Belle wiped at her eyes, "And my thread…where would it be?"

Persi took Belle's free hand and stood, "Come on, hon," she urged, leading her out of the room.

Belle could hardly keep up with Persi's eager strides, her hand warm like summer sun and smelling of fresh cut grass. She wove through the maze of hallways as if she had lived there all her life, making her way to a box.

"Being stuck with a man because of one mistake is something no girl should face," Persi insisted, doors sliding shut. Belle panicked as the box moved down, but Persi didn't seem affected in the least, "I got freaking kidnapped because I was out playing in my mom's fields. Then some nice guys come to try and save me, but Mr. Jackass is all like "she can't go up because she's got pomegranate seeds from the underworld in her". Pomegranate seeds! As if with all this technology they can't just cut me open and take them out!"

The box finally stopped, the doors sliding open again.

"I'm sorry," Belle murmured sympathetically as she stepped out.
Persi huffed, "Seven thousand and thirteen years is a long time to be married to a jerk… I'm just glad your solution's so simple," she looked Belle over, "You'll at least get into Asphodel, if not Elysian."

Had Belle any color in her cheeks, she might've blushed, "Thank you."

Persi nodded and the doors to the box closed. Belle turned around, preparing to meet the Fates and find Baelfire's thread.

III

Tom Clark had an eye for thieves, and he prided himself on that fact. Sure he had more allergies than the medical world acknowledged, and yes he wasn't exactly a ladies' man. But no one had ever gotten away with stealing from him… That he knew of.

He had no idea why Mrs. Gold would steal; she was an honest woman with the richest husband in town. But she had set his flawless Thief-o-Meter off. Maybe because she kept pacing around the family planning section. Maybe because she was looking around as if to see if the coast was clear. Maybe because she'd glance at him every so often as if concerned about him.

"Can I help you, Mrs. Gold?" He finally asked, startling her.

"Um, yes…" She said, before finally moving to pick some items up, "I know you're not one to run your mouth, Mr. Clark, but all the same… I'd appreciate if you'd keep this purchase on the down low."

"Of course. I wouldn't betray customer…" He paused to sneeze, "…trust."

Mrs. Gold smiled, "Thank you." She took another quick scan around the pharmacy before going to the counter, the items nearly covered.

Mr. Clark tried not to react too much as she set down three pregnancy tests on the counter. He remembered the incident with Mary Margaret and Kathryn…he would not wish that embarrassment on kind Rose. He scanned and bagged the items with a detached air, and she paid for them.

"Thank you," she murmured, a light blush on her cheeks as she turned to walk out the door.

He wasn't sure if there was something wrong with his theft senses, or if he had just smoothly avoided a scene.

Belle's heart was still racing from the encounter at the pharmacy as she slid into a back booth at Granny’s, her hand practically shaking as she gripped the bag.

"Hey Rose…" Ruby said softly and, for a moment, Belle feared she had seen the contents of the bag. The waitress frowned, "…isn't it a little late for you? I mean, it's half past eight."

Belle squirmed in her seat, "I felt like an iced tea…and keep them coming, please."

"Sure thing…” Ruby rested her hand on Belle's shoulder briefly before leaving.

There was no one else in the diner for once. Just Belle. It was relieving, but it was also terrifying. It was out of the norm for her to be here, and that divergence had obviously tipped Ruby off. But how could she take the pregnancy tests at home, knowing her husband could stroll in at any minute wondering why she was gulping so much water down, or why she had locked herself in the
bathroom, or why she was sobbing no matter the results…

"Ruby, why don't you head home?"

Belle was taken from her thoughts as it was Granny, not Ruby, who set the iced tea in front of her. Ruby watched Granny warily.

"…why?" She asked slowly.

"Because it's a slow night, and why are you questioning me? Go before I make you take inventory," Granny threatened.

Ruby had her apron off in record time, heading out the door with only a brief glance back at Belle. Belle smiled and tried to be happy for Ruby's early night.

Widow Lucas turned around, one hand on the table and the other on her hip with eyes still wolf sharp gazing down at Belle. She could see the resemblance between the two she-wolves in this position; both fierce, both protective, both with beautiful hearts despite their occasional wrongdoings.

"I know that look," Granny said.

Belle tried not to squirm like a scolded kid, but that was impossible to do when Granny had cornered you.

"I saw that look in my dear Ann's eyes the week after she missed her period… Eight months before Ruby came into the world."

Belle felt the blood drain from her face.

"Is it that obvious?" She murmured.

Granny shook her head, "Not to most people…but I don't miss much. Are you scared?" Belle nodded. "Of course you are; it wouldn't be natural if you weren't. The question is what are you scared about?"

Belle considered the question, "…I'm scared that I'm wrong… I'm scared of false hope… I'm scared of being hurt again like I was when the adoption fell through."

Granny let out a long breath, "Those are good reasons to be scared. Why isn't Mr. Gold here to hold your hand?"

"Because false hope would hurt him just as much, and I'd prefer to take the pain away from him if I can."

The older woman shook her head, going to lock the front door, "You shouldn't face the thought of having a kid alone, pain or no pain." She shifted the blinds closed, "I'll keep filling your glass until you're done, and I'll stay here until you're ready to go."

"Thank you," Belle murmured. Granny let out a grunt that could almost be mistaken as a "you're welcome".

Two and a half iced teas in, it was time for the first test. Belle braced herself, taking one of the boxes and heading towards the ladies' room. Ready or not, she had to know.

III
Belle approached the front desk where large gold letters across the front declared it "RECORDS". Beside a large box was a jar full of a green solution, a single pink eye floating around inside of it. The eye seemed to focus on her and Belle avoided looking at it.

Behind the desk were rows upon rows of shelves that reached to the ceiling, rolls of bronze thread ticking. With each tick, a new bit of the thread came out, so that long and short strings hung down over the sides of the shelves. Three women (Belle didn't have another adjective to call them) were present in the area behind the counter, short pale things that reminded her of mice if it wasn't for the copious amount of wrinkles.

One sat at a spinning wheel similar to Rumplestiltskin's, her hands coaxing out the bronze thread and then winding it around the large circular spools. Another took the spools from her, measuring the length of the thread before etching in numbers into the side of the spool with a magic quill, going to sort them soon after. The final had a list in one hand and a pair of scissors in the other, following the list to certain spools and cutting off the thread. They grumbled to one another hoarsely, as though they had been together so long they scarcely needed to bother with actual words.

The Etcher harrumphed and waddled her way towards Belle, and she noticed the single hollow where an eye would go.

"And what do you want?" She muttered, having to stand on a stool to even raise her head above the desk.

"I'm here to consult my thread. Persephone sent me," Belle said.

All three of the women harrumphed.

"Persephone…not even a real goddess," The Cutter muttered.

"No one sees their thread…drives mortals insane to know how much time they had left. Remember that Pandora girl?" The Etcher called back.

"Never could keep well enough alone," The Spinner declared.

"And what if you're immortal?" Belle queried.

"Then what are you doing in Hades?" The Etcher asked. The trio cackled in unison, spittle flying from the Etcher's mouth. After a moment, the Etcher shook her head, "Just take that form you have there up to the office. You ain't dyin' today."

Belle noticed how the eye in the jar had drifted to look at the Form of Release in her hand.

The Etcher went back to her work and the eye floated unfocused. Belle bit her lip, summoned up her courage, and then opened her purse and covered the jar with it. Instantly the Fates toppled over, the Etcher falling flat on her face, the Cutter tumbling off a ladder to the ground, and the Spinner collapsing against her wheel. Belle feared for a moment that she had killed them instead of merely blinded them, but a chorus of snores assured her they were just asleep. Belle rounded the desk quietly, and then went on her search.

Despite the confusion of threads growing in length nearly constantly, the spools themselves were highly organized according to realm, then region, then town. Belle tried Hyksos, but neither Rumplestiltskin nor Baelfire's names appeared on the sides of a spool. She continued to scan the shelves.
Off in the back corner, the bronze threads suddenly turned to gold, and there were few that actually ticked. The title "immortals" was given to this collection, and Belle found Rumplestiltskin's, longer than the majority of the others. Belle found her own and was surprised to see that hers ticked, though not nearly as quickly as a mortal's. She rolled the spool out and read her etched number. Was that how long she would age?

She scanned the rest of the immortals, and found an odd little inset collection labeled "in limbo". Belle's heart pounded as she saw Baelfire's spool. It wasn't ticking. She rolled it out and saw that his etching had notes attached to the number. "Trapped in time; will resume mortality in three hundred years".

Belle compared the length of their threads. Bae's was shorter than her own; he would be younger when they met. This relieved her somewhat; one of the scenarios she imagined was a three hundred and fourteen year old man, or at least eighty. Bae would be between her age and fourteen; this cut out entire age groups from their search.

Nervous about someone coming down to see the Fates out cold, Belle left, fighting the temptation to steal Baelfire's spool just to ensure he wouldn't die from now until then. She grabbed her purse and rushed to the strange box, slipping inside just as the women began to wake up. There were no exclamations, no moaning and groaning; they just went back to their eternal jobs as if they had just taken a nap.

Belle eventually found the "front" and handed them the form Hades had given her. The person glanced down at the form, sighed, and brought two paddles out from underneath the desk. He rubbed them together.

"CLEAR!" He shouted.

"What?"

He slammed the paddles down on Belle's chest and she swore she had been struck by lightning.

Belle's eyes flew open as she coughed and sputtered, her heart jerking around in her chest. Her body was stiff and hurt whenever she tried to move something. She blinked a few times and realized she was back in her bed. Alive. She had done it. She had died and come back. She had never felt so relieved.

She glanced towards the day glass on the nightstand. Three grains of sand had fallen through. She had been dead for three days…and didn't she feel like it now.

III

Every fiber in Mr. Gold's being was begging for him to panic, and he was trying so, so hard not to. Belle was fine, of course she was fine, she was probably just in a corner somewhere reading a book completely forgetting it was 9:30 at night and she was supposed to be home and they'd all have a good laugh about it and he'd forgive her for the heart attack…

Yes, that was definitely the scenario, but his paranoia was having a hard time believing it, especially with Regina's latest "Belle should be locked up because she's insane" kick. And there was nothing in the world distracting enough to keep his mind off of his wife.

His phone rang and Mr. Gold grabbed it, but waited a ring so it didn't appear as though he were right next to it. Midway through the second ring, he picked up.

"Hey."
"Rum…” God, oh god, that was definitely her "I've been crying" voice, and that sniff confirmed it, "I…I'm going to spend the night in the cabin, alright?" Her voice sounded strangled, fighting off even more tears.

Mr. Gold leaned forward as if that would bring him closer to her, "What's wrong?"

Belle laughed hoarsely, "Nothing, nothing at all, I just… There are so many emotions going through me right now, and I don't want to face you until they're sorted out," she cleared her throat, "Everything's fine. I love you."

"I love you too."

If everything was fine, then why was she crying? Why couldn't she come home to him? Did he do something? But he had to trust her… Even though the last few days were making him concerned.

Belle set down her cellphone, unable to keep the smile from her face even as Mr. Gold's worried tone echoed in her ears. She wanted to tell him, she really did… But it had to be perfect, and not while she was sitting on the bathroom floor of the handicapped stall of Granny's Diner bawling her eyes out.

Three pregnancy tests were set in front of her, practically screaming their results to her.

Positive.

Positive.

Positive.
An Apple Red As Blood

Chapter Summary

Mrs. Gold tries to find the best way to tell Mr. Gold that she's pregnant.

In the midst of her wonderful life, Belle finds herself longing for the one thing she can never have; to carry Rumplestiltskin's child.

Rumplestiltskin had always been intuitive, and had learned from a young age how to read people. Often he could tell even before the other person knew that they were going to strike him; the smallest shift in the emotional norm caught his attention. He knew and he did not know Belle, and so she intrigued him.

Even with that blind spot, Rumplestiltskin was sure that Belle's sudden lack of interest in babies hinted at something very wrong. She did not go down to the nursery. She only gave them a passing glance when he presented one proudly to her. She did not hold or play or feed or even watch the newborns she used to fawn over. Her overall demeanor didn't change except for the occasional glimpse of sadness he caught.

He simply would have to approach her gently and slowly pry the answer out of her without her realizing what he was up to.

"Is something wrong?"

Subtlety had never been his strong suit.

Belle glanced up from her book, curled up in her lounge chair in the library. She blinked a few times, and Rumplestiltskin waited for her to pull herself back to the real world.

"No…"

He took a couple of steps closer and she tried to discreetly hide her book between the chair's cushions. Belle had never tried to hide what she was reading from him before.

Rumplestiltskin lunged forward and grabbed for the book. Belle screeched her protest, trying to hold onto it, but with a well-timed jerk of his arm he had it.

"Rumplestiltskin!" She snapped, her face turning bright red.

He flipped to the page she had been on moments ago, "...and yet as Genevieve gazed down into her arms she couldn't believe that the miracle she saw there was hers..." Rumplestiltskin's throat closed up as he continued to silently read the passage in which this Genevieve woman marveled over her firstborn child.

He didn't quite know how to react.

Belle ripped the novel out of his hands, flushed from throat to cheekbones, "If you ever take a book out of my hands again I swear I will beat you from here to Agrabah," she threatened, going to put it back on the shelf.
Rumplestiltskin stared after her, "...Belle..."

"It's just a book," she choked, turning her face away from him.

Rumplestiltskin slowly walked over to her, his hands taking one of hers. Her head dropped as she squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

"I'm just like everyone else, Rum," she admitted sadly. "All my life I told myself I was too clever... that I would never feel the pain of one of your deals... That I was too smart to sign up knowing the cost and pay it without regret... No, regret's not the right word; I still don't regret what I've done..."

He tugged gently at her hand and she let him lead her back to her chair. He eased her down into it and then knelt at her feet, getting the sinking suspicion he knew what this entire anomaly was about. Both of her hands held onto his as she stared down at her lap.

"You warned me that I would never bear your child... And I thought I would be able to handle that," Her nails dug into his hand, "I'm sorry, Rum... I don't mean to want," she looked him in the eye, "Not when I have everything I could ever desire."

Rumplestiltskin gazed up at her, "There's nothing wrong with wanting, Belle... It's natural to want a child, especially you. You have such a maternal nature..." He ran his thumb over the back of one of her hands. "...the next one will be yours."

Belle's forehead creased, "What?"

"The next babe I collect from a trade... I will keep. For us," he brought the hand up to his lips and kissed it, "Alright?"

Belle wanted to protest. She wanted to explain that it wasn't the same as having their own, to look down and see them in their product of true love. To feel it growing inside of her, that natural bit of magic...

"I know it's not the same..." Rumplestiltskin murmured, lowering his gaze, "But it's the best I've got."

She smiled, running her fingers through his hair, "Doesn't matter, so long as we love it, right?"

Rumplestiltskin nodded, "The deal is struck," he murmured.

III

Belle was going to pee if he didn't let up soon, and she wouldn't feel sorry for him if she did. The wand continued to press down on her full bladder as Dr. Don Walker watched the screen. His glasses were on the end of his nose as he squinted, and Belle couldn't wait to tell Snow that they had had the same obstetric (though with Snow Doc didn't have an actual degree save for his pick axe).

"There it is," Dr. Walker said with a smile, "Congratulations, Mrs. Gold; the mister and you are going to have a junior in about 25 weeks."

Belle straightened as he turned the screen towards her. At first, it seemed like just a pulsing black-and-white image, but then she started to make out the head and the curled up body, and little arms... It was so human looking. She could scarcely believe that what she saw was inside of her, growing, a little bitty child that she and Mr. Gold had created. She supposed that curses were only
effective for birth control until they were voided by a land without magic.

Dr. Walker smiled, then pointed at the screen, "See that little flicker right there?" Belle squinted and then nodded as she spotted it. "That's your baby's heartbeat."

Belle covered her mouth as she stared in rapture at the pulsing rhythm. She hadn't even known it existed until yesterday, and it already had a heartbeat.

Yes, Mr. Gold would most assuredly kill her when he found out she had done her first ultrasound without him. In her weak defense, though, it hadn't seemed real until this point. Three sticks of plastic weren't very compelling; an image of the miracle within was much more so.

She made her way numbly back through the corridors of the hospital, a picture of their child in her jeans. She paused for a moment as she looked into the main patient room, at an empty cot that had once been occupied by a nineteen-year-old girl who held Belle's hopes and dreams in her arms, cruelly ripping away a child Belle had been waiting for, hoping for, for so long.

Belle smiled as she stared through the glass, standing in the same spot where she had told Emma about the name Isabella, and she began to cry. Would the crying ever stop? Would the awe and wonder of their little miracle ever fade, or was she doomed to break down every time she paid any mind to the flicker of life inside of her?

But there was something she had to do, someone she had to confront with this blessing and show the first picture of their child to. She wiped at her eyes, and ran.

The residents of Storybrooke were used to the eccentricities of Rosaline Gold. If she had a book in her hand, she was practically blind and deaf. She sidetracked easily, as opposed to Mr. Gold's purposeful walk. But still, they had to stop and stare as she ran down the sidewalks with a skip in her stride, eyes puffy and red but shining. She didn't stay still enough for anyone to tell if she was happy or sad. Rumors started to circulate about how she had been seen leaving the hospital, but when asked Dr. Whale insisted he had no idea why she had been there. Dr. Walker simply went about his work, flying under the radar.

"You know, even if I wanted to, I couldn't. Magic, well, is in short supply around here and dwindling by the minute."

Mr. Gold was not in the mood for the Queen's apple drama, or for any of her drama really. Belle had left a message telling him that she had made an appointment with Dr. Walker that morning, but would come by the shop afterwards. This sick business was really starting to worry him.

"You want the curse broken," Regina accused, "Why?"

Before he could answer with a more mature version of "none of your beeswax", the door to the shop flew open, the bell ringing merrily. Both he and Regina turned around to see Belle frozen near the doorway, breathing hard.

"Belle…?"

"I'm sorry; I didn't know you were busy."

"I'm not," he insisted, stepping around Regina.

Belle noticed how Regina kept her distance as she approached her husband. If she had known a moment of maternal insanity was enough to drive Her Majesty back a few steps, Belle might've broken out the hatchet sooner.
Once Mr. Gold was within striking distance, Belle grabbed him by his tie and pulled him in for a nice long kiss. His surprise paralyzed him for a second, before he became more pliant and kissed her back. Her tongue snaked into his mouth, ravaging it for a moment before she finally released him, smiling softly.

Mr. Gold stared at her with a mix of confusion and arousal, "What on earth was that about?"

"Reassuring you that me not coming home last night was not your fault," she smirked, "Occasionally you're not to blame."

He frowned, "The appointment…?"

Belle glanced back at Regina, "…it's not something I want to discuss in front of Her Majesty." She touched his face, "Everything's going to be alright, Rum… Somehow."

"This is touching," Regina drawled, "But I'm afraid the rules of "first come first serve" still apply."

"Can you refrain from snarling like a wounded animal while I speak to my wife?" Mr. Gold growled. Regina opened her mouth. "Please."

Regina's mouth slowly closed as she silently fumed. Mr. Gold turned his attention back to Belle, "We can step outside for a minute…"

Belle shook her head, "For once, Regina's right. She was here first," she took his hand and lightly squeezed it, "Dinner, tonight, 9:15. Don't be late."

"I haven't been in a while, dearie," he reminded her. She smiled, then placed a much more chaste kiss on his cheek before stealing out the door.

Before Belle was out of earshot, the "please" effect had worn off.

"I want to strike a new deal. One where I can get rid of Emma without shattering the curse."

She stumbled on the curb as guilt hit her. She had momentarily forgotten their entire reason for being in this world, of a curse that was close to breaking and a quest that would be undertaken once it had. They were so close to finding Bae…they didn't need any distractions.

Belle tried to push the doubts aside. There was room for everything; curse, Bae and baby. This bump in the road was a blessing. Even if it wasn't the perfect time for it, she couldn't forget that.

Mr. Gold's mind remained on Belle as he brushed Regina's curse concerns off. If Emma died, fine, they could leave and let Storybrooke burn to the ground. If Emma lived, then the curse would be broken eventually, and they could leave. No matter that he liked Emma, it was no skin off his nose whichever way the battle went, which was how he had planned it from the start.

"What did she want to talk to you about?"

Mr. Gold's attention was brought back to Her Majesty, "None of your concern, go on your merry way and try to think of a way to fix your own problems. You certainly don't need to take ours on."

Regina sneered, "Little touchy today, aren't we?" She tilted her head, "Who was the appointment with?"

"Dr. Walker."

She arched an eyebrow, "Isn't he the more long-term care doctor? As opposed to Whale?"
"She probably doesn't trust her health to a doctor whose hobby includes attempted resurrection," Mr. Gold muttered.

Regina shrugged, "I'd just be concerned, if I were you," she started towards the door, "You do know that if someone gets sick, like her dear old daddy, you can't blame me for it. The curse didn't give me the power to, say, put cancer in someone," she shook her head, "Then again, it's probably nothing."

Mr. Gold tried to push the thought out of his mind, but with his conscious already fertile with all the reasons she would have to go to the doctor's after bawling her eyes out and refusing to come home, the seed planted right in the center and took root.

III

It was supposed to be a happy day, a day of celebrating their first child. But a cloud hung over her head, and the person she thought would be able to ease her worry wasn't here.

Still, Snow White tried to enjoy her baby shower, cooing over each gift as she tried to push thoughts of Regina's threats out of her mind. She'd glance around every so often, but her childhood friend was nowhere to be seen.

"It's beautiful, Ella," Snow declared as she held up the glass unicorn mobile, "I'm sure she'll love it, but why you didn't keep it for your girl is beyond me."

Cinderella grinned, resting a hand on her nearly equally engorged stomach, "I just thought it would suit your nursery better."

"There's one more!" Red said excitedly, picking up a small box and handing it to Snow. Snow glanced around; she had already opened everyone else's in attendance, and Charming said he'd be giving her his tonight.

She then noticed the gold ribbon neatly tied around the box and a note attached.

"Drink in good health," Snow read out loud, "For the little one… Love, Belle and Rumple."

"Don't open it!" Grumpy barked, "It could be a trap!"

Snow arched an eyebrow, "A trap?"

"You've got her lover locked up in a dungeon; I don't think she'd be too congenial towards you," Granny muttered.

Snow shook her head, "I've known Belle since we were little girls. Her gift is genuine."

"But how long have you known the Caretaker?" Ella asked darkly.

"Since she tried to talk me out of a mistake I was going to make because I thought Charming didn't love me," Snow defiantly opened the box.

Nestled into silk cushions was a vial of blue-green liquid. Snow picked it up and examined it. A gold etching labeled it "Intuition."

"Now you really should be careful," Red said, her voice quivering, "She wants you to drink some dark magic potion…"

"Belle would not have me drink something if there was any danger," Snow insisted.
"Whatever girl you knew is gone," Ella exclaimed, "Charming and I saw her with our own eyes; she's no better than he is."

"What you saw was an act, then. I know the real Belle, and I know she'd never hurt me," she uncorked the vial.

"Snow..." Red whimpered.

She raised it to her lips.

"Snow!" Grumpy tried to smack it out of her hand, but it was too late. She had downed it all.

The group stared in horror, waiting for her to explode or keel over or even transform. Snow's face grew puzzled as she slowly licked her lips.

"...it tastes like chocolate," she concluded, surprised.

Snow felt no stranger after taking the potion. She waited to see some side effect, or an effect in general. Nothing happened, not even as night fell and Snow sat alone in the slowly-under-construction nursery, waiting. She turned her head as she noticed a shape suddenly appearing on the balcony.

"Your bluebirds could outrace falcons," she remarked, and Snow saw the profile of the Caretaker through the sheer curtain.

Snow rose to her feet carefully, "...why didn't you come today, Belle?" She murmured.

The silhouette shifted, "You didn't need me to come and stir up trouble… I'm not sure how civil Cinderella and I could be."

"I had seven dwarves, a werewolf, and a crossbow-wielding grandmother in attendance… I'm sure we could've kept you two in line."

Belle's gaze seemed to be fixated away from the castle…away from Snow.

"...do you want to tell me what I drank?" She asked, laughing a little.

It seemed to illicit a small smile from the Devil's Bride, "It'll boost the little one's instincts, help guide her through the challenges she'll face, aid her in seeing through another's mask," she shrugged, "I'm not good at potions, though, so the power might be a little spotty..."

Snow pulled the curtain back and Belle tensed, very adamantly keeping her eyes on the forest.

"Why won't you look at me?" Snow asked softly.

Belle grit her teeth, arms folded, "...because it hurts," she admitted.

Snow could reach out and touch Belle's shoulder she was so close, so close that she could see the anguish on her friend's face.

"Do you remember what we talked about that night, when you summoned the Dark One?" Belle's voice shook, "Do you remember how I said I would never give a child to Rumplestiltskin?" She took a deep breath, "I was right, and I've never hated my words more."

"Oh Belle..." Snow closed the distance between them, holding her friend close. Belle hugged her back loosely, trying to ignore what was between them. "He's the most powerful man in the realms;
surely he can cure you."

Belle shook her head, "It's not me," she whispered.

Snow stared, "You mean he's…"

"Nature has its ways of keeping up a balance," Belle explained, "...if the Dark One was capable of children, then he could spawn a legion of powerful demi-Dark Ones, just like any other hereditary curse." She stepped back and glanced away, "As petty as it is, I didn't come...because I'm jealous. I'm jealous that you and your true love can bear a child that is your own...and my best hope is an adoption."

Snow gave Belle a pitying look, "...there was a time I thought that door was closed to me as well. But miracles tend to happen when you aren't looking," she smirked wryly. The humor was lost on Belle.

She sighed, "Maybe in another world... May I?" She gestured towards Snow's stomach.

"Of course."

Belle shyly set a hand just above Snow's bellybutton, spreading her fingers.

"Hello, little one," she murmured. If the baby was aware of Belle, it wasn't showing any signs of acknowledgement.

"Doc says it'll be a girl," Snow said, unable to keep from smiling at the thought of her daughter.

Belle laughed softly, "Gods help us if she's anything like you," she teased.

Snow snickered, "Hopefully she'll be more like Charming... A thief on the lam is not much of a life."

Belle's fingers slowly traced downwards before her hand fell away, bright eyes glossy and full of longing.

"I trust in her," she said softly.

Snow had no idea what she was talking about.

III

"Rumplestiltskin... I'm pregnant," she said, grinning.

Figaro blinked lazily and swished his tail.

"Too blunt?" She guessed. Figaro blinked again. "Well you know how literal he is; if I say there's a bun in the oven he'll think there actually is a bun in the oven and go check on it, and if I say there'll soon be the pitter-patter of little feet he'll start chewing you out for not keeping it in your fur." She took a deep breath, "Alright, how about this. I have a bottle of wine out and when he offers to pour me some I stop him and say expectant mothers shouldn't drink alcohol. Clever, eh?"

Figaro lifted a back leg and twisted around, his face soon buried in his fur. Belle sighed.

"Rumple isn't always the most gracious gentleman, but I doubt his reaction to my pregnancy would be to lick his crotch," she shook her head, walking out of the bedroom, "Why am I asking for your advice, anyway? You're a guy; you don't realize this is practically a female equivalent to a
She ran down the stairs, smoothing down her dress and glancing up at the clock. 9:10. Her stomach fluttered nervously as she checked over the dinner table again. Everything seemed to be in place… except for... Oh crap, there really were buns in the oven, and she was lucky to remember before the whole house burned down.

Mr. Gold was relieved when he could finally call it a day and go home. If he wasn't plagued by his own horrible thoughts about what Belle's news might be, then he accidentally overheard rumors. Some seemed to lean towards Regina's thoughts; Belle had come down with a life-threatening disease. Others were more optimistic, saying that she was getting a divorce from her husband but due to the recent incarceration needed proof that she was sane. Some combined the two rumors into a sick little fantasy where Mr. Gold had mindfully given her HIV and she was building up a murder case against him.

Then there were the blessedly practical people whose words kept him from going home or to Dr. Walker to demand an explanation.

"For Christ sakes, Ruby!" He heard Granny snap as he drove by the diner, not even having the window rolled down yet being able to hear plain as day, "The girl probably just wanted a check-up without being hit on!"

He admired the sensible, active woman Widow Lucas was…from a distance.

He arrived home and immediately noticed the lack of lights, the only brightness coming from a soft glow in the dining room. The table had been set with their best china, a candelabra standing in the center with its candles lit. Belle sat in her chair, her elbows resting on the table as her hands were folded and pressed to her lips. She almost looked like she was praying.

She glanced up and smiled nervously, sitting up straight. She had change into a very form-fitting red satin dress that if she didn't look so anxious he might've enjoyed.

"Hey…" She murmured.

"Hey…" He murmured back, gesturing around, "What's all this about?"

She bit her lip guiltily, "Can't I just decide to have a nice romantic dinner for my husband every once in a while?"

Not when you didn't come home the night before, he wanted to say. Not when you won't tell him why you were at the doctor's. But very little ever came out of accusing Belle, so instead he took a seat.

"I suppose…" He set his cane aside and reached for the spaghetti.

Her hand rested over his, intercepting him. He followed the arm up to her concerned face. Then, she said the fatal words.

"We need to talk."

Mr. Gold couldn't even recall what being hungry felt like after that, his stomach was so heavy with lead. He swallowed.

"…about the appointment today," he finished. She nodded, easing his hand down onto the table.
Her fingers rubbed over the back of it, "I know this couldn't come at a worse time… But we'll find a way, we always do. If it helps, I'm scared out of my mind too..."

Mr. Gold internally screamed. It was just as he feared; it was the worst. He couldn't meet her eyes.

"...you're dying, aren't you?"

Belle, the two little words on the tip of her tongue, felt them vanish like vapor. Her forehead creased in confusion, "What?"

"The doctor found something that wasn't there before, and now you're dying," Mr. Gold sagged under the weight of his thoughts, the candlelight making the shadows on his face look even more dramatic.

"No… No I'm not dying!" Belle had to laugh at the absurdity.

"Then you want a divorce," Mr. Gold said sullenly.

"No, I'm not dying, I don't want a divorce, nothing bad is happening!"

She squeezed his hand and he managed to meet her gaze.

"...you promise you're fine?" He asked weakly.

Belle frowned, "...I think I am," she said honestly, "I mean, there is something there that wasn't there before, but it's nothing…" She trailed off and sighed, "...this is not how I wanted it to be. I wanted it to be perfect, for you to be happy, but now…"

Mr. Gold grimaced, "You aren't going to tell me what this is all about now, are you?" He guessed.

She shook her head.

He pulled his hand away, going back to dishing up his plate, "...this honesty thing, Belle… It goes both ways," he said coolly.

"I know," she mumbled, her hand brushing against her stomach.

The words were there…but they wouldn't rise out of her throat. Two simple words to make it all better, to turn this dinner into something special…or would they? Doubt was spreading between the pair like a disease.

She feared the entire dinner would be in silence, but Mr. Gold finally spoke again.

"Regina's trying to get rid of Emma."

Belle's head whipped up from staring at the wine bottle, "But she knows the repercussions of that, doesn't she?"

"Not kill, get rid of in a permanent fashion," Mr. Gold shook his head, "She's not getting anything from us, I can tell you that right now."

"Doesn't mean she'll stop," Belle twirled a forkful of spaghetti around its tines, "What do we do?"

"We review the plan. Prepare for whatever scenario unfolds. Stay out of the ripple effect when it comes to a head, and slip out of town."
Belle guiltily noticed that while he had made himself a plate of food, he wasn't eating.

"We can only help Emma so much with her destiny," he murmured, "We get too entangled, and we're knotted here inside the town's drama."

"So we cut our ties and start packing?" She assumed.

Mr. Gold stared at the wine bottle, "Cutting ties will make it look suspicious, as will too much packing. Little things here and there…be prepared to start scrambling at a moment's notice." He gestured towards the bottle, "You need this as much as I do right now?" He tried to joke, but his voice was too sour.

Here it was. The perfect opportunity. The chance to use her clever innuendo to hint at what she was hiding.

Instead, she just shook her head, and he sullenly poured only one glass of wine.

III

Prince Charming descended the winding staircase, cycling down into the earth. At every checkpoint they tried to dissuade him from proceeding, but he brushed them off, continuing towards the underground cell.

The further he went down the cave-like corridor, the clearer Rumplestiltskin's voice became, until he could understand the odd chant the imp was repeating without end. An endless loop that he was sure was meant to drive the guards into an irredeemable insanity, making a foolish decision that the Dark One would take advantage of. He was trying to escape using his words as a weapon, cleverly woven into a melody that rubbed at the guards' nerves. Charming himself wasn't sure how they could stand it.

"I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves, everybody's nerves, everybody's nerves. I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves and this is how it gooooooes… I know a song that gets on everybody's nerves, everybody's nerves, everybody's nerves…"

The two guards posted near his cell were tense with agitation, looking like they'd turn around and yell at him to knock it off at any moment. Those poor souls… He would ensure their wages would be raised.

"Rumplestiltskin!"

The imp stopped mid-word and glanced up from his seat in the corner of the cell. He giggled.

"Am I in twouble?" He asked mockingly.

"Not yet," Charming approached the cell as close as he dared, "I want answers."

"Don't we all?" He tilted his head, wild eyes peering up at the faux prince, "You know, even Regina got a candle and a spoon to play with when she was being held prisoner…"

"Regina wasn't nearly as deadly without her magic," he claimed.

Rumplestiltskin wrinkled his nose in protest, but didn't vocally object to the statement.

"I'm bored," he announced.

"I don't care," Charming said dismissively.
"You should," Rumplestiltskin pouted, drawing his knees closer to him and rocking back on his tail bone, "Boredom leads me down paths others do not wish me to venture down."

The threat did not scare Charming. The Dark One was still in a cage, powerless without any weapons at his disposal. The threats were not nearly as intimidating as they had once been. Charming shifted his footing.

"I met with the Caretaker the other night," he commented.

Rumplestiltskin's indifference changed. He was up on his feet, approaching the bars of his cage with an expression that was both hopeful and aggressively protective.

"What did you bother her for?" He growled.

"Ella wanted to make a deal…a husband for a husband."

Rumplestiltskin kept his face carefully neutral, "And Belle…?"

"Refused."

"Good," Rumplestiltskin nodded to himself, "I don't want her going back on my word…"

Charming frowned, "She's never visited you… Not once."

"I've only been here a few weeks," Rumplestiltskin insisted with a shrug, "She's probably busy enjoying having the castle to herself."

"She had the option to free you and she didn't."

"Because she's smart enough to honor my agreements. Magic is a balancing act; one misstep and everything can crumble."

"You've reworked your deals before," Charming pointed out.

Rumplestiltskin smirked, "Are you telling me I need to persuade Belle to change her mind?"

"I'm asking what's so important about Cinderella's baby that your true love won't change the contract."

The imp sneered, "I don't see why that's any of your business."

"Ella is Snow's friend."

"And I was under the impression that Belle was Snow's friend as well."

The two men glared at each other for a moment, both convinced that they were in the right. It was Rumplestiltskin that broke the silence.

"Belle and I don't agree on much of anything, but we do agree on the most important thing… Romantic love can be seconded by the love of a child."

Charming seemed to be thrown off by the statement. Then again, in Rumplestiltskin's experience pretty much anything that didn't involve sheep threw him off.

"…what does that have to do with…" He trailed off, then furrowed his eyebrows, "Are you saying Ella's baby…was for Belle?"
"Ladies and gentleman, he can think!" Rumplestiltskin chirped.

His nose wrinkled in disgust, "You'd steal a baby-"

"Trade."

"To give to your lover-"

"Wife."

"To raise as your own?"

Rumplestiltskin was silent. Charming laughed, stepping closer to the cage.

"That's pathetic, taking someone else's child because you're too lazy to try on your own."

He was on Charming in an instant.

The faux prince coughed and sputtered as Rumplestiltskin closed a hand around his throat, perched on the bars and looming over him.

"You think it's laziness that keeps us from having our own child?" He snarled through rotted teeth, foul breath choking Charming just as much as his death grip, "You think I'd just give up on that, offer Belle less than what she wants because it requires my effort? YOU THINK I WOULDN'T MOVE HEAVEN AND HELL TO GIVE HER WHATEVER SHE WANTED?!"

The guards approached but Rumplestiltskin paid them no mind, glaring at Charming with such hatred he regretted ever saying such words to Rumplestiltskin. It was the second time Prince Charming had ever seen what resembled a man inside of the beast.

**III**

Belle rolled Baelfire's leather ball between her hands as she lay on one of the spare room's beds, staring up at the ceiling and contemplating the situation. Mr. Gold's quiet depression was tearing her apart; as she was closing him off from the news, so he was closing her off from the thoughts tormenting him. She didn't like the distance she had created between them.

No matter what, she'd have to tell him tonight, even if it wasn't the shining epitome of decades of desire she was hoping for. Yes, he had to know before he found out, and before this "how to get rid of Emma without killing her" debacle was settled.

She held the ball as she got up, making her way down the hallway with baby steps. There was one room she had been avoiding since the incident with Ashley…one room that they had both been avoiding. She went to it and stood before the door, taking a deep breath. It would no longer be a memorial to what could have been… It would be a reminder of what was to come.

Belle rested her hand on the doorknob, and tried to turn it. It was locked. Why on earth had it been locked?

Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she pulled it out, the screen announcing a text message from Mr. Gold. Maybe he didn't feel like coming home tonight. She opened it. "Here. Now. SOS."

She was out the door before her mind could fully wrap around the meaning behind those three words. She was halfway to the shop before she even considered panicking.

Mr. Gold was at the counter when she came in. He set down the large case he had been carrying
and went over to Belle.

"What's happening? What's wrong?" She sputtered.

He rested a hand on her shoulder, meeting her eyes, "I need you to listen to me very carefully Belle, and remain calm."

She nodded her understanding and he frowned.

"Henry's in the hospital right now."

It took everything inside of Belle to keep from freaking out just at those words, only a shaky breath betraying her fear. Mr. Gold brushed her cheek with his knuckles comfortingly.

"It's just a sleeping curse."

"Just a sleeping curse?!!"

"It was meant for Emma, but the brave little prince bit the bullet," he continued to stroke her face, "He's going to be fine, Belle, I promise."

"How did…?"

"I don't know, and we can figure it out later."

Belle's chin trembled. Tonight was supposed to be a happy night… Tonight was supposed to be perfect. His hand moved away from her face to squeeze her shoulder.

"I need to stay here…to help Emma and Regina. And I need you to go home and pack the essentials; a few changes of clothes, cash, the magic to find Bae, a couple books… We're leaving in the morning."

Belle stared at him, "…it's so soon."

Mr. Gold nodded somberly, "I know, Belle, I know, but it's happening now and we can't stop it," he met her eyes, "The curse is breaking tonight."
Chapter Summary

Mr. and Mrs. Gold prepare for the curse to break.

Belle and Rumplestiltskin play matchmaker for their pet couple; Snow White and Prince Charming.

Belle's introduction to true love was through dance. Like a proper young lady, she had been sent off to bed at a decent hour, but how was one expected to sleep knowing that there was a ball going on in their home?! So Belle had waited until her nursemaid had retired for the evening, and then slipped out of bed to see the grand ballroom.

Her breath caught in her throat as she peered through the rungs of the upper floor's railing and saw dozens upon dozens of dancers. The ladies in their beautiful gowns, the men handsome in their suits, swirling around each other like a stream moving around a stone under the grand crystal chandelier. Music swelled with the laughter and Belle marveled at how none of them managed to fall or run into each other.

There, in the very center of it all, were her papa and mama. They didn't speak, nor did they seem to be paying any attention to the music with how slow they danced. They just stared and smiled at each other, as though there was nothing else in the world but them. They moved so gracefully, their eyes so full of love… Belle decided that this was what marriage was, loving each other so much that they had to dance with their eyes showing all their love. And one day, she would have it.

The next day Sir Maurice and Lady Callista walked in on their young daughter twirling around underneath the grand chandelier, humming to herself.

"What are you up to, Belle?" Maurice asked her with a soft laugh.

"Dancing," Belle informed him, threatening to topple over as she crossed her legs awkwardly.

"And who with?" Callista asked.

"My husband."

Maurice smiled good-naturedly, "And what does your husband look like?"

Belle paused, staring at her father as if he had lost his mind, "How should I know? I haven't met him yet." She continued her lopsided waltz, "But I need to practice, so I'll be ready for him. I want to dance as good as you and Mama."

Callista chuckled, "Oh darling, your father can't dance. Ogres have less lumbering steps."

"Better than your mother's twirls," he countered, taking her hand and squeezing it.

Belle tilted her head, "But if you mess up a lot, then how come your dancing looks so pretty?"

Callista smiled, leaning into her husband, "People aren't perfect, my beauty…but love is. Love is
all about two jagged pieces coming together seamlessly, filling in the faults of the other to make something incredible."

The next winter, Lady Callista was taken as a victim by the Black Plague. Belle witnessed as her father slowly forgot about true love, and turned into a man haunted by something he both couldn't remember nor forget.

Belle had gotten no better at dancing by the time she came to finishing school, and no one wanted to be the clumsy young noblewoman's dance partner save for Snow White. She bravely faced Belle's stumbling feet and easily crossed legs each dance class.

"Lady Belle, you are utterly a lost cause," The instructor, a woman known solely as the Countess, declared as Belle once again stumbled into Snow.

She murmured an apology to a patient Snow and then muttered under her breath.

"What was that, Lady Belle? A noblewoman, if driven to speech, must speak clearly so that she may not have to repeat herself."

Belle took a deep breath, "I said I don't really see the point in this."

The Countess's chest swelled, "The point of this is to ensure that you are not a laughingstock of your lands. You don't want to shame your husband by stomping about like a wounded dragon, do you?"

"Of course not," Belle shook her head vehemently, "I just... Feel that I cannot dance perfectly without having my husband as my partner."

All of the other girls stared at Belle as if what she said was the strangest thing that they had ever heard. The Countess's lips puckered in what might have been a smile if she had remembered how to do such a gesture.

"Then indulge me as to why you think that," she sneered.

Belle bit her lip, then quickly stopped. Another unladylike habit, "My future husband... he will know me so well that he'll know my mistakes before I make them. He will adjust to my faults, as I will adjust to his... because that's true love, and true love makes things that are imperfect perfect when you put them together."

The Countess hooted, and Belle supposed that was her version of laughter, "True love! Oh Lady Belle, you silly little girl... Why don't you go back to your nursery and listen to other myths?"

Snickering moved through the other girls and Belle's cheeks flushed.

"There are only two purposes for marriage; status and child-bearing. True love..." She said the words as though they tasted like vinegar, "Doesn't exist."

"Of course it does," Belle objected, "My mother and father were in it."

"They must have grown fond of each other then," The Countess said snidely, pointing at the door, "Four demerits, and you are not to leave your chambers for the rest of the day."

Humiliation burning hot in her throat, Belle took her leave. It was better in her dormitory than out here pretending to learn how to dance anyway; she had books in her dormitory.
Belle clung stubbornly to the idea that true love existed…until the day she returned home to find that her papa had given her hand in marriage to a knight named Gaston. A boy she had grown up with, but one who had always seemed dull with his talk of hunting. Even if true love existed…it was no longer for her.

She felt herself stumble in slow motion, having time to let the images of her childhood dreams and horrid dance lessons flash in front of her before she fell flat on her backside. Right beneath the chandelier where her parents had danced gracefully a lifetime ago. The ballroom went silent as her body hit the floor, the musicians stopping in shock. Belle sat there, frozen in disbelief.

Gaston must have sensed that she was falling… How could he let her go? How could he not even reach out a hand and attempt to stop her from falling in front of all these people?

The silence was broken by her fiancé’s loud laugh.

"I don't think she was quite finished when she graduated!" He joked to the crowd.

And they laughed. They laughed at her fall, a fall that her father would never let happen to her mother. Gaston bent down, offering a hand.

"It was just a tease, Belle, no need to be upset," he insisted, as though she were a child threatening to throw a tantrum.

There was no love in his eyes, just a sliver of companionable affection. It was then Belle knew that she could never love Gaston, and Gaston in turn would never love her.

She scrambled to her feet and, very unladylike if she did say so herself, ran out of the ballroom, tears beginning to fall down her face. She needed to escape… She did not want the life her father and Gaston had planned for her. She wanted to decide her own fate, have her own adventures, do as she wished.

And, she admitted in the back of her mind, she wanted to fall into true love with someone who would understand these desires.

III

Belle's mind tried to wrap around everything at once, making lists and chucking them aside. The most important things to pack were obviously the magical supplies; Belle hoped he'd cover the ones in the shop. But there were things she needed to prepare with the supplies, and how could she focus knowing that there was so much else to do?

So Belle tossed two suitcases onto the bed and started grabbing a few outfits for each. She'd bother with ironing his shirts later if he bitched about it; the man wore nothing but formal. As for her… well, she wouldn't have to bother too much, since she'd be constantly growing. A few of her favorite shirts, some jeans, nothing terribly fancy.

How much of their toiletries would they need? Should she pack food? What about documents, what all would matter to them once they found Bae? Would they even come back to Storybrooke, or would they just relocate to near where his son was?

Belle sighed, tossing the emergency cash into her bag. She could really use a potato right now.

III

"She has no breath," Red said, the dagger under Snow's nose showing no mist, "She's gone. She
sacrificed herself…for true love."

"She sacrificed herself for all of us," Grumpy murmured.

The group of dwarves and werewolves went silent, before a muffled sob came from Dopey. Granny wiped at her eyes and Red's shoulders shook. Happy buried his face into Grumpy's shoulder and, for once, Grumpy didn't shove him off.

Their dear Snow White was gone forever because of Regina the Evil Queen.

They grieved properly before Grumpy, the only one besides Granny who had endured enough pain in their life to be rational at such a fragile time, spoke.

"What do we do now?"

"There's nothing we can do except bury her," Granny said simply.

"Oh dear gods, don't do that!"

The group spun around to see they weren't alone. A young woman stood near the headstone of Daniel, dressed in a gold gown with gloves that reached to her mid forearm. She flushed as she realized she had called attention to herself, bowing her head shyly.

"Sorry, I was trying to let you have a private moment…" she mumbled, "But if you bury her, then that'll make it that much harder for Charming to get to her."

"Why would Charming want to get to her?" Grumpy snapped, "She's dead!"

"Only mostly dead," The woman corrected, "Mostly dead means she's slightly alive."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?"

Belle took a few steps closer to them, "An old friend of Snow's," she glanced down at the woman in question, sighing, "It's a sleeping curse… Nothing true love's kiss can't fix."

"A kiss?" Grumpy snorted, "You're telling me a kiss is gonna fix this?"

Belle smiled softly, "True love is the most powerful magic of all. I've seen it cure worse curses than this."

"So you're one of those magic dabblers," Granny muttered, sizing Belle up, "Only fairies practice the good kind…"

She bit her lip, "I'm not perfect, but I try to be good."

Ever since this woman had appeared, there was something about her that made the invisible hackles of Red's wolf side rise. And yet her wolf side also told her that the woman's intentions were pure; there was goodness underneath that thick dark aura. She truly wanted to help them.

"What do you suggest we do?" Red asked.

Grumpy and Granny stared at Red as if they had just found out she ate people. Belle, however, looked relieved that someone seemed to be willing to accept her advice.

"Well this is no place for a proper reunion," she insisted, glancing around, "Too many memories… I'm thinking a nice forest, a nod to the fact that it's where they met," she looked at the dwarves,
"Could you carry her please?"

The dwarves blinked in surprise, then turned to Grumpy. Grumpy huffed, then bent down near Snow's shoulders. The six others fell into line, picking up their princess as carefully as a newborn child.

"Hold tight," Belle warned, before they were all enveloped in a thick purple smoke.

There were numerous exclamations, a few clever uses of profanity, and a couple of stares.

"I warned you," she said defensively, picking her way towards a glass coffin and examining the trees, "...yes, yes this will do nicely."

They followed her over to the coffin, exchanging nervous glances. The only way something like this coffin would be out in the open would be if someone planned it...

Belle propped open the lid, "She'll be safe in here until her prince comes for her," she assured them.

Not really having a second option, they lay Snow White down inside and carefully closed the lid.

"How do you know that he'll come for her? Last we knew the Evil Queen had him locked up somewhere," Grumpy grumbled.

Belle sighed and shook her head, "Have you really become so cynical, Dreamy?"

The dwarves stared at Belle. The Lucases stared at Grumpy.

"Dreamy?" Red asked.

Grumpy squinted at the woman, seeing her through new eyes, "...Belle?"

"Glad I made such an impression," she teased, looking down at Snow White's attire, "Not for the most romantic moment of your life, you are not wearing that..."

She flicked her wrist and Snow White's woodland attire changed into a white gown, flowers embedded in her hair. Belle smiled, "Much better..."

He knew better but with her wide grin, clasped hands and inability to sit still from excitement, Grumpy thought Belle kind of looked like a girl version of Rumplestiltskin.

III

The spinning wheel would have to stay; there was no way they could fit it in the trunk, and they were not taking her truck. Belle felt a pang of regret for leaving behind that essential part of Rumplestiltskin... They'd probably be too busy for him to spin, though, and she was sure they could always come back.

She set herself in front of a workbench in the shed, instructions to her left and materials to her right. She shifted uneasily; she always felt like she would mess up whenever she was the one to do the magic. However this wasn't technically magic...just prepping for magic.

She took some cloth from one of Bae's shirts and with a stabbing pain in her heart, burned it. She turned her attention to a small orb wrapped up carefully in silk. Maleficent's orb.

She very carefully began to slice into the glass of the orb, rotating it until it was cut cleanly into
two halves. She dug through the basket of items until she found the golden scarab, clicking the two halves back together now that no magic drove it to its purpose. She put out the small fire and dumped the ashes from Bae's cloth into the orb, setting the golden scarab on top of the ash and sealing the orb back into a complete ball. She found the small bronze stand and set the modified orb into it. She'd let Mr. Gold be the one to install this on the dashboard.

She packed up the rest of the magical supplies and checked the time. Four in the morning. How had time passed so quickly?

Belle's phone went off and she instantly answered it, "I'm almost done."

"Thank you. I'm just about done here as well," Mr. Gold reassured her, then paused, "…and emotionally?"

"Been too busy to pay them much mind," she said honestly, sighing, "We need to talk, though, before magic returns."

"Of course, dearie. It'll be alright," he assured her.

Belle swallowed, "…I know."

III

"Careful!" Rumplestiltskin cautioned as Prince Charming carelessly grabbed for the potion, "True love is a fragile thing…anything can break it, with enough pressure."

Charming glanced at him, "And what do you know of true love?"

Rumplestiltskin smirked, "Perhaps I'm in it," he said smugly.

He had been his lover's stepmother's prisoner for the past few days, allowed to escape by one of her own men, ran headlong into an Infinite Forest, met up with Rumplestiltskin who had been casually sitting on a log and had just finished a swordfight with him… And yet the simple revealed fact that the Dark One might actually love someone was the oddest thing to have happen to him so far today.

Charming couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the statement, "You? You love someone?"

Rumplestiltskin rested a hand over his chest, "With all my shriveled black heart. She's my twoo wove," he said shrilly.

And there was a moment when Prince Charming saw something other than a monster, something almost human in the imp's eyes. There was a warmth in them, a man truly in love and not a beast in the thralls of lust. He was…almost human when he spoke of this mystery lady.

"It's the most powerful magic in the world," Rumplestiltskin continued, "The only magic powerful enough to break any curse. It must be protected at all costs."

Was it just Charming, or did there seem to be extra emphasis on "must" and "at all costs"?

Later, Charming was wondering about Rumplestiltskin's definition of a "safe place" and why it was inside of an enchantress instead of, say, a magical lockbox as he swam through the freezing waters of the Forbidden Lake to dry land. Rumplestiltskin stood there beside a fire, a mount nearby.

"Impressive, dearie. Very impressive indeed," he remarked. He nodded to the fire, "Come warm
yourself."

Charming was quite convinced Rumplestiltskin was the most annoying thing in the kingdom, making him barter for his stolen ring back amongst everything else. He did notice Rumplestiltskin's change of attire; he had shed his usual leather ensemble for a dark blue ball-like outfit.

"I have done what you've asked. Return my ring to me," he demanded.

"Of course. You're in a bit of a rush," Rumplestiltskin said sheepishly, a smirk curling his lips, "How rude of me."

He took a few steps closer and presented the ring to Charming, "With this… You will find her," he promised.

Charming took the ring back and examined it. The precious stone in the center now pulsed with a magical glow. Wet, exhausted, and peeved at the hindrance to his quest for Snow White, he started off.

"Thank you," he muttered.

"Now wait just a minute."

Charming sighed and turned around, wondering what on earth he wanted now. Rumplestiltskin wrinkled his nose as he sized the farm boy up.

"No, no, that won't do at all," he decided, waving his arms.

Charming disappeared in a cloud of magenta smoke, emerging dry and dressed fit for a coronation. Rumplestiltskin grinned.

"Much better… Now you're ready for your big moment. So go on Prince Charming; ride off on your white horse to save your damsel in distress!" He said dramatically, hands twisting in their usual flair.

The prince frowned, "Why do you want us together?" He asked, "What do you get out of it?"

Rumplestiltskin shrugged, "The wife and I are huge fans of true love, believe it or not, and what it creates."

_Wife_? Either this poor woman was someone he got out of a deal or maybe, just maybe, there was a redeemable part to the monster that had stolen his twin brother away.

Trapped inside an endless nightmare, Snow White wandered through the mirrored room. There were no doors to leave this place, no windows to see out of… It was just her, reflected over and over again, forced to think of all she had left behind. She hadn't even told anyone goodbye… especially not Charming.

Would she be stuck in this limbo forever? Did Regina hate her that much that she would leave her in agony without hope of release? She didn't mean to have Daniel die…she really didn't…

It could've been days, or minutes, or months, but she suddenly felt a pressure. The mirrors started to crack all around her, light blinding her… And suddenly she was gasping for air, sitting up and staring into her true love's eyes.

Alive.
"You found me," she breathed, smiling at her Prince Charming.

He smiled back at her, "Did you ever doubt I would?"

"Well the endless sleep gave me pause," she admitted, looking around.

There were the dwarves, along with Granny and Red, all of them excited and happy to see her alive and breathing once again… Though Granny did look a little unsettled.

Snow caught a glimpse of something gold near a tree and spotted Belle, leaning against the trunk and watching the scene with a dreamy expression she usually reserved for her novels. Snow was able to watch her for a few seconds before Belle realized she had been caught. With a start, the Caretaker suddenly vanished in a cloud of smoke.

"What's so funny?" Charming asked.

Snow giggled and shook her head, "Just remembering things past," she lied, allowing him to help her down from the coffin (a coffin? They had put her in a glass coffin?).

There was something very comforting in the fact that even if the Caretaker had all the power she could wish for at her fingertips, she was still Belle and would always be looking out for her old roommate.

III

Dawn was breaking over the isolated town in Maine and in her entire experience of this world, Belle had never felt it to be such a symbol as it was today. Her future, which had been so carefully planned out since Rumplestiltskin was locked away in the dungeon, was now as clear as a fog. She could hardly see a hand in front of her.

But at the same time, she was excited. The last phases of Rumplestiltskin's long plan were finally fitting together. Today they would embark in search of Baelfire, finally in the same world, finally free from the curse's hold. And, along with her stepson, she would have a child all their own to nurture.

Mr. Gold had been quiet, yet his eyes practically shouted his emotions. He was afraid. He was excited. He was concerned. He was troubled. He was jubilant. He could barely keep himself from laughing. He was an exact mirror of Belle, save for how a few centuries and the fact he actually knew Baelfire intensified his feelings.

He held her hand as they drove to the forest's edge, the vial of true love cradled in her other palm.

"You know what I dreamed of yesterday?" He asked her softly.

"What?"

"The ocean."

Belle smiled, "You hate the ocean."

"I know," he played with her hand unconsciously, "We had a little beach house that we rented; we'd go there on the weekends sometimes. I stayed on the shore and I got to watch both of you body-surf on the waves. The two most important people in my life…you and Baelfire…playing in the ocean while I got to watch," he squeezed her hand, singing in a low rumble, "By the sea, Mrs. Gold, that's the life I covet. By the sea, Missus G, oh I know you'll love it."
Belle giggled, resting her head on his shoulder, "Anything you say," she sung softly back.

He parked the car and turned off the engine. Belle sat up and Mr. Gold turned to her, a shy smile on his face.

"...for the first time in my life... I am not tied down by an identity. I do not have to be the village coward, or the Dark One, or even the pawnbroker and fearsome landlord. I can be anything I want to be. We can do anything," he said urgently, "You want to own a bookstore, Belle? You want a chain of bookstores? They're yours. Or maybe just a library in your honor, the size of a skyscraper filled with shelves upon shelves of books on anything you can imagine... We could see the world, together."

Belle smiled. It was so good to see him enthusiastic and hopeful for a change. Years upon years of baggage seemed to be lifted and she could see the man he might've been had fate given him a fair chance. It made her feel like the whole town could burn to the ground and it would be worth it, just to see her husband this carefree.

He let go of her hand and glanced away sheepishly, "First things first though... We have to make sure magic gets here so we can properly track down Bae."

Belle nodded her agreement and they both stepped out of the car.

He seemed buoyed by his goal, moving much faster through the woods than she did. She had to pick her way carefully around each root and small plant. It was only now that he was racing to go fulfill that final step before leaving that Belle remembered that they never had the talk.

That there was something utterly important that she needed to tell him before they could go chase after their dreams. That there was one last variable that he didn't know about as he planned. She stopped in her tracks, taking a deep breath.

"Rumplestiltskin, wait."

"It's alright, Belle, just residual magic coming from Emma's kiss."

"Rumplestiltskin..." The two words finally tumbled out of her mouth, "I'm pregnant."

Mr. Gold froze, utterly motionless for a moment. He then slowly turned towards her, his mouth slightly ajar and his eyes wide. Belle took advantage of the pause, picking her way through the brush as tears spilled from her cheeks.

"I'm going to have your baby," she choked.

He stared at her for a moment longer and then suddenly his cane fell to the ground. He lunged forward and took her into his arms, clinging to her for dear life. She wound her arms around his neck and laughed, squeezing him tight. He gave a strangled sound that could have been words, or could just have been noise. She could feel him threatening to break down.

She gently rested a hand on the side of his head, pulling away, "There'll be time for that later," she assured him, smiling as she looked into his eyes, "There'll be time for everything, but first..." She held the potion out to him, "There's something we have to do."

Mr. Gold glanced down at it and nodded, taking the potion from her. His free hand took hers and held on for dear life; the poor thing probably thought he was dreaming. She kept him steady as they made their way up the hill towards the wishing well, the remains in this world of a lake that had the power to return that which was lost. Dropping the most powerful magic of all into the well,
he had reasoned, would be enough to bring magic back *period* to Storybrooke.

They stood on the platform of the well, and Belle gazed down into it. How appropriate that a wishing well would help them fulfill his heart's desire. She glanced up to see Mr. Gold watching her, adoring her silently with an excited sort of nervousness. He tilted the vial towards her.

"Milady," he murmured. She smiled and giggled.

Her free hand pulled out the stopper and, with a smirk, Mr. Gold dropped it down into the well. It hit the water with a splash and almost instantly, purple fog started to rise. He nudged her away and Belle complied, keeping their distance from magic straight in the face.

Mr. Gold smiled faintly as tears filled his eyes. He turned to face his wife.

"...we really are going to have a happy ending, aren't we?" He asked meekly, hardly seeming to believe his own words.

Belle fought back her own tears and nodded.

He wrapped her in a tight embrace and pressed his lips fiercely to hers. Belle pushed back just as passionately and they stood there, kissing each other with all their might, as magic slowly bubbled up out of the well and spread. Neither of them pulled away, even as they felt the old darkness stir in their blood, awakening after decades of rest. The whole world could burn and they would still be there, lost in their own love as the tempting promise of a happy ending spread out before them, more real than they ever dreamed it could be.

III

Kit Pettigrew was sleeping when her memories returned to her. It made for very odd dreams, of a mutilated corpse of something that wasn't quite a cat and wasn't quite a human... Of a man with reptilian eyes and glittering skin trying to console her, though he couldn't help but nervously giggle every once in a while. Of exploring a giant castle, one that belonged to the glittering man, and of a young woman with black braided hair known as Regina.

Of venturing to another land in search of a rabbit hole to help her guardian get to a land without magic, a desire of his he never explained. Of a fifteen-year-old named Jefferson, and an eight-year-old named Alice. Of a war waged by the Queen of Hearts to find the two portal-jumpers rumored to be living in her dominion... Of a baby named Grace sent away with Jefferson, and of long nights guarding the girl who had grown up to be his wife. Of watching her best friend die via a crushed heart, and having to use that as a distraction to escape. Of losing her age when she traveled back to the Enchanted Forest, having to tell Jefferson that Grace's mother was never coming back from Wonderland. Of conquests and deeds that no mere mortal could accomplish but somehow Kit did, of a love of snuggling to those she cared for and warm spots in the sunlight and purring and scratches and shiny things she may or may not have taken with permission...

Kit Pettigrew might have been the one to curl up in her sleeping bag and fall asleep...but it was Katja the Puss in Boots who awoke with a start, jerking into a sitting position as her eyes flew open. She cried out at how blurry everything was; she couldn't make out every detail of the fibers of the tent wall opposite her, she couldn't smell any animals running around outside. It was like someone had hit her with a weakening spell, and she was disoriented as hell.

The cursed part of Katja's mind calmly explained that this was normal; she was only human, after all.
Only human… Katja’s body caved in at the realization. Regina had taken away the very core of her being, forcing her to be another species just so she wouldn’t stand out… Bitch.

Katja shifted through her memories of this land, both the true and the false. Geezus, all she ever did to the Queen was try to steal a top, and Regina turned her into some brat? Abandonment issues aside, that seemed a bit much… And then there was Mr. Gold and his pawnshop. And making her a maid for two weeks. And putting her in a straitjacket because she didn't feel like wearing appropriate clothes. And not getting her the Chinese dish she wanted from Mushu's. And for pretty much everything else.

Well that bastard was gonna pay.

Esperanza Danseur was on her way to work when her memories returned to her. She hated morning shifts, being a night person and all, but she had to pay the bills somehow. It'd be easier if her goat would stop eating everything in sight…

The wave of magic struck her just as she entered the parking lot of the grocery store. She whipped her head around, confused. This wasn't the city she knew…all these buildings were so odd…

"Quasi!" She cried out, "Phoebus?!"

Of course neither answered, and she didn't know where she'd ever find them. But her cursed memories recalled a convent on the other side of town…it was the best clue she had. And so Esmeralda the former gypsy ran for her life, desperate to find her old friend Quasimodo at least.

Gespard LeFleur was setting out some new flowers for the display in front of "Game of Thorns" when his memories returned to him. At first he was dumbfounded at the story of him being a knight that suddenly appeared in his head, and tried to shrug it off. However, for some reason the fantasy persisted.

"Gaston!"

He turned around to see Moe French staring at him as if Mr. French was concerned he had just lost his own head. Try as he might, Gaston could not knock the strange coincidences of it all. For some reason, he had been a knight and now he was here, wherever here was.

"What in the gods name…?" Sir Maurice murmured, glancing around the shop.

Gaston just shook his head, beyond an explanation. Perhaps Belle knew…

The train of thought derailed as he remembered Rosaline Gold. Driving her home. The rose in the hospital. Telling Mr. Gold that he wasn't good enough for her. Picking her up at the bar after a fight with her husband. Hitting on her so much she pulled the emergency break and walked home.

Gaston grimaced at the bad form his Storybrooke counterpart had shown, lusting after a friend like a man drawn in by a siren.

"…how has the beast allowed me to live after all of that?" He muttered.

Meanwhile, there had been an uproar at the Storybrooke Zoo. At around 8:20 a.m., a male Bengal tiger had apparently escaped his cage and was trying to leave the zoo. The zookeepers, who were all dealing with Sudden Memory Return as well, were unable to recapture him, only detain him inside of the zoo. The tiger sprinted around the grounds, trying desperately to find a way out and roaring his anguish. Civilians were warned to stay clear of the tiger gone mad, as zookeepers armed themselves with tranquilizers.
One of the civilians, despite security trying to keep him back, had scaled the bordering wall of the zoo, trying to seek out the Bengal. He spotted him and shouted at the top of his lungs.

"RAJAH!"

The feline's head whipped around at the sound of his name and caught sight of the man, bounding towards him. The man jumped down inside of the zoo and the tiger nuzzled him as affectionately as possible. He wrapped his arms around the tiger and rubbed his back.

"I know, boy, I missed you too," he murmured.

Aladdin straightened, wishing he'd have some time to clean up. Being a street bum for twenty-eight years wasn't exactly the first impression he wanted his true love to see when they were reunited… Then again, she'd seen him worse.

Rajah looked up at Aladdin hopefully and snorted, motioning towards the gates.

"Of course, Raj, let's go find Jasmine," he murmured.

And yet a hobo reclaiming his pet tiger to go find his princess fiancé was not the strangest thing Storybrooke would encounter that day.

Bianca Diablo was having a cup of coffee, glancing over some sketches when her memories returned to her. She'd sip at the black liquid, sigh, and then edit one of the sketches. She was a perfectionist when it came to her work as a designer, and though it meant a better end product it also drove her insane.

She rose to fetch another cup (she'd need it to get through the other half) when she froze. The mug dropped from her hand, but she didn't even notice. It was over. Whatever peace she had found in this land, whatever kept her from remembering what she had been, was gone and now she was perfectly aware of her past as Cruella De Ville Hunter.

"Ella!"

Horace's voice echoed through the spacious mansion they had been living in. He had been out gardening in the early hours, as he was prone to in this world.

"In here, Ace," she called.

He came in and she turned to him, fighting off despair. His body deflated in relief as he saw her, embracing her joyfully. She numbly hugged him back.

"Where's Jas?"

"Out shopping," Crue murmured.

Horace stepped back, smiling at her, "I forgot how brown your eyes were before…" He said shyly. Crue couldn't help but smile.

Remembering was not itself the curse; there was no white on one side of her head, no icy eyes apparently, no urges to kill or dead spouses to converse with… She could still be normal, uncursed, here in this land without magic.

Horace's forehead creased as he looked out the window, "…the hell is that?"

Crue joined him to see a purple smoke slowly blotting out everything; the sky, the backyard. Soon
it would be upon them.

Her stomach clenched, "Something horrible," she responded.

Rajah stopped and whined at the purple smoke flowing through the streets. Aladdin grabbed at him and urged the tiger to keep moving.

Gaston urged Sir Maurice back inside the flower shop and locked the door, but that didn't appear to stop the foul vapors. The two men were soon cornered by the counter, surrounded by a mist that didn't seem to harm them, but didn't seem particularly beneficial either.

Ezzie tried to make it to the convent before the smoke caught up with her, but no such luck.

Katja glanced at the purple smoke that crept inside of her tent and grinned.

"Thank the gods," she breathed, "Magic's coming back."

III

Belle hummed to herself as she danced around the ballroom, her steps careful and her arms positioned on her imaginary partner's shoulder and hand. The room was larger than the one in her father's manor, but it still had a lovely chandelier and an odd painting on the ceiling of winged babes. She closed her eyes for a moment, picturing the scene yet again of Prince Charming waking up Snow White. Love was so...so beautiful.

Suddenly there was something under one hand, and something holding the other, moving with her. She opened her eyes to see Rumplestiltskin grinning at her, giving a soft "nee" of delight. She laughed and shook her head at him. She smiled as he shyly rested a hand on her waist, surprisingly chaste for a man she was married to.

His steps were a bit eager for the waltz she had been doing, but she sped up, letting him lead.

"Tale as old as time," she sang aloud.

"True as it can be," he crooned back.

"Barely even friends..."

"Then somebody bends," he threatened to dip her and she squealed her protest, "...unexpectedly."

She giggled, "Just a little change..."

"Small to say the least," he insisted.

"Both a little scared," she assured him.

"Neither one prepared."

"Ever just the same," she declared.

"Ever a surprise."

"Ever as before."

"Ever just as sure..."
Belle accidentally caught the hem of her dress with her heel, threatening to topple over. Rumplestiltskin quickly moved his other hand to her waist, smoothly picking her up and twirling her around.

"As the sun will riüüüüüise!" He trumpeted without missing a beat and Belle laughed.

He set her back down and they fell smoothly back into their rhythm.

"Bittersweet and strange," Belle sang.

"Finding you can change," His hand brushed her cheek.

She twirled a lock of his hair around her finger, "Learning you were wrong."

"Certain as the sun... Rising in the east."

"Tale as old as time."

"Song as old as rhyme." He caressed her neck, "Beauty..."

Belle leaned forward, resting her head on his chest, "And her beast."

The dance slowed as their odd little sing-along ended, Rumplestiltskin willing the chandelier to dim to a romantic glow. Belle sighed happily.

"We did it," she said.

"We did it," he agreed.

"We got those two crazy kids together-"

"Regina be damned."

"George be damned."

"Everyone be damned because they're in true love." He wove his arm around her waist, "And it's utterly surprising how many obstacles one is willing to overcome in the face of it."

"It's worth it," Belle murmured, "If it wasn't worth it, then it wouldn't be true love."

She gazed up at her beast, her husband, her best friend and partner-in-crime. And when he gazed down at her, she knew without a single doubt that he was the one she had danced with all her life.

"I love you," she said, because she could never tell him enough.

"I love you too," he said, because neither could he.
Broken, We Are Both

Chapter Summary

The conclusion to "Mr. and Mrs. Gold".

Broken

"The hell was that?"

Emma Ruth Swan had always had a way with words and a tendency to say exactly what others were thinking. It often got her into trouble, but it wasn't like she could control herself. It was just who she was.

She coughed and shook her head as the offending purple smoke faded. How it had managed to get through the concrete walls and closed windows was beyond her… But pretty much everything that had happened since Henry bit into the apple turnover was beyond her.

"Go get dressed, kid," Emma said, tapping Henry on the shoulder, "I think we need some answers."

"Your parents will be looking for you," Henry pointed out. A knot formed in Emma's stomach. Truth be told, she wasn't sure she was ready to accept the fact her parents were Prince Charming and Snow White.

He turned towards Mother Superior, "You're the Blue Fairy, aren't you?"

She smiled softly at him, "I am, child. Listen to your mother now; I suspect we have a long day ahead of us."

One of the other nurses ushered Henry towards where his personal belongings had been kept. Emma marveled at Henry's faith. She couldn't speak for anyone else, but she for one had some apologies to dole out to him.

"The smoke was magic, Your Highness."

Emma jerked at the unfamiliar title, "No. No, no, no, I am not doing this "highness" crap. I'm just Emma, or Miss Swan; I am not from your country."

Mother Superior smiled comfortingly, "But you are. You are the Lost Princess."

Emma rubbed at her forehead. Too much for eight in the morning.

"So someone did a crap-load of magic or what? I thought there was no magic…"

"There wasn't… But something changed," Mother Superior frowned, "It works differently, I feel it… Matters are complicated now."

"Tell me about it," Emma grumbled, glancing out the window, "Who the hell would want magic
"Why don't you ask that queen of yours?" Dr. Whale snarled from his seat on a hospital bed.

"Regina? No. She was busy with Henry all night like me…"

Emma's stomach curled as she thought of that golden egg the dragon of a goose had laid when it had been killed. How she had just tossed it up the elevator shaft, trusting a man who seemed to be on her side… But she supposed the only side he was on was his own.

Mother Superior blanched, "Someone much more wicked… The creature that had created the Dark Curse in the first place."

"A manipulative, slippery, silver-tongued devil who'll rip you off as soon as help you out."

"The Dark One."

"Mr. Gold."

"Rumplestiltskin!" Belle squealed.

He had scarcely stopped touching her since magic had returned; holding her hand on the car ride home and having difficulty keeping his eyes on the road in favor of staring at her. Now as they made their way home, he was on her heels, grabbing at her as she attempted to escape. He now had her pinned halfway up the staircase against the wall, his eyes warm and his smile tender.

"I really don't know whether I want to kill you or make love to you, Belle, I cannot decide," he confessed, kissing her neck, "Three days… Three whole days you kept this from me!"

"It wasn't on purpose!" She insisted, "You were preoccupied, and I was waiting for the right moment."

He stared at her, "…Baelfire could've shown up on our front doorstep and I'd still have the time to listen to the fact that you are pregnant!" His smile returned, as if that word demanded his joy.

He kissed her again and Belle felt warm clear down to her toes. His enthusiasm was making her a little nervous; neither of them were graceful, and she had read "Gone With the Wind" enough times to know staircases were her enemy in her fragile state. She pulled away from him, grinning at the pout he made at this action.

"It has a heartbeat," she told him, "It's almost twelve weeks old now."

His brow furrowed, "Twelve weeks?"

"I know, I couldn't believe it either. I thought that when it happened… fireworks would go off or something," she fumbled with her pocket, "Here…"

She pulled out the slightly worn picture, something she had kept as close to her as Rumplestiltskin's dagger. She offered it to him and he took it tentatively.

"Please don't be mad at me for doing the first one without you," she begged, "You can go to every single other one, I promise… I just wanted to be absolutely certain before I told you."

Mr. Gold stared down at the sonogram image, his eyes roaming around the being that was no bigger than a plum. Their child, so spectacularly normal… Their child, inside of her, a miracle he couldn't believe he had been granted. His hand shook as he sniffed, then wrapped himself around
Belle, crying silently.

"I know, Rum... I know," she cooed.

He allowed himself to cry for a few minutes before straightening and clearing his throat. Belle kissed his nose before maneuvering her way around him to continue up the staircase.

"I need a nap," she decided.

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "A nap?" He followed after her, "You can sleep on the way."

"Oh no I'm not," she pointed at him, "You will get us lost ten minutes out of Storybrooke if I'm not co-piloting."

"I would not," he protested.

"Yes you will," she sat down on the bed, slipping her shoes off, "I've got one word for you; Narnia."

"Oh for heaven's sake, Belle, let it go."

"I will not let it go! We were supposed to get to the White Witch's castle and you steered us all the way to Cair Paravel somehow!" She flipped the comforter over and laid down, "If it wasn't for your issue with wolves, I'm sure they would have directed us there."

"Why would I trust a pack of dogs?"

"Because they worked for her, and they talked."

"Regina talks and I don't trust her," he grumbled, taking a seat at the end of the bed. Belle flicked the covers over her, "And you picked a fight with a faun."

"Hey, "Daughter of Eve" sounds highly sexual out of context."

She rolled her eyes, snuggling down into the mattress, "Are you going to join me?" She asked.

Mr. Gold snickered, shaking his head, "How on earth could I sleep? I'm far too excited."

Belle sighed, "Fine... But if you're cranky don't blame it on me."

"Well I'm not stopping every hour so that you can use the bathroom."

"Then I'll get sick all over your car."

"And you'll clean it up."

"I'm pregnant."

"That is not going to be your duct-tape-esque excuse. If you start getting too emotional, I'll leave you behind and pick you up on my way back."

"Same goes for you, Mr. I-Cry-At-The-Drop-of-a-Hat. Except for it'll be worse, because you're going to be in overprotective mode."

"Damn straight I'll be in overprotective mode, and you are not going to have our child on the side of the road like some trailer trash redneck."
"We'll probably have sex in an IHOP bathroom, because I can't eat pancakes without getting syrup on me and I can't get syrup on me without you licking it off of me."

"We are going to want to kill each other, being in a contained area for so long. So there's going to be daily fighting, and then we'll waste time trying to hide from each other for a moment alone."

"One of us is coming back in the trunk, and it sure as hell isn't going to be Bae."

Mr. Gold grinned, crawling up to kiss her, "I can't wait."

She bumped his chin with her nose as he pulled away, "This is going to be an amazing road trip…"

He nodded, and then left her to her nap.

He was tempted to immediately start throwing things into the Cadillac, but there was something he had to do first. The picture of their child held tight in his hand, he went into the office and pulled out some stationary. He began with one letter, a short one with a greeting, two sentences, and signed with a name Mr. Gold had never been called before. He stared at the picture a little longer before tucking the letter into a new file folder.

He slipped back into the bedroom to see that Belle was already fast asleep, hair in her face and a serene smile on her unconscious lips. She was so beautiful… He could not fathom how she could be his.

It has a heartbeat. It has a heartbeat. The words echoed through his head and he wasn't quite sure why.

Mr. Gold cringed at the knock on his door, retreating as Belle shifted in her sleep. He was hardly to the staircase when another knock came, and then an angry "GOLD!" as he came to the bottom. It was like they thought he could just poof his way in front of them… He snarled and flung open the door.

"Could you please keep it down?" He hissed, "Rose is trying to sleep."

"Belle is trying to sleep," David Nolan corrected him.

It seemed as though it was already time to harass Rumplestiltskin for the Charmings, inducting Emma into the tradition as well.

"Why'd you bring magic here?" David demanded.

"Why did you steal that potion from Emma?" Mary Margaret asked.

"How could you put Henry at risk like that?" Emma snarled.

Mr. Gold sighed, "Quite a questionnaire you've whipped up in the short amount of time you've had… But let's glance over the results. Henry's safe, I presume?"

"For now," Emma grumbled.

"And the curse? Has it been broken?"

"Not completely, or we wouldn't be here," David muttered.

Mr. Gold smirked, "So you assume… And it appears that you all have found the family you've always been looking for."
Emma glared daggers at him, but didn't protest further.

"You should be thanking me, not harassing me in my own home," he insisted.

"Thanking you for what? For making it easier for Regina to have her way?" Emma snapped, "I may have only skimmed the book but it seems like an Evil Queen is a very bad adoptive mother for Henry…especially when she's got it out for his grandparents."

"I trust you'll find a way to restrain her then," he shrugged, "Isn't that what heroes are for? Defeating the villains?"

"You're awfully casual for a guy whose last encounter with the mayor involved duct tape and tying her to a chair," she muttered.

Mr. Gold tried not to grin at the memory, "I can handle Regina."

"What about Belle?"

His heart skipped a beat as he glanced at Mary Margaret. Belle surely hadn't told anyone else… Not before him… But she just looked like a concerned friend.

"You don't have faith in her?" He asked.

"I don't have faith in Regina not playing dirty," Mary Margaret corrected herself.

Mr. Gold straightened, "Belle will be fine," he promised, "However, if it were my son the Evil Queen wanted… I wouldn't spend too much time away from him."

The Charmings finally got the hint and, with final synchronized glares, left his front porch. Mr. Gold closed the door and started slowly back up the stairs.

It had a heartbeat. It had a heartbeat, and so that flicker of light they had tried so hard to conceive could die. Easily.

Mr. Gold went to his office again to write a second letter, a much longer letter, sealing it in an envelope and slipping it into one of Belle's bags.

Belle yawned and stretched as she awoke a couple of hours later, feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the drive. She blinked her eyes a few times and noticed a very handsome man sitting at the foot of her bed. She propped herself up on her elbows.

"I think it's a sign of how long we've been married that waking up to you staring at me is actually kind of cute now," she mused.

Mr. Gold half-smiled, "You ready, dearie?"

Belle bit her lip, "About as ready as I'll ever be." She slipped out of bed and quickly made it.

She took his arm and walked with him out of their bedroom, out into the hallway, and down the stairs, chattering all the while.

"Our first major stop is going to be Boston, logically, even though I doubt he'll be that close… But you never know. We can search the surrounding areas tonight, get used to the equipment and making sure that we can use magic outside of Storybrooke… I know you've checked everything over more times than you can count, but still… We can have a nice dinner out like a normal couple, not having to worry about being harassed. I still don't know how Figgy's going to feel
about all of this; should we kennel him? I don't like the thought, but it's just one more thing to keep track of... I'm sorry if I'm babbling, I'm just so nervous."

Mr. Gold didn't mind at all; he would miss that anxious babble, her arm entwined with his, being able to feel her and just be with her.

She stopped in the hallway, staring into the living room, "...why are your bags still in here? I would think you'd have enough time to..." She trailed off, slowly turning to him.

This was it. The moment he had been dreading since he had written the letter. He clenched his jaw and tried to be as stoic as possible as Belle stared.

"Why are my bags gone and yours aren't?"

"Because you're going alone," he stated.

Pure fear lit up Belle's eyes, "No, no I can't..."

"Yes you can, Belle."

"No I can't!" Violent heaves of breath jerked out of her as she watched him helplessly, "I can't do this without you, I don't even know what he looks like! How will I ever find him amongst millions of people?!"

Mr. Gold grasped both of her shoulders, looking her dead in the eye, "Yes you can. You know just as much about Bae as I do; you knew August wasn't him."

"Rum-"

"I trust you more than I trust myself." His grip tightened as his voice wobbled, "You are my hero, Belle. I know you'll succeed."

"This isn't some stupid quest! This isn't even about a curse! This is Baelfire, your son!" She screamed, "Can't you be brave for him?!"

"For the first time in my life I am doing the brave thing! This town is going to go straight to hell and yet I'm not running!"

Belle tried to take a deep breath, but it didn't calm her in the slightest.

"...why?" She growled, "Why am I going and why are you staying?"

"I don't have to choose, but I am making a choice now. I choose you...I choose Baelfire...I choose our child... I want all three of you, more than anything I've ever wanted in my entire life. There isn't a single doubt in my mind that you can find him and when you do, I will be here waiting..."
for you, having a carved out safety zone for us when you get back."

She sniffed, "I hate your plans… I hate them so much…"

He chuckled, "Hopefully after this, there won't be any more."

Belle held onto him for as long as she could, but he was gently nudging her towards the door. She wanted nothing more than to handcuff herself to something immovable and refuse to go until he agreed to go with her. Why did it matter what happened here? Regina would be too preoccupied with Snow and Emma to care about what they were up to.

And yet… Her desires were selfish, letting the town dissolve into anarchy when her powerful husband could keep them on a tight leash if he was so inclined. Her friends could get hurt…and poor Henry… No, this was probably for the best, she tried to rationalize, a hand on her stomach. She didn't want to imagine what kind of sick thoughts Regina might have about how to use Belle's pregnancy against her.

Everything she'd need was loaded into her truck, the golden scarab ash orb stuck firmly to the dash. A folder was set in the seat next to her, marked with an elaborate "B". She climbed in and buckled up as slowly as she could manage without Mr. Gold getting suspicious.

"…9:15," she said.

Mr. Gold's eyebrows furrowed, "What, love?"

"9:15. I will call you every night at 9:15," she promised, blinking back fresh tears, "That way I can at least hear your voice, even if I can't be with you."

"Don't be afraid to call more often than that," he assured her, resting a hand on her leg. She glanced at him and fought the urge to wipe his tears away.

His free hand cradled her face so softly it was almost a phantom touch, "Bring back my boy, Belle… Bring him back, and then we can be a family."

Belle caught his lips with hers, and they tried to fit as much passion as they could into it, knowing that this kiss would have to last them months, if not longer. His tongue met with hers and they danced together intricately, memorizing each other desperately.

Eventually they had to pull away, and they replaced their kiss with a tight embrace.

"Please don't kill my cat," she begged, making a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a sob.

"I won't," he promised.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Belle felt as though she was tearing off a chunk of her flesh as she pulled away from him, unable to meet his eyes. He closed the door and Belle started the engine, checking her mirrors. Mr. Gold stood in the driveway as she backed up, refusing to take one last look at him while he stared at her with all the focus he could muster. He wanted to memorize everything about his Belle; he had made the mistake of not paying much attention to her every movement before he was imprisoned, and he didn't want to make the same mistake.
He couldn't blame Belle for not looking back. A look back could mean changing her mind. He waited until the truck disappeared from sight and stood five minutes longer, staring blankly at the point where she had vanished, before heading back inside to cry or something. He swore there weren't any tears left in him, happy or sad. Then again, there always seemed to be more.

Belle knew if she looked back, then she'd return and throw herself at his feet, begging for him to change his mind. It was the same philosophy for the first time he had made her leave; if she turned around for a final glance at the castle that had been her home for the past few months, then she'd lose all nerve and run back to him. This time there was a lot more at stake than anger or pride if she refused to go; she needed to find Baelfire. He was going to make sure she was safe, and she was going to find his son.

Why did Rumplestiltskin always make her go when neither of them wanted to be parted from the other? It would make the leaving so much easier if at least one of them genuinely hated the other.

Belle pulled into the gas station and got out of her truck, feeling helpless and frustrated and wanting to cry so, so badly. She didn't want to leave… She wanted to be with him…

A large group caught her attention before she pulled the hose out of the pump; a large loud group heading for 108 Mifflin Street. Belle frowned and started to follow, cracking her knuckles. If Regina did anything to hold Henry against his will, they'd be cleaning the former queen's blood out of the sidewalk for a month…

Emma shoved her way desperately through the mob, trying to get to Regina before Dr. Whale did something stupid.

"Leave her alone!"

"Why should I listen to you?" Whale snarled.

She clenched her jaw, "Because I am still Sheriff."

"And because she saved you. All of you!" David addressed the bloodthirsty crowd.

"And because no matter what Regina did, it does not justify this," Mary Margaret insisted.

"We are not murderers here," Emma finished firmly.

Dr. Whale sneered, "Well, we're not from this world," he pointed out, as if Emma hadn't figured that out with the dragon and the potion and true love's kiss and everything.

"Yeah, well, you're in it now."

This didn't seem to calm the rage of the crowd, who had been trapped in an unfamiliar town for years, the majority of them living poor lives… On one hand Emma couldn't blame them. On the other…she was still Henry's adoptive mother, and killing wasn't going to solve anything.

Emma wasn't too great with a crowd, and it was three against several dozen. Odds didn't seem to be in their favor.

"Enough!" A voice cut through the mob's hysteria.

Everything became deathly silent. The only one who moved was Dr. Whale, snorting his derision.

"And what are you going to do, Rose? Stop me?"
"If it comes to that, Victor, yes."

Dr. Whale went from cocky to speechless in a matter of seconds. Regina smirked.

The mob parted and Emma saw Rosaline Gold, wearing almost the exact same outfit as the first time she had seen her walking around town with her nose stuck in a book. Her hair was down and there was a disturbing coolness to her demeanor. She strolled up the walkway purposefully, a panther stalking towards her prey.

It wasn't Rose; it wasn't even Belle. It was someone else, the same someone who had attacked August. People stared in fear and fascination at the woman ascending the front porch steps; the only ones who didn't shrink back were Mary Margaret and Regina.

"How…?" Dr. Whale murmured.

Belle snorted, "Please, I'm married to Rumplestiltskin. You think I don't know everything about this curse, including every single person's true identity?" She made a shooing gesture, "Run back to your laboratory and play with your science, doctor… Leave Regina to those of us who can handle her."

Dr. Whale, perhaps out of fear of her knowing his true identity, complied, slipping away while the rest of the mob watched in nervous anticipation.

Emma opened her mouth, but Mary Margaret rested a hand on her shoulder to stop her from speaking.

Regina chuckled, stepping closer to Belle, "How cute…mere hours into magic coming to Storybrooke and you already think you can reign as you once did. Allow me to be the one to warn you, Caretaker…magic is different here."

Belle smirked, "I know."

Without a single movement, Regina was flung backwards, slamming into the siding of her house. Regina stared in horror as she tried to move, but found herself pinned by an invisible force. Emma glanced down at Belle's left arm and noticed the mark there no longer looked like a horrific birth mark, but as though it had cut through obsidian rather than flesh.

"Fortunately I'm a quick learner," she tilted her head to one side, "But you're all talk."

She stepped closer to the former queen, trapped as a fly in a spider's web. Emma was equally disturbed and admiring of this harsher side of Rose.

"Belle…" Mary Margaret whimpered.

"Don't worry, Snow, I'm not going to kill her," she replied loftily, studying the silent Regina, "Henry wouldn't be too happy with me if I did that. But she should know if she steps one toe out of line…" Belle glanced down at her chest, "…you know I've never taken someone's heart before. I'd have no qualms about practicing on you."

Something akin to fear came into Regina's eyes. Confident that her point had been received, she allowed Regina to slip back down onto her feet. Belle then turned to Mary Margaret.

"If you have any trouble with her, Your Majesty, don't hesitate to bother Rumple. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if it involved getting Regina to behave."
Mary Margaret noticed the politics behind Belle's words; not only did she solidify their leadership in a town full of royalty, but she had implied an alliance between them, and an alliance with the Dark One (though tremulous) was quite valuable. Mary Margaret nodded, folding her arms.

"We should be able to handle her for now, thanks."

Belle returned the nod, then forced a smile as she glanced at Emma, "This must be a huge adjustment for you... You'll be fine," she tried to reassure her.

Emma wasn't about to take assurance from a woman who just force-slapped the mayor against a wall, though.

Belle gave a small bow to the trio, a quick glare to Regina, and then turned to walk away. The mob dispersed, shooting nervous glances at Belle. Mary Margaret hesitated, then shook her head.

"Charming, Emma, take Regina to the station," she ordered before stepping off the porch.

Emma glanced between the pair... her parents... David nodded his consent and Emma bolted after her mother.

"Where are you going?"

"To talk to her," Mary Margaret said bluntly, "Her Caretaker persona's a mask, and I want to know what she's hiding."

"Maybe she's just as pissed off at Regina as the rest of us," Emma said, "The woman has been trying to get her committed for insanity."

Mary Margaret shook her head, "This isn't Belle," she murmured, as if that was an honest rebuttal.

Emma was once again lost in translation. She could get that Rose was actually Belle from "Beauty and the Beast"; she could even get that Gold was both Rumplestiltskin and the Beast. But who was this Caretaker, and who would be afraid of Belle? Just because she was married to Rumplestiltskin? Or because she had a habit of threatening to take people's hearts? And since when could Belle do magic?! All Emma remembered was dancing dishes...

They caught up to Belle at Mater's gas station and convenience store, filling up her truck and glaring at the numbers as if they had done something to offend her. Her eyes were red, Emma noticed now, and while her hair had looked nearly majestic as she stormed up towards Regina it looked disheveled now.

"Belle?" Mary Margaret asked timidly.

Belle's eyes flicked down, staring at the ground, "I'm really not in the mood to talk right now, Snow," she murmured.

"That's alright, we can talk some other time," She was quick to assure her.

"Maybe..." Belle said, pulling the hose out as the numbers stopped rolling and setting it back into the pump, "...I'm going to miss you, my old friend."

Mary Margaret's eyebrows knit in confusion, "What?"

"She's leaving," Emma explained, staring at the baggage in the passenger's seat.

Mary Margaret's jaw dropped, "No..." Belle clenched her jaw, turning towards the driver's door. "I
mean, is it even safe for us to leave Storybrooke?"

"Why not? The curse is broken, isn't it?" Belle's chin trembled.

Mary Margaret's heart thudded, "…what about Rumplestiltskin?" She asked quietly.

Belle's nails dug into the door's handle, "He's not coming."

"Not coming?"

"No. He's staying right here in Storybrooke," Belle's lips curled back as her arm shook with tension, "He sent me away."

"What?!" Mary Margaret exclaimed, "Belle, no, he wouldn't-"

"He doesn't want me here with him!" She snapped, wiping at her eyes, "He told me to leave, so I'm going. As far as his money will take me."

"But you two were-"

"Cursed, and now we aren't," she jerked the door open, then glanced at Mary Margaret, "I'm sorry… True love doesn't always work out."

"You can't give up! Not now!" Mary Margaret pleaded.

Belle shook her head, "I can't change his mind… If he wants me back he has my number," she turned the keys in the ignition, "Goodbye Snow White, Emma."

She slammed the door shut, and the two women stood and watched the Caretaker pull out of the station and onto the main road that led out of town.

Mary Margaret's apartment was solemn, despite the fact that they were a reunited family of four. Ruby had dropped Henry off, who was surprised at the somber mood he had walked in to. That is, until he learned of Belle's departure.

"Just like in her story," he said sadly, "She left the Beast that time too…" He perked up, "…but the Beast came after her and saved her life. Maybe Mr. Gold just needs some time."

Emma wrapped an arm around Henry's shoulders, rubbing the opposite one, "I don't know kiddo. Might be different in Fairytale Land, but here men don't really chase after their women. Especially men like Mr. Gold."

"It doesn't make any sense," Mary Margaret said, as she had been insisting since they had left Mater's, "They've been through so much…what could be different about this time?"

"We're not getting the whole story," Emma stated, "She couldn't even look you in the eye… And after that stunt with the dragon's egg, I don't think anything Gold does is without a purpose. He's planning something, and that means Rose has to go."

"They haven't spent more than a few days apart since he broke her out of Regina's tower," Mary Margaret pointed out, "They don't willingly split up."

"Except for those last four months."

The trio turned towards David, who had been sitting on the edge of Mary Margaret's bed, chin resting in his hand as he stared at the floorboards.
"She's only acted cold to either of us once, and that was when we went to trade for Thomas. Rumplestiltskin himself admitted that Belle and he have one priority higher than their own love... The one thing that had separated them since that first time she left..."

"Ella's baby," Mary Margaret's eyes widened, "You mean Belle might be... That there's something there that wasn't there before?"

David nodded, "I'm almost positive that there's something there that wasn't there before."

"I guess if you want it, it makes sense," Emma murmured, "From what I've seen, they really wanted what wasn't there before."

"What's there?" Henry asked, feeling out of the loop.

The adults exchanged glances and Mary Margaret sighed, "Nothing... It's not polite to spread gossip."

"Just tell me!" Henry begged, "I can keep quiet..."

"Don't you have homework that's due tomorrow?" Emma asked, deciding that she should actually try to be a parent now that being raised by the Evil Queen wasn't an option.

Henry frowned, "I just got over a sleeping curse," he glanced over at Mary Margaret, "Please can I have a pass, grandma?"

Mary Margaret wrinkled her nose at the unfamiliar endearment, "Henry, if I excuse you from your homework, I'd have to excuse every student from their homework since they were all cursed..." She sipped at her tea, "No wonder they all seem bored; they've been learning the same material for 28 years."

Belle's knuckles were white on the steering wheel as she fought back tears. She was a mile away from the Storybrooke line and she was positive the pain in her chest would kill her before she actually left. She hoped what she said to Mary Margaret would match whatever Rumple's story for her sudden departure would be. Saying she was on a quest was practically begging for interference. Technically, it was the truth. The bare bones, but still the actual story.

She glanced down at the binder. There was a careful itinerary detailing each stop, Jefferson's map, other maps, a list of facts she had compiled about Bae, and finally Milah's sketch of the fourteen-year-old version of him. Before it had seemed like plenty, but now she wondered if it would be enough. The golden scarab was lightly stirring in the orb, shuffling through the ash. It didn't take too much magic to operate, but since she'd practically be the only source of magic outside of Storybrooke, it might be draining after a few hours of willing the makeshift compass to work.

Half a mile to the city limit. Tears were coming but she blinked them back, needing to concentrate on the road. It wasn't forever; they were only parted until she found Baelfire. Once she found him, then she'd have Rumplestiltskin again, and their little one. They could be a family, so long as she found Baelfire.

Quarter of a mile. She rocked restlessly back and forth, staring ahead.

"I have to find him," she murmured, "I have to find him."

The "leaving Storybrooke" sign was now in view. She grit her teeth together as her arms shook.
"I have to find Baelfire, I have to find Baelfire, I have to find Baelfire," she chanted under her breath, "I have to, I have to find Bae, I have to find my husband's son Baelfire, I have to find Bae-"

Belle crossed over the town line.

A wave of magic came over her, confusing her. What was this? And what was so important about finding Mr. Gold's son from his first marriage? Baelfire…who would name their kid Baelfire? Certainly not Rose.

**We Are Both**

Mr. Gold cried for a while, of course. He had turned Belle out yet again, this time much harder than the first. But he trusted her, and knew it wasn't forever, so eventually he got back up out of her reading chair and pulled on his big-boy pants.

He glanced down to see the cat staring at him, tilting its head as if wondering why on earth so much water was coming from his eyes. Stupid cat… She should have taken it with her. He sighed, then nodded towards the stairs.

As if understanding, Figaro trailed after him, following him up to the second story. Mr. Gold made a brief detour to their bedroom, and dug out a key that had been tossed into the small metal trash can that he never seemed to need to empty. He then went down the hallway and bracing himself for the worst, unlocked the door.

It swung open to the nursery, a room abandoned since his rage at Miss Boyd. It had been too painful to look at, and so he had locked it.

"What a mess," he muttered, glancing down, "You gonna help me out, boy?"

Figaro blinked, then turned around and trotted off. Mr. Gold growled under his breath. Cats were good for absolutely nothing… He set about cleaning up his mess, something to keep him occupied while he waited for 9:15 to roll around.

Mr. Gold tried to make the most of his sudden bachelorhood. He slept until ten o'clock the next day. He drank directly out of the milk carton for no goddamn reason. He paraded around in his birthday suit until it got too cold and he had to put clothes on. One large supreme pizza served as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He watched every gory horror movie he could think of that he had been meaning to see. He got to sleep with all of the covers instead of whatever he was allowed.

By the second day of his bachelorhood, he was tired of it. He missed his Belle, and no matter the fact that his house was now a "man cave", it still depressed him to know he was alone.

Work was no longer about selling things; it was about dealing with people's problems. From the petty to the disturbing, Mr. Gold listened to their complaints like a king with his peasants, mostly just yelling at them for wasting his time. There was some commotion outside today, but Mr. Gold didn't have enough shits to give one about it.

Besides, he was facing the fact that he would have to eat lunch. In the back room. Alone. Maybe he could call her, pretend that she was there… But he was trying to give her her space. She had been plenty upset at the whole "sending me away even though you love me again" thing, and he figured it wise to let her make the first move.

Not that he was anxious. Of course not. He was the Dark One; he didn't wait around by the phone like a school girl.
He had a cell phone for gods’ sake. He was not forced to be stationary.

He heard footsteps on the hardwood floor, not preceded by the opening of the door. He turned around to see a young teenager dipping her hand through the glass of a display case, bringing up a small golden ball. She held it towards him.

"This is mine, you jerk," she muttered.

Mr. Gold smiled, "Finders keepers," he reminded her and she smirked.

If it wasn't for her human appearance, Mr. Gold wouldn't have thought of her as Kit. Katja had found and donned clothes that were similar to the apparel she had worn in their land, including his well-worn boots. The leather pants were new, as was the corset top that he was pretty sure he had seen on Regina.

Katja approached the front desk almost shyly, ghosting through the counter. She bent over as if in a bow but remained there, waiting.

"C'mon, Rump, I know you want to," she grumbled, "Hell, I'd beat myself to death if I could. I mean seriously, I was a total brat."

Mr. Gold smirked but, instead of the hard caning he had imagined during her time as a maid, he settled for a very solid smack to the back of her head.

"I don't care if you were cursed; you were a pain in the arse and I should have pushed you off the clock tower a few times just to shut you up," he stated.

She straightened, fighting the urge to rub at her head. He smiled softly.

"...I missed you, Katja," he murmured.

She smiled back, "Missed you too, Rumproast."

The tender moment ended as Katja jumped up onto the counter, swinging her legs up and sprawling out. He shot her a glare that she didn't seem to register.

"See you've been busy," he muttered, gesturing towards her top.

Katja grinned, "Yup. Gotta hit them while they're distracted and chaotic," she ran a hand up and down her thigh, "The savior has some great taste in pants... I never knew leather could be comfortable..."

"And yet you still haven't found new footwear to confiscate," Mr. Gold remarked.

Katja smirked, "They're my favorites; of course I'm not gonna trade them out. You found out what I took from you for that help with the Reggie hacking thing yet?"

"Of course," he shrugged, "I've just been a bit busy to rake a kid over the coals for thinking a key and her name on some documents means that she gets a two million dollar property," he leaned over her, "You're a minor, pussycat. You can't own property without at least an of-age co-signer."

"That's why I've got your signature on it."

"A poorly photoshopped signature that I can prove is not from the original documents," he winked at her, "Blue ink, dearie. Can't photocopy that."
Katja hissed, "Why can't you be dumb like everyone else?"

"That wouldn't be any fun for you now, would it?" He straightened, pretending to busy himself with something.

She bobbed one of her feet, "Where's Bluebelle?"

Mr. Gold froze, "...gone," he murmured.

"Obviously, but gone where?" She glanced at him, "Did she really leave Storybrooke?"

He frowned, "Since they haven't found her body in a ditch yet, I'm assuming so."

"You haven't talked to her?"

"She hasn't talked to me."

Katja closed her eyes, "You're a shitty husband."

"I know."

"How long is she gone for?"

"I don't know. A few months, I imagine."

"The hell is she doing?"

"Taking a vacation, drop it."

"Do you need help?"

Mr. Gold looked the former werecat over, "What do you mean?"

"You've had a woman looking after you for a long time; I'm not confident you can function on your own anymore."

His chest swelled at the indignity, "I functioned perfectly well without her before."

"You reek of pizza, cat, and sorrow," Katja said bluntly, bobbing her foot faster, "I'm not suggesting I play house with you; I just think there's going to be a ton of people wanting deals and my usual revenue of ogre-killing isn't going to work in this world."

Mr. Gold smirked, "You want to be my business partner," he surmised.

"Rump & Boots... It has a ring to it," she claimed.

He shook his head, "Since when do you tie yourself down to any one alliance?"

"Look, if we ignore my biological and werecat ages, I've lived plenty of decades due to various magical loopholes, almost three with this curse alone. It's about dang time I settle down."

"Now tell me the truth," he insisted.

Katja opened her eyes, "Besides the fact you've got less walls around you than I've ever witnessed before so you might actually show your care for me? I miss my tail."

He chuckled, "You think I can just grow you a new one?"
"I've seen you turn people into snails. A tail shouldn't be beyond you," she propped herself up on her elbows, "I can work it off, watch the shop while you do gods know what."

"You think I'd trust you in the shop alone? A professional thief?"

Katja huffed, "If you liked this stuff so much you wouldn't be selling it," she insisted, "I can make up a resume if you want it to be official. I graduated from the Academy of Life As A Vagabond, worked as a mercenary, thief, and occasional guard kitty. My hobbies include pissing people off and being adorable, not an easy combo… Oh, and I'm not afraid of the leather dress code that seems to go along with BAMFs."

"You forgot your career objective," he pointed out blandly.

"Getting my tail back and sucking the marrow from Regina's bones."

Mr. Gold pursed his lips, "Tempting…but don't you think marrow-sucking Regina's bones is a bit extreme?"

"Look at this," Katja held up a hand, "She gave me a nail-biting habit. She has to die."

"Your vanity of your cat characteristics is quite astounding."

The door flew open and the pair glanced up.

"Huh… Did you call for a hero?" Katja asked.

"Indeed I did not," Mr. Gold assured her, "I think Mr. Nolan needs help."

"Geezus, princes coming to monsters for help. What has this world come to?"

"This world? I practically made him who he was in the old world."

David didn't pay too much attention to the banter between the pair. He studied the girl sprawled out on the counter as casually as Figaro, taking in her clothes.

"Puss in Boots?" He guessed.

Katja smirked, wiggling a foot, "What gave me away? Did I accidentally purr?" She jeered.

"Play nice, Katja," Mr. Gold warned, shifting his weight, "What can I do for you, Charming?"

David frowned, "Have you heard from Belle?"

Mr. Gold tensed, "What is it to you if I have or have not?"

"Answer the question."

"No, I have not heard from Belle. She left quite upset," he stated.

David was silent, watching the pawnbroker as he tried to gather his words.

"…I think you should call her," he finally said.

Mr. Gold arched an eyebrow, "If I wanted your marital advice, I'd ask for it."

"I mean it, Gold, call her," David took a deep breath, "…there was some trouble with the boundary line."
He suddenly had Mr. Gold's full attention, "…what kind of trouble?"

"Sneezy crossed over, as an experiment… And now he insists he's Tom Clark," he swallowed, "He's forgotten who he is from our land."

Mr. Gold grasped the counter to keep himself steady.

"I just thought you should know," David murmured.

"Thank you."

His purpose for the visit fulfilled, David left again.

Katja sat up, watching Mr. Gold carefully. He looked as though he were barely keeping it together.

"I'll see myself out," she murmured before vanishing.

Mr. Gold felt as though ice had formed in the pit of his stomach, heavy and sharp. He had to call her… She had to be alright. There was just no other option, she had to be alright, or else his entire being would have fallen apart. He made his way to the back room and sank down into his desk chair, before slowly pulling out his cell phone.

His fingers shook as he pressed each number, and he added the area code just to stall. He held the phone to his ear, each ring a siren as his heart raced.

"Hey, you've reached Rose. Leave a message after the beep."

He hung up and dialed again. This time, she answered on the fourth ring.

"Hello." Not a question. She knew who was calling her.

He leaned over, raking his fingers through his hair, "I need you to humor me."

"What?"

"Just…tell me my name." His voice was barely audible, "Please, my sweet Belle, just say my name."

There was a brief pause before her voice came back icily.

"Dialled the wrong number, asshole. This is your wife, Rose."

Belle was serious. She was angry with him.

She let out a breath in a hiss, and he could practically see her pacing wherever she was at, a hotel room maybe, "I know our marriage was just some contract to you… A convenience for both of us… But how could you do this to me?!" She was crying… Belle was crying… "You think it's been easy for me, that I haven't looked at other men and wondered what it would be like?! To be loved and to make love?! But I have been faithful to you through everything! And then you went and cheated on me!"

The accusation ripped through Mr. Gold like a bullet. He was shaking, doubled over in his chair and not believing the words coming from Belle's mouth.

"How could you do this to me?!" She shrieked, fighting off hysteria, "How could you care so little about me as a person that you'd sleep with another woman?!"
"Belle…"

"Yes, that whore Belle! I found the letter you gave to her in my suitcase…why the hell was it in there?! Were you really that careless, or is this just your cowardly way of telling me?!!" There was some rustling before she cleared her throat, reciting in a mocking tone, ""My darling Belle, I am excited for the life that we are about to build with each other, the life you always dreamed of living with me. I will finally be able to devote myself completely to you once Bae and I are reunited. I know you're scared, and you want me with you, but I can't be with you right now until this thing is settled. Then, I will leave everything for you and Bae. I love you with everything inside of me. It will be alright, I promise. I love you, Rum." Why the hell does she call you Rum?!

Mr. Gold pressed his lips tightly together so she wouldn't hear him crying.

"I mean I'm out here looking for your estranged son, from your first wife no less, and you're back in Storybrooke counting down the minutes until you can leave me for your little slut! I must be less than dirt to you, for you to disrespect me so completely. And who names their kid Baelfire?!!"

He stirred a little, "…you remember Bae?"

"I caught you cheating on me and all you can think of is your stupidly-named son?!!" She choked, "Am I just another tool to you, a little pawn that you can just move around because you saved me from living out of my car? Guess what, I have feelings… I might've even loved you!" She paused a moment, trying to control her sobs, "…by the way, asshole, I'm pregnant. With your kid. Because you're the only one I've ever slept with."

The line went dead. The phone fell from his hands. And though his mind could not fathom a single word she had said, his heart did.

His Belle was gone, replaced by a shadow that could never compare to the real her. A shadow that hated him.

He fell to the ground and wept harder than he had in his entire life, howling and clawing at the floorboards. He was too weak to smash things, but the pain still drove such an urge. He cried until his body ached and he was swallowing down bile, pure determination keeping him from vomiting.

He had gambled. He had been greedy and wanted everything. Now he had nothing.

**Day One Post-Tragedy**

Mr. Gold had no idea how he got home, but he was there, clinging to Belle's pillow for dear life and crying until he ran out of tears. Then he just jerked in spasms of dry sobs. He did not sleep, or eat, or anything except lay on the bed they had shared, cradling a chipped cup like it was their newborn infant.

**Day Two Post-Tragedy**

Mr. Gold managed to make it out of bed, exhausted from yesterday's weeping marathon. Unable to fight her words out of his head, he turned for help. He drank more booze than he thought was possible, and though it dulled the pain, it did not erase her memory. He held the chipped cup so tight there were cuts all over his hands from where the porcelain had dug in.

**Day Three Post-Tragedy**

Mr. Gold threw up more than he thought anyone was capable of. He drank some water, his body demanding he lay in their bed to recuperate from the abuse. Through his headache, he managed to
form coherent thoughts. He was calmer than he had been, mostly because of how he ached. He accepted the fact that Belle had lost her memory, thought he was cheating on her with herself, and somehow remembered Baelfire. The notes, perhaps?

**Day Four Post-Tragedy**

Mr. Gold showered, but didn't shave. He dressed, and nibbled on some crackers as more of a necessity than out of actual hunger. He washed his blood off of the chipped cup, and tracked down Baelfire's old ball and the sonogram picture. He went to the stand in the hallway and arranged the items in a little alter, a reminder for every time he passed through exactly what he wanted.

He put it off for a good hour and a half, but finally got the nerve to dial and hang up several times. On the fourth try, however, he finally managed to dial the entire phone number and not hang up.

"Yes?" Rose answered testily.

"Give me five minutes. Five minutes of you listening and me speaking. No interruptions, no hanging up, just hearing me out. Deal?" He asked.

Rose wavered for a moment, "…deal."

Mr. Gold took a deep breath, and began.

"This is not for you, Rose; this is for Belle. I fully realize how crazy I sound, but these words must be spoken, and I know that deep deep down the Belle I love is still there."

True to her word, Rose didn't say a thing, though probably thought Mr. Gold had lost it.

"There was a time that I would've let you go without so much as an attempt to come after you, because I have never believed that I am worthy of you, or that you could love someone like me. But as selfish as it is, I can't let you go now, I just can't. It's not because you're cursed and have no idea who you are, or that you're carrying my child, or even because you're looking for Bae without having any idea what you're doing. I simply cannot give you up." His jaw clenched, "I will not give up on you, because I know that you would not rest until you found a way if I were in your place. I am a coward, and I do not know what I am doing, but I know that I have to do something, because you deserve a man who would go through the fires of hell for you. I want you. I want Baelfire. I want our little one. I want this, all of it, more than I've ever wanted anything in my entire miserable life. So for the first time, I will fight. I will fight because you are worth fighting for, and deserve someone who would fight for you. I will not be a coward, not now, not with everything on the line... But I need something from you. I need your patience, as I always have. Because I have no fucking clue how to win you back, or how I got you in the first place. All I know is the woman I love, the woman I've been learning since the moment she walked out of her father's door with me. So please...please let me fight for you."

His speech was met with silence. He wasn't sure if she was waiting for more, or if she had just blown it off.

"...why did you cheat on me, Gold, if you truly love me?" She finally asked.

He frowned, "Honestly, I have no idea. We will have to explore that later, when you're more susceptible to the truth."

"The truth?"

"We're going to have to take this slow... It's not something I can say all at once without you
freaking out."

"Why not? What is going on?"

Mr. Gold took a deep breath, "For now… What you need to know is that letter was for you. You are the Belle I was writing to." True to his nature, he hung up before he could hear her reply.

**Day Five Post-Tragedy:**

Did she expect for him to call her up for an interview? Nope, but she was expecting *some* contact… Then again his wife did just lose her memory… She really hoped he wasn't dead, because dying of self-neglect was definitely something he'd do.

Hands in her pockets, Katja swung by the pawnshop as she had every day she went to and came back from school (yes, school, she still had to suffer that injustice). Today there was a letter taped to the front door. Because curiosity and cats went together so well, Katja checked it out.

*Pussycat,*

*You start on Monday. You better not wear anything similar to what I last saw you in, or else you're going to be spending more time in a magically enhanced strait-jacket.*

*Love,*

*Rumplestiltskin*

Katja smiled, and began trying to figure out what would be the best outfit to show up in work would be, tip-toeing on that fine line between getting a reaction and not behaving like his tramp.

Granny's was relatively busy for the time of day, as it had become the unofficial meeting place for most townsfolk. David and Mary Margaret enjoyed a breakfast alone, needing some time for just the two of them to nurture their marriage. Mother Superior and Sister Astrid discussed her options over some coffee, which were primarily leaving the convent for Leroy or staying and keeping her vows of chastity. Jefferson stared adoringly at his Grace, who was trying to catch him up on her life before she had to catch the bus. Regina had found a corner booth, back to Mary Margaret, nursing a pitch black cup of coffee and mulling over ways to get Henry back. It was a relatively peaceful scene until the tell-tale thuds of a cane broke through the noise.

After five days, Rumplestiltskin had emerged from his den. Plenty of time for the rumor mill to make its rounds. Everyone knew what had happened. He knew that everyone knew what happened. And yet the pink elephant remained as he crossed the quiet restaurant to the counter. The only waitress who wasn't afraid of him came forward.

"The usual, to go," he murmured.

Ruby glanced down at his hand, "What's that?"

Mr. Gold glanced down at the package in his hand. He could be bitter, say that it was just a parcel and it was none of her business… But he needed to conserve his energy for more important things.

"She forgot one of her books," he said.

"Oh…" Ruby fled to make his order.

The restaurant went dead silent as someone approached Mr. Gold. He didn't need to glance over to
see who it was.

"She finally got away from you then, Beast?" Moe French murmured.

Mr. Gold smirked, "It wasn't especially difficult, since I was the one who told her to go."

"And now she's lost to all of us," he said flatly.

Mr. Gold shook his head, "Not lost. She just thinks she's someone else."

"She's facing the world alone, without anyone to help her."

"I'm sure she's touched at how much you think of her abilities," he growled.

Granny kept an eye on the drama, ready to break it up at any moment. It didn't matter how big Moe was, she could take him.

Ruby set down a cup of tea to go and Mr. Gold paid for it.

"You're a monster, Rumplestiltskin."

"Indeed I am," he agreed, turning around.

"You're going to let her go, just like that?!"

Ruby tensed as Moe's voice raised, and several of the patrons shifted nervously. Mr. Gold hardly even bat an eyelash.

"Do you know what the difference between a hero's determination and a villain's is, Mr. French?" He queried. The florist didn't respond. "A hero still gives up. A hero still has the option to give up. A hero's determination can make them unbelievably stupid. But a villain?" He shook his head, "They never give up. Their determination makes them clever, trying every possible way to get what they desire," he gestured around broadly, "You've seen it with your own eyes, a woman damning an entire kingdom to misery just to take away the happiness of her foe."

Regina stared down at her coffee. Mary Margaret shifted uncomfortably.

Mr. Gold's eyes narrowed, "Do you know why bad guys die in kid's movies? Because that is the only way to stop a true villain. Over. Their. Dead. Body. Now unfortunately your daughter married an immortal villain, a villain who hasn't given up on his goal in 328 long years." His lips curled back, baring teeth at Moe, "Nothing will keep me from my family; Belle, my children and I will have our happy ending, together, even if I have to destroy everything in my path to make it happen," he picked up his tea, "We will be happy...if it's the last thing I do."

With that vow, Mr. Gold shouldered past Moe French, ignoring the shocked patrons of the diner, and leaving the restaurant. He had to get to the post office to drop off her well-worn copy of "The Princess Bride", hoping she hadn't given him a fake address.

They had fought pirates, faced his sinister past, slaughtered unicorns, suffered the loss of a baby, survived the death of someone they might have saved, endured prison cells, proved the innocence of a framed princess, insecurities of a son that may or may not want them, been rescued from torture and doubt, faced legions of non-believers of the feelings they had for each other, fought werewolves, cast a dark curse, endured twenty-eight years of civility, and overcame sterility and the boundaries of a small town to finally move towards their ultimate goal.
What was a bout of amnesia in the face of true love?

The End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!