Be All My Sins Remember'd

by Shepherd23

Summary

Following Zelena’s defeat, the people of Storybrooke settle into life back in the Land Without Magic. Though trouble is always just around the corner (especially with King Richard testing the leadership of the town), it’s nothing that Emma and Regina can’t handle. At long last, it looks as if the storm is over. But villains can appear in the strangest of places, especially after a betrayal comes to light that will shatter the line between good and evil. Edited Universe, Alternate Season 4, continues on from There But for the Grace of God.

Notes

Hi, guys! So this is the sequel to ‘There But for the Grace of God’ – if you haven’t read that one first, you might want to! I mean, I’d really like it if you did but this first chapter should give you the gist if you don’t wanna :) But if you wanna read that first then you probably should, otherwise massive spoilers (obviously :P)! That was Season 3b, we’re now onto Season 4. In the meantime, you can follow me at shepherdinthevalleyofdeath.tumblr.com for sneak peeks or to ask any questions! Cheers!
The Love of Friend and Family

About 800 years ago

Thousands of miles north of the land known as Misthaven, the western sea breezes drove choppy waves into a tiny cave. With each pound of the waves, salty spray soaked the hexagonal columns that formed the body of Eileanan Carragh. Gulls squawked from their nests high amongst the rocks, and silvery fish swam in the protected pools, sparkling with blue from the light that radiated off Rheul Ghorm’s wings. She strutted along the untouched shore far from the clutches of humans, climbing higher into the cave as the echoes of the sea faded away, the brilliant blue light illuminating molluscs and snails that waited for the high tide that would soon fill the cavern. The tiny creatures shrank from her presence, and Rheul smirked as Fionn’s last guardians let her pass into the main cavern unhindered. With his passing, humanity’s resolve would fail, and Danu’s true offspring would reclaim their rightful place as the rulers of Misthaven.

Ninety years, she had been waiting for this. Ninety years of fighting Damhsa’s tyranny and attempting to live peacefully alongside hard-headed humans, who didn’t understand what was best for them all. It was almost over. Just a few more hours.

Fionn’s frail body appeared amidst the gloom, reclined against the rock wall in what must have surely been a painful position. All that remained of his snowy white hair were a few whisps delicately attached to his scalp, his eyes were shut, and as she watched, he drew in a single, long, raspy breath. Dark spots covered wrinkled, pasty skin, and he held in his bony palm the rose gold ring that had belonged to his long-dead wife. Rheul cringed. Such was the failing of humans. If hubris didn’t kill them first, all of them would inevitably fall into the weakness that had overtaken this pathetic shell of a once-great man.

“Hello, shister.”

Rheul stepped out of the shadows to meet Fionn’s half-blind gaze. He grinned, showing bare gums and a few sparse teeth.

“Come to visit your baby brother before the ferryman comes for him?”

“I wanted to thank you,” she said, pushing aside the urge to retort that he was not her brother – not in any way that counted. “The Fianna are scattered. It seems Merlin was not powerful enough to lead them by himself.”

“Aye, I heard,” Fionn rasped, his good eye tearing up at the mention of his oldest friend.

“Humanity is without a leader. Ruadh is dead. Damhsa and Caoimhe are in exile. All that remains is you. And not for much longer, it seems.”

Fionn bent over, hacking and coughing. Rheul stood straighter, relishing in the triumph that Misthaven was hers at long last. The fool at her feet may have stood in the way for sixty years, but he could do nothing from the grave. *Humans*, Rheul scoffed. What had Mother believed when she picked him?

He continued to cough and Rheul grimaced again. Surely it would hardly be breaking her oath to put this sad being out of his misery –

And then she realised that he was laughing.
“You’re wrong, shister,” he rasped, his collarbones stark against paper-thin skin. “You will never rule over Mishthaven.”

“Oh? And how do you plan to stop me?”

“Not me. My grandshon.”


“He ish more powerful than you know.”

“Not as powerful as you,” she retorted even as Fionn shook his head sadly. There was no way. His mind was surely failing him. She could squash the boy with a mere thought –

Unless Fionn had done something.

She frowned at him. He grinned back. Surely not –

But she hadn’t detected an ounce of magic in the cave. She had put it down to his advancing age, but magic could sustain even a human far past their normal lifespan. No. There was nothing here, not even the tiniest spark of power coming from the old man. She scanned the cave properly.

Nothing.

No.

She thrust her hand into the old man’s chest, secured her fingers around his weary heart and tore it from his body.

It was red. Apart from a tiny white gem that sparkled in the core, it was red. Powerless, pathetic, ordinary red.

“Thish wash Mother’sh plan, shister,” he said, his remaining brown eye gleaming. “The Guardian will live on without me. For ash long as my family livesh, no fairy will ever claim the throne.”

“You don’t know what you’ve done!” Rheul cried, the red crystal bouncing on her palm as her hands shook. Fionn smiled toothlessly.

“On the contrary. I know exactly what I’ve done.”

Storybrooke, 4 February 2014

“Come on, it wasn’t that bad!”

Neal shrugged and continued walking arm-in-arm with his fiancé (a title he would never tire of assigning to Emma Swan) along the darkened Main Street. Three days after getting engaged, they’d finally had a night together that didn’t get interrupted by crying babies, flying monkeys or grumpy pre-teens. A nice dinner at some Greek-sounding place was followed by a movie at what could passably be called a cinema, if one ignored the fact that it was actually Storybrooke High’s multipurpose hall outfitted with a projector and popcorn vendor. “It was okay.”

“Okay? You’re calling GoldenEye just ‘okay’?”

“Well, I mean, it’s not exactly Raiders of the Lost Ark, is it?”
“It’s a classic!”

“Okay, on a scale of _Phantom Menace_ to _Empire Strikes Back,_” said Neal while Emma rolled her eyes, “I would say it’s at least _Return of the Jedi._”

“Oh, my God, you are such a nerd,” said Emma with another eye-roll. Neal nudged her with his elbow.

“You know you love me.”

“Hmm. Most days.”

While she pretended not to laugh, Neal feigned a shot to the heart. “Ow!”

The loft was dark when they got back, and blissfully quiet. Neal breathed a silent word of thanks while Emma retrieved her key and carefully unlocked the door. After three days with a newborn, Neal was almost – _almost_ – ready to run for the hills. He knew that Emma loved her baby brother but man, Jesse could scream when he needed to.

It also made him secretly grateful to have dodged all of that with Henry. Though a part of Neal was still sore that he’d missed the first ten years of his son’s life, he really did prefer pizza and video games to diapers and late-night vomiting. How Regina had survived on her own, he would never know.

Neal lit the flashlight on his phone and looked around the loft. A lump on the bed – Snow with a pillow over her head – stirred for a moment, then rolled over and began to snore softly. Then Emma gave him a nudge with her elbow and pointed to the couch. Henry had crashed, his headphones uncomfortably askew on his cheek and a scene from _Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets_ dimly illuminating what looked like a potato in pyjamas nestled in the crook of his arm.

Neal laughed softly. Babies could sleep in the strangest of positions.

“How is it that he’s so much better at this than we are?” Emma whispered.

Neal shrugged. The one time he’d tried to get Jesse to sleep, it had ended around four o’clock in the morning with Snow seizing the baby from him and kicking everybody out of the apartment until midday. Truthfully, it was a miracle that neither he nor Emma had dropped him yet.

While Emma carefully lifted the baby, Neal shut the laptop and untangled Henry’s headphones. They both froze when Jesse grumbled, but a few wriggles later and he went back to sleep.

The trick, of course, was making sure that he _stayed_ asleep, which Neal had learnt the hard way took a bit more than some shushing and a lullaby. They were probably in for another long night.

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Across town, Rumplestiltskin couldn’t sleep. It had been four days since he regained his freedom, four days since he’d broken free of Zelena’s hold on his dagger, and yet he still didn’t feel as though he had shaken off her touch. He could feel his skin crawl just at the thought of her continued presence in Storybrooke – and his curse _burned_ to go after her.

“But you won’t, will you?” said the voice of Zoso. “Nah. Bloody coward.”
“Stupid fool,” agreed Fafnir, the growling dragon who was several centuries Zoso’s senior. “He never should have made that deal with her sister. Should’ve roasted the both of them and had done with it.”

Other voices joined the chorus. Rumplestiltskin groaned and bumped his head gently on the basement wall. For the most part, he’d learnt to ignore the voices of the previous Dark Ones – he’d had hundreds of years to perfect the skill – to the point that they had been almost silent. Until his resurrection, that was. In the quiet of night, they had a habit of creeping out of the shadows. Lilith, in particular, seemed to get a thrill out of waking him just as he was falling asleep. Twice he had disturbed Belle with his fits. Tonight he’d crept out of bed before that could happen, shut himself in the basement and opened the first book he came across.

His spinning wheel sat in the centre of the room, its old, polished wood glinting in the moonlight. A fine layer of dust had gathered from disuse. Rumplestiltskin’s fingers twitched. It was how he used to chase the nightmares away, he thought as he put the book down and gently laid a hand on the wood –

“That’ll do,” the Witch crooned, pressing the blade to his chin. Under her command, his hands froze. She leant in close - too close - and he couldn’t move. Couldn’t run. Stuck in a cage. “We have work to do, doll.”

“Rumple?”

The sound of Belle’s voice jerked him out of the unwelcome memories. He backpedalled away from the wheel, shut his eyes and started to count, the way he’d done as a boy to stop himself from crying. Like he wanted to now. Belle called his name again, and he realised that she was looking for him.

“I’m downstairs,” he called, grateful that his voice stayed level.

“Hiding behind the wench again, are we?” Zoso sneered. Rumplestiltskin ignored him.

Belle padded barefoot into the basement, looking adorably groggy. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he murmured, forcing a tired grin. Perceptive blue eyes studied him, and he feebly gestured to the open book on his workbench. “Sorry. Couldn’t sleep. Did I wake you?”

“No,” said Belle, hugging herself tightly. It was then that he noticed how pale she was. “I had, uh …”

“Bad dreams again?” he asked. She nodded. It had happened a few times – usually earlier in the night, before Fafnir or one of the other Dark Ones got to playful – when he’d rolled over to find her crying into a pillow. It was always the same dream, too.

“It’s over, Belle,” said Rumplestiltskin. He stretched out his arms and walked to her, letting her hold him tight. “She can’t hurt either of us anymore.”

Oh, he could’ve killed the witch for what she’d done to Belle. Heavens knew Zelena deserved it. Not only had she used him, but she had kept Belle imprisoned in the library tower for months on end and then murdered her father. Belle, the most wonderful, harmless, good woman that he had ever known. The last person on Earth who deserved such abuse.

But Regina’s newfound heroics seemed to think that Zelena was worthy of life, as if the witch hadn’t tried to kill her son – his grandson – and erase everything Regina held dear. Rumplestiltskin shut his eyes and breathed in the smell of Belle’s hair, just to remember why he had even made that
deal in the first place. For her, and for Bae, because he’d promised he’d try to be a better man for them.

Even so, he had to keep reminding himself that Zelena would be gone by the end of the week. Banished from Storybrooke, never to return. She would never be able to hurt him or his family again, and she would have to live out the rest of her life knowing that Regina had won. That small piece of vindictiveness was, when his curse railed for her blood, the only thing that stopped Rumplestiltskin from marching into the sheriff’s station and destroying her, deal or no deal.

“I’m sorry,” Belle murmured against his shirt, having pressed her face into his chest as they held each other. He could feel her sniffling, too.

“It’s not your fault,” he insisted, pulling back so that he could look her in the face. As she wiped her eyes, it suddenly occurred to him how quiet it was. The voices had stopped at her touch.

True Love, he remembered. His curse couldn’t bear to touch something so pure – and Zoso had always been quieter when Belle was nearby. He smiled at the thought, and leant down to kiss her before she could ask him why. She soon had her hands tangled in his hair, his arms locked around the small of her back and gently walking them both in the direction of the door.

“Back to bed?” she murmured against his lips.

“Mmm-hmm.”

He would have been more eloquent, but that meant more time not kissing her. Every stolen moment with her was precious, and Rumplestiltskin would have pinched himself if it hadn’t meant letting go of Belle. They were alive. They were free. And they were together. Dark Ones and Wicked Witches be damned, he had never been happier.

At Granny’s in the morning, Regina had to swallow her laughter as Neal put his elbow into his scrambled eggs for the fifth time and Emma downed her third cup of coffee. She remembered those days all too well.

“Had a rough night’s sleep?” she asked, trying and failing to keep a straight face. Emma glared at her. If she hadn’t been so tired, Regina didn’t doubt that Emma would have punched her.

“Don’t start,” the sheriff grumbled, wiping the sleep out of her eyes. “How long does this carry on for, again?”

“Anything between two and five years.”

“Oh, wonderful.”

Regina chuckled and slid into the chair opposite, leaving room for Roland and Robin to slot in next to her with their breakfast while Henry, yawning widely, took the seat next to his other mom. Roland nudged her arm and pointed to his sausages.

“Gina, look!” the six-year-old said excitedly. “Miss Ruby made smiley faces out of ketchup!”

“Yes, she did,” said Regina, shooting a grin at his father. Roland was at an age where he found anything and everything absolutely fascinating. The night before, he’d spent a whole hour telling her all about Henry’s bumper book of animals and asked if he could meet a talking bird. That led to
a promise to visit Central Park Zoo sometime, and another hour explaining what a zoo was to him and Robin.

Neal then gave up on his scrambled eggs and put his head down on the table, much to Robin’s amusement. “If you think this is bad, wait until he hits two.”

“At least he’ll be able to tell me what’s wrong then,” Neal mumbled from between his elbows.

“You won’t be saying that for long after he starts talking,” Robin grinned and picked up a spoonful of baked beans.

“I didn’t think it was too bad,” said Henry.

“You had Harry Potter playing on your laptop,” said Emma, with her eyes shut and nose almost in her cup. “Which doesn’t sound like such a bad idea at this point.”

Emma’s pager beeped, and she jumped, eyes flying open. If there had been anything in the cup, Regina imagined it would have rained all over the booth.

“Gotta go,” she said as Henry moved to let her out. As she left, Ruby handed her a take-out cup.

“Jesse is okay, isn’t he, Mom?” Henry asked, looking slightly concerned. “I mean, he has been crying a lot and really late at night …?”

“He’s a baby. That’s what they do,” Regina told him. “At that age, they have their own routines and it takes them a while to figure out how things work in the world.”

“It’s the babies who don’t scream that you need to worry about, Henry,” said Robin. “Jesse’s alright. And Snow will be too, but I’d advise you not to get in her bad books until he starts sleeping through the night.”

“When will that be?” asked Neal.

Robin shrugged. “Whenever he feels like it.”

“Speaking of which,” said Regina, although that topic of conversation had nothing to do with her line of thought, “you’ve got school, young man. Come on, you’re going to be late.”

“Okay,” said Henry, scoffing down his last pancake.

“What’s school?” asked Roland.

“It’s a building where big kids go to learn stuff,” Regina explained as she slid out of the booth. “Like what you were doing last night with the animal book. They’ve got teachers who can help you learn how to count, and read, and all sorts of stuff that you’ll need when you grow up.”

“Really?” Roland turned to his father. “Papa, how big do I got to get to go to school?”

“Just a bit bigger. About that big,” said Robin, indicating with his hand a height slightly taller than Roland currently was. Regina chuckled as Roland carefully memorised exactly where Papa’s hand was. She then fixed up Henry’s collar and the two of them waved goodbye. Neal didn’t even raise his head, just flapped his wrist tiredly and then put his hand into his eggs.
It was great to be back in Storybrooke, and Henry found that he missed New York a lot less than he thought he would. Having spent so much of his life in a small town, he now realised how crowded the big cities were. Oh, the convenience had been great, but Henry liked the intimacy of knowing everybody in a small town.

“Do you think Robin could teach me to shoot a bow?” Henry asked his adopted mother on the way to the school bus. Regina chuckled shyly at the mention of her boyfriend and put her arm around Henry’s shoulders. Finding out that his mom was the True Love of Robin Hood was just about the coolest thing ever. He did hope – for his other mom’s sake – that Robin’s thieving days were behind him, but Regina was happy. Even if Henry hadn’t liked him, that would have been more than enough.

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“I already did,” Henry confessed. “Actually, what I meant is: would you mind if Robin taught me to shoot a bow?”

Regina chuckled again. “Why do you want to learn?”

“’Cos it’d be kinda cool. Plus, Dad’s still teaching me to swordfight. I know we’re not going back to the Enchanted Forest anytime soon, but I’d still like to learn.”

He knew that a lot of people, particularly those who’d arrived with the second curse, wanted to go home. Henry had asked if whether Regina could do what she’d done to stop Pan’s curse and take everybody back – Grandpa Gold surely would know a way that Henry could go with them rather than get left behind like last time. But Regina had explained that she’d reversed the first curse by destroying Rumplestiltskin’s original scroll – that couldn’t be repeated since Regina had done the second curse entirely out of her own head. That was probably why everyone’s memories had been wiped, why an extra four thousand people came over, and why the town hadn’t expanded to accommodate all of them. In fact, as Regina had told him, it was something of a miracle that the town had arrived as intact as it had.

“No, I wouldn’t mind,” said Regina as the bus came around the corner. “So, you like him, then?”

“Of course!” Henry grinned. Heck, he was ecstatic! She was going out with Robin Hood. “He makes you happy, Mom. Even if I didn’t like him, that’d be all that mattered.”

The bus pulled up. In the window, Henry could see his old friends – Grace, and Eric Blau, who was twelve but looked like he was eight – waving from the window.

“I’ll see you later, Mom.”

Grace and Eric shifted around so Henry could fit in, and he promptly began to tell them all about New York. It was good to be home.

Rumplestiltskin forced himself out of bed in the morning, leaving the warmth of Belle’s arms to be yelled at from inside his own head. In the past, he had never been fond of sleeping in – even before becoming the Dark One, he had been an early riser. Cleaning the house, feeding the sheep, cooking breakfast. Everything Milah hadn’t been around to do.

But since discovering that Belle’s touch kept the voices at bay, he’d found it harder to leave her in the morning. He turned the shower on high to drown out the voices. And the crushing guilt.
He hadn’t told Belle about the voices. Not yet, anyway. Every morning, Rumplestiltskin left the bed hoping that they would be gone. His predecessors could no longer gain control like they had after Zelena brought him out of the Vault, and so weren’t dangerous in any sense. At least not to anyone except himself, and he could handle them. He’d handled Zoso’s voice in his ear for over two hundred years. He could cope with a few extra.

*It’s just a side effect of coming back from the dead,* he told himself for the millionth time. *It will go away eventually.*

Now all he had to do was convince himself that was true.

“Hey. How are you feeling?” Belle asked, looking up from her novel when Rumplestiltskin came down the stairs. She had taken over one of the old chaise lounges, a habit the two of them had developed back in the Dark Castle—although Rumplestiltskin was never about to admit how little reading he had done in those cherished moments, frequently distracted by a rather pleasant view across the room. It did seem that Belle now had something on her mind that distracted her from the book. He pretended not to notice that she held the novel upside down as he leant to kiss her on the cheek.

“Better now,” he said, grinning happily when she blushed. Gods, he could lose himself in those eyes. “Eggs?”

“Hmm?”

“For breakfast? You want eggs?”

“Oh.” She blinked, beautifully flustered. “Okay. Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” he said, going into the kitchen to fetch the eggs and orange juice. When he turned around, she was tapping her fingers on the counter and biting her lip. That meant she was thinking about something, which could have been good or bad. “How—how well do you understand the connection between the curse and the dagger?”

He poured them both a glass of juice. “In what way?”

“If it could be broken, for instance,” she said, taking the glass without looking at it. Her nervous eyes were fixed on him.

It had been five days since either of them mentioned the dagger, now securely hidden in the old Victorian manor. Belle’s first suggestion had been to hide it at the shop. Though Rumple agreed that it was the more secure option—and gods knew that he didn’t want to be anywhere near that infernal blade right then—it was also the more obvious choice, and he wasn’t comfortable being so far away from something so dangerous. So it had ended up in the study he hardly ever used, locked in a box and sealed beneath a loose floorboard.

“What makes you think that it could be?”

Belle bit her lip again, fidgeted guiltily, and then retrieved a small, black moleskin journal from behind the fruit bowl.

“This was, uh, in with some things that got brought over with the last curse,” she explained, carefully opening the journal’s yellowed pages. “I found it last year, while trying to figure out why you’d gone—”

“Nuts?” he suggested, offering up a half-smile to see how she would react. Belle chuckled weakly.
“Yeah. Well, it belonged to somebody named Seannan MacCumhail. At least I think that’s how it’s pronounced,” she mused while tracing the fine black lettering. “I don’t know much about her beyond her name, but apparently she was a minor sorceress who did a lot of research on the Dark Ones Siegfried and Magnus Duinn.”

“Not minor,” said Rumplestiltskin. Belle looked confused, so he elaborated: “I know the name. The MacCumhail clan was a whole family of sorcerers. Very old, very powerful, and extremely influential in determining the course of human history. Their ancestry goes right back to the Fae Wars. Some sources say they were even connected to the White Fairy.”

“There was a White Fairy?” Belle asked. She hopped onto the stool and listened with rapt fascination while he put the toast on.

“Emphasis on was,” Rumplestiltskin continued. “As I understand it, there were five of them. Red, Black, Blue, Summer and White. The Red Fairy was killed in the war, the Black was exiled, and nobody has heard from the Summer or White Fairies in centuries. If I was a betting man, I’d say they died as well. Blue is the only one left.”

“She’s never mentioned them.”

“I don’t think she likes to spread it around that there were others, sweetheart. She rather fancies people believing that she’s always held the monopoly on supreme power in the Enchanted Forest.”

Belle gave him that look, the one that said his opinion was biased. Well, it was, but that didn’t mean he was wrong. “Do you know them? The MacCumhails?”

“No. They died out long before my time.”

He knew that because he had gone looking for them, believing that any enchanter with the power to stand up to the fae must surely know of a way to cross realms and find his son. Fifty years of fruitless searching had yielded nothing but a few books – like the one in Belle’s hand – some letters, and exactly no descendants. How an entire family line with hundreds of years of history just disappeared, Rumplestiltskin still couldn’t figure out. And most of the following generations of sorcerers had never heard of them – Rumplestiltskin knew for a fact that Regina wouldn’t recognise the name.

“Oh,” Belle said with a hint of disappointment. “That’s a shame.”

“Aye. According to the legend, they were humanity’s most powerful champions, after Merlin of course. I doubt we’d have ever become what we are if it hadn’t been for them. We’d certainly still be slaves to the fae.”

“Actually, I was thinking in terms of the curse.” Belle flipped over a few pages until she found one with a crude drawing of a knife. Rumplestiltskin’s stomach dropped. It was his knife. “According to this, it wasn’t part of the original curse, but added in later on. Around the same time that the Vault was created.”

“I know.”

“You know?” she asked incredulously. He shrugged.

“Sweetheart, I’ve had that book for over a century. You really think I never bothered to check what was in it?”

“Well, yes, but – Rumple, don’t you realise what this could mean? If it wasn’t part of the original
“It doesn’t mean that the connection could be broken,” he cut her off, more harshly than he’d intended. “I looked into the possibility too. Whoever bound the curse to the dagger knew what they were doing. It would kill me if I tried. And there’s no other sorcerer alive who has enough power to do it,” he added quickly when she appeared about to suggest something similar.

“Oh.”

Rumplestiltskin turned the stove to low heat, then sighed and faced her. “I’m sorry, Belle. But I don’t think it’s possible.”

“It’s okay,” she murmured, suddenly fascinated with the counter top. “I’d just hoped –”

“Me too.” He tried to smile when she looked up. “But, nobody’s going to get the dagger again. I kept it safe for two hundred years, and you only die once.”

She chuckled weakly at his lame joke. “I suppose so.”

“And we should probably put that somewhere safe,” he added, gesturing to the journal. “Just in case any sticky fingers get foolish ideas.”

“Agreed.”

She smiled, turning the kindling fire in his blackened heart to a roaring blaze, and informed him that she would be right back. Rumplestiltskin watched her walk away. Knowing that she worried so much that someone might wrest control of the dagger from him gave wings to his pitiful self-esteem. Though they hadn’t exactly said as much, it was more or less official that they were living together again. Somehow, after everything that had happened, Belle had not walked away – how, he would never know, but he dared not question it for fear of the dream flying away from him. And he had his son back, and his grandson – both of whom he would get to see that very afternoon.

In the two hundred years since he’d let go of Bae, he’d known exactly one time of true happiness, when Belle came to live at the Dark Castle as his maid. His little joke, of course, to demand the only child of a backwater lord as his payment – and entirely a coincidence that said lord was the great-grandson of the duke who had enslaved Rumplestiltskin’s predecessor. But the joke had turned on him, and then he’d lost his love – supposedly, to death – and then somehow, someway, some god in a land Rumplestiltskin knew not had seen fit to grant him a second chance. With Belle. With Baelfire. He had a family again, and now those memories of his innocent little maid – unafraid of the big, scary beast – truly were a brief flicker compared to the blazing inferno that was his present existence.

“Rumple!”

Belle’s cry cut through his reminiscence and he startled. She frowned in concern.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“You’re burning the eggs.”

He certainly was. Rumplestiltskin yelped and shut off the stove, wondering how on earth he hadn’t noticed the smell. Surely his mind hadn’t wandered that much?
“Sorry,” he said a few times while Belle fetched a couple of plates, her expression torn between amusement and concern. He waggled a finger at her; he was allowed one slip-up when, at last count, she had managed to burn significant portions of two of his kitchens. And the eggs weren’t too bad – certainly not the worst things Rumplestiltskin had ever eaten. “Went into a bit of a trance.”

“How? Thinking about what?”

“You, of course.”

That had been it – he’d gotten carried away thinking about her, and his son, and his family, and allowed his mind to wander a tad too far. That was all, he insistently told himself as Belle giggled and they took their places at the table for breakfast. Just a momentary lapse. Nothing to worry about.

Neither was the fact that he could hear laughing in the back recesses of his mind. Nothing to worry about at all.

Archie knocked on the door to the loft. Inside, he heard Snow call, ‘Just a minute!’ so he waited patiently until the sound of someone hurried cleaning stopped. He hoped he hadn’t caught her in the middle of something. Snow opened the door and smiled.

“Archie! What are you doing here?”

“Well, it’s Leroy’s shift at the hall and I have a free afternoon, so I thought I’d stop by. Is that alright?”

“Of course, come in! Sorry about the mess – Jesse just went down, so this is the first chance I’ve had to tidy up –”

The loft was certainly a lot messier than Archie had ever seen it. A basket of clean laundry had been dumped at the foot of Snow’s bed. Books, newspapers and washcloths had clearly been put down wherever they happened to be and had yet to be picked up, and there was a pile of dishes in the sink that were washing themselves. Archie did a double-take, but he hadn’t imagined it – the scrubbing brush was indeed cleaning a plate without any human assistance.

“That was Emma’s idea,” said Snow.

“Really?” Archie was impressed. “I didn’t realise that she had gotten that far with her magic lessons yet.”

“Well, she can get them clean and put them in the next sink. Getting them to put themselves away is still a bit off. She tried to do that last night and broke three mugs.”

“Ah.”

“Archie, not that I’m not happy to see you,” Snow started, pulling on her fingers nervously, “but what are you really doing here? Did Ruby ask you to check up on me?”

“No,” he said truthfully. “I came to see how you were because I’m your friend and I care about you. And I wanted to make sure you were okay.”
“I’m fine,” she answered automatically.

“You want to rethink that answer?” he asked, pulling out a chair at the table for her. Snow paused, and then sat down. Archie copied her. “Yes, I did talk to Ruby, but she’s not why I’m here. She told me that you’ve barely left the house in a week.”

“I’ve been busy,” she excused, gesturing at her sleeping son. “Turns out that a newborn is a lot of work.”

“Despite the fact that Granny has offered to babysit Jesse for you?”

“She’s been busy too.”

“Not so busy that you have to stop taking care of yourself,” Archie insisted. “I think you’ve been hiding, Snow. That’s not healthy.”

“It’s what I have to do. He needs me.”

“Snow…”

Then the jacket draped across the third chair caught Archie’s attention. Snow’s eyes went to it as well, a mixture of nervousness and guilt on her face.

“That’s his, right?”

She nodded. “I found it when I cleaned out the closet. This was in there, too.” She passed him the silver deputy sheriff’s star. Archie took it and turned it over in his hand. Unlike the sheriff’s badge – which was worn and scratched from its years of use – the deputy’s was still shiny and new and only had a few dents on the back. In thirty years, only two people had worn it – Emma, and David.

“How am I going to explain this to him, Archie?” Snow murmured, watery eyes focused on her son. Jesse slept on, innocently oblivious to the world. “One day, he’s gonna want to know about his father. What do I tell him?”

Archie put the badge down. “You tell him that David was a brave man who died to make the world a safer place for his children.”

“How do I tell him –” Snow gulped – “How do I tell him that I’m the one who killed his father?”

“You didn’t. Zelena did.”

“I held David’s heart in my hand and I crushed it to powder,” Snow continued as if she hadn’t heard him. “How am I supposed to tell my son that his father died because of me?”

“How.” He leant forward in his chair and fixed his gaze, forcing her to look at him. “David made his own choice. Your son is going to grow up safe and loved because of what you two did. Emma understands that. One day, Jesse will too.”

Snow sniffled and looked at the table. “What if he doesn’t?”

Archie took a breath. “Snow, I can’t promise that he will. I won’t lie, it’s a possibility. But I can promise that you won’t be alone. Emma, Neal, Ruby, Regina, the dwarves, me – we’ll all be here to make sure that Jesse knows what his father died for. He’ll know that David gave his life to make the world a better place, and will always be remembered as a hero.” He stretched out a hand to hold hers. She didn’t meet his eyes, but slipped her fingers between his. “I promise.”
“It’s to you, slick,” said the greasy man sitting across from Killian at the poker table. In the half-light of the little pub on the docks, most of his irredeemable features were hidden by shadow, so he vaguely resembled a human. The four drunken men on either side of him laughed uproariously at some joke that Killian must have missed and slapped each other on the back. Killian ignored them. He had to plan his next move carefully.

There wasn’t much piracy to be done in Storybrooke – none, actually – and Killian, upon the breaking of the Dark Curse, had suddenly found himself in a tight spot. Oh, he had been in them before and considered himself an expert on manoeuvring out. A little flick of the wrist, false praise and free beer regularly paid itself out quite handsomely and Killian saw no reason why Mr J. Worthington Foulfellow should be any different. The man was an idiot, and also halfway to unconscious on only three pints of shandy, so his brain was working even less than usual. Easy pickings.

“Raise you ten,” Killian said, pretending to sound pathetic after a moment’s contemplation. The goons laughed again, and he hid a grin. Foulfellow snorted.

“Ten, and I raise you twenty.”

Killian tapped his cards and snuck a glance at his chips. Fifteen was all he had left. He put his cards down and chucked in his remaining chips, along with the silver ring on his little finger. “That’s worth five at least, wouldn’t you say?” he asked, getting a shrug in return. “Call.”

“Ha!” Foulfellow laughed, showing his cards. “Full house. Ladies over tens.”

Killian grinned. “Four nines,” he declared and triumphantly placed the cards down in front of Foulfellow’s bloodshot eyes before sweeping up his winnings. A heavy hand pinned his arm to the table, the owner a tall brute with a handlebar moustache and a remarkable resemblance to something slimy Killian had once found stuck to the hull of the Jolly Roger.

“Oh, it is,” said Foulfellow, no longer swaying in his seat and clearly sober. “That’s why it’s necessary to check that all the players stick to the rules.”

The fish-faced man flipped Killian’s wrist over and forcibly rolled up his sleeve, revealing five cards. Killian shrugged. “It was worth a try.”

He managed to dodge the first blow by twisting and slamming his hook into Fish-Face’s arm, then jumping over the neighbouring table with most of the pot in his hand. Foulfellow snarled. So did the goons. The owner shouted for them to take it outside first. Killian was only too happy to oblige. He was a foot away from the door when the chair hit him in the back of the head and he hit the floor, face-down by the boots of a scarred man with a patch over one eye. Thankfully, Killian was already unconscious and so didn’t make the mistake of mentioning it.

The newspaper was as boring as ever. Despite a plethora of villains roaming its streets, nothing ever seemed to happen in Storybrooke, Zelena thought as she paced her cell for the hundredth time. Five days in this tiny cell and she was about ready to tear her own skin off just to have something
to do. Regina seemed to think she was doing her a favour – giving her time to reflect on her oh-so-nefarious deeds, as if her dear sister hadn’t committed plenty of her own and had never been incarcerated for them. All that hero nonsense about ‘turning her life around’ and ‘seeing the light’ – Zelena feared she might vomit if she was forced to listen to that speech once more.

Speaking of which …

Zelena sighed as she heard footsteps in the station behind her. She didn’t bother to turn around, far preferring the blank brick wall to the pitying face of the woman she had to call a sister. “Spare me the diatribe just this once, sister, and leave me to my misery.”

“I can if you like,” said a male voice, which Zelena had not expected. She turned on her heel. No, it wasn’t Regina playing a new trick – even without her magic, Zelena thought herself skilled enough to detect a glamour. It was indeed a man, one she didn’t recognise but who seemed to recognise her, with cropped brown hair wearing a black vest over a white dress shirt and his hands stuffed into the pockets of his tailored slacks. “But seeing as how I’m not Regina, would you do me the honour of granting me five minutes of your time?”

“Who are you?” Zelena demanded as she glanced past the man. The narcoleptic dwarf with the bad attitude was out cold, snoring away with his nose squished between his face and the desk. Had that been his doing? Possibly, Zelena concluded. She could smell the magic radiating from the man, leaking out of the creases of his shirt, raw power of a sort that Zelena could only dream of possessing. Whoever he was, he was powerful – which meant he probably wasn’t there with Regina’s blessing.

Instead of answering her, he stepped closer to the bars, blue eyes looking her up and down and all over. Zelena instinctively hugged herself. He didn’t seem threatening – more curious than dangerous, at least to her – but the intense attention made her uncomfortable. It reminded her too much of the way her father’s friends used to leer at her over an empty bottle of brandy, but less creepy.

“What – what are you doing?”

The man did a double-take, having realised he was staring. “Oh, I’m sorry. It’s just that you’re even more beautiful than I imagined,” he said, shoving his hands into his pockets. “You’re the spitting image of your mother. Except the eyes.”

“Really?” Zelena murmured before she could stop herself. She had always wondered if there was any resemblance to Cora under her skin – but how did this man know that she looked like her mother? She cleared her throat and asked confidently, “Do I know you?”

“In a way,” said the man. “My name is Jonathan. I’m your father.”

Blue teleported herself straight from her office into the Dark One’s backyard. It wouldn’t do to have someone see her, after all. Young Nova had been instructed not to let anyone enter her office for the next few hours and Rumplestiltskin had finally left his house for the first time in days. His house was protected against attack, of course, but all Blue intended to do was a spot of reconnaissance – a temporary blip in the wards would allow her to slip in and out without him ever knowing, and she would have the answer to the question of what he had done with the dagger.

She knew that he wouldn’t keep it with him, not for as long as the Witch remained in town – or,
indeed, now that its existence and its powers were common knowledge amongst the heroes of the town. There would be many a disgruntled nobleman who fancied having the Dark One in thrall, she was sure. Neither would he want it to be too far away from him, lest said disgruntled nobleman act on such a foolish impulse. For a moment, she wondered if he had given it to the librarian, but dismissed the thought almost as soon as it arrived. A Dark One so recently freed from bondage would be at the height of his paranoia and would not entrust something so valuable even to those closest to him. That left his house.

She entered through the kitchen, sending out feelers ahead of her for powerful magical traces. There were many, as expected, but one particular thread caught her attention. Upstairs, to a study that she couldn’t enter. She scried, using a nearby window to follow the remainder of the trail to an otherwise insignificant patch of carpet.

So he had buried it in the floorboards of his house, Blue thought with a grin. Heavily protected, of course – she had no doubt that she would be able to circumvent his wards, but not before he returned home. And he doubtless had alarms hidden in the threads, and traps intended to disable any potential thief before they got within an inch of the blade.

Better to leave it for now, but she did need the dagger. Fortunately, she knew exactly how to get the Dark One to bring it out of hiding.
The woods were wet and soaking, an obstacle course of muddy puddles leftover from the storm earlier in the week. In retrospect, Regina regretted not bringing along more sensible shoes. But with any luck, this would be over soon enough.

She clambered to the top of another ridge, following the trail illuminated by a strand of Zelena’s hair wound around her finger. A yard to her left was Robin, an arrow nocked in his longbow, which had been found in Rumple’s possession a few days ago. He padded along, not bothered in the slightest by the mud and a fox-like grin plastered on his face. He was having fun, which made an otherwise unpleasant adventure considerably more enjoyable.

Emma led the group, her gun drawn and ready to shoot at the slightest hint of trouble, while Alan and Leroy brought up the rear. The dwarf had twin pouches in his hands, a mix of fairy dust and some strands from Ruby Lucas’ cloak. A bit of genius on Belle’s part had figured out how to combine the two to produce a de-monkifying potion (the name courtesy of the wolf, and Regina secretly wished that she’d thought of it). The hard part was getting the monkeys in close enough to blow the stuff in their faces – that was where the longbows came in.

Regina then felt a tug on her finger, and halted on top of the ridge. “Wait up. I’ve got something.”

She turned in a circle, trying to triangulate the signal. It seemed to be coming from every direction. Emma held her pistol higher.

“What?” she called nervously, glancing over her shoulder.

“I don’t understand. It’s like it’s coming from everywhere –”

Oh, crap.

“Heads up!”

Regina pushed Emma out of the line of fire as feathered wings swooped them from four different directions. One of them screeched in pain, an arrow protruding from its hindquarters courtesy of Alan. It landed with a splash, and Leroy quickly doused it in dust. Regina tossed a spell at one of its companions. The grey monkey suddenly found itself unable to move at all; it fell three feet to the ground and then rolled to the bottom of the ridge. It would be fine there for the time being, so Regina turned her attention to the great white brute with the scarred face, who was taking a second run at Emma. She started the spell, only for the monkey to be thrown sideways into a tree, whereupon it was ensnared by a sudden growth of vine.

“Good work,” Regina told Emma as her ‘student’ (as it were) picked herself up off the ground. She had mud all down her side and looked thoroughly displeased about it.

“Thanks. I guess they got wise to the fact that we could track them.”

They looked around to survey their work. Leroy had seen to the grey monkey and its fourth friend, downed by Robin with a well-placed shot in its wing. Both were now writhing on the ground, beginning the painful process of returning to human form. Even as they watched, thick hair thinned and receded, limbs swelled and lengthened, and jaws retracted to a normal size and thickness.
Within minutes, all four were back to the men that they had been before.

“John!” Robin exclaimed happily, running down the ridge to hug his old friend gladly. “Oh, Lord, it is good to see you!”


“Long gone, old friend.”

Meanwhile, the dwarf with the purple beanie was having a much less pleasant return to humanity.

“There’s an arrow in my butt!”

Alan grimaced guiltily. “Oh, yeah. Sorry ‘bout that.”

The monkey Robin had downed was now a scruffy blonde man that Regina didn’t recognise, holding his bloodied arm. The arrow had gone straight through, but he was clearly in pain. Emma walked over to him.

“Hello. I’m Emma – do you mind if I take care of that for you?”

“Uh, sure,” said the man doubtfully. “Where the hell am I?”

“You’re in a place called Storybrooke,” said Regina. “Don’t worry, you’re perfectly safe. Do you remember anything?”

“Not really. Uh, I was mucking out the stables when some big purple cloud filled the sky,” he said, watching carefully as Emma wrapped a bandage around his arm. “Then, uh, I was somewhere I didn’t recognise. Anna and I went up to the hills – we thought maybe Grand Pabbie might’ve known what was going on –”

“Anna?”

“My fiancée. Ahh!”

“Sorry,” said Emma. She finished tying off the dressing and helped the man to his feet. “So your fiancée’s in Storybrooke?”

“I – I guess so. Is she okay? Can I see her?”

“Don’t worry. If she’s in town, we’ll find her. What’s your name?”

“Kristoff.”

“Alright, Kristoff. We’ll get to the hospital so they can take care of your arm, and then we’ll see if we can track Anna down.”

“Thank you.”

Robin trudged up the hill with John and Alan in tow. He grimaced at the sight of the bloodied bandage on Kristoff’s arm. “How many is that now?”

“Twelve,” said Regina. “Two more, and we’re all done.”

“Make that three,” said Alan. He hefted his bow and pointed it at something behind Regina, motioning for her to get out of the way. She did, then turned to see what had startled him.
The white monkey that Emma imprisoned in the tree was still trapped, and good thing too. He seemed to be fighting the effects of the dust, struggling against his bonds as something halfway between human and monkey. Robin stepped closer, bow drawn, and the monkey-man’s beady eyes fixed on him, with something deadlier than general murderous intent burning there. It snarled, scarred face twisted and monstrous, then broke free just enough to swipe one clawed hand at Robin. On instinct, Regina added her own power to Emma’s, and more vines whipped out of the ground, binding the monster firmly to the tree.

“Thanks, Gina. He must be the boss monkey that Dorothy warned us about.”

“Of course,” she agreed. That would explain why the dust was having minimal effect – according to Dorothy, this was Zelena’s henchman (henchmonkey?), the Great White Marshmallow, a former king of some obscure country near Oz who had thrown his lot in with the Witch. In exchange for his loyalty, Zelena had given him the ability to transform from simian to human and back again at will.

“Great,” said Emma. “So what do we do with him?”

As if on cue, the air shimmered next to a tree behind her, the unmistakeable taste of tarnished metal hit the back of Regina’s throat, and a blue-clad figure appeared amongst a cloud of sapphire smoke.

Great. What does the bug want now?

“Mother Superior,” Emma greeted formally, though it didn’t miss anybody that she was the only one to do so. The outlaws eyed her suspiciously, as did Regina, while Kristoff looked confused and Leroy growled aloud. “What brings you by?”

Blue smiled politely, and then started when the marshmallow monkey tried again to break free of its bonds. “I was informed that you had found a way to return Zelena’s minions to their former selves. I must admit, I am quite impressed.”

“Thank Belle,” said Robin. “She’s the one who came up with the idea.”

“Really?” Blue’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Impressive.”

Robin wasn’t quite done. “So bloody good thing she didn’t get killed by the Witch then? As could have easily happened, since she was alive the whole time and nobody bothered to help her.”

Regina gave her boyfriend a look. Much as she disliked the senior fairy, it was hardly a smart move to insult Blue to her face.

“Given the circumstances, it was a reasonable conclusion,” Blue defended, shooting Robin a motherly smile that, to Regina’s eyes, looked more like she was calling him an idiot without saying so. “Obviously, I am delighted to have been proven wrong on this occasion.”

“Obviously,” Robin drawled in response. This time Regina nudged him, and he shut up.

“Did you just come by to inspect our handiwork, or do you actually want something?” she asked, her tone equally as disrespectful but knowing that she was in a better position to do so. She hadn’t forgotten that Blue had refused to help them when Zelena was on the verge of taking over the town, or the fact that Tink had been disinvited from the convent for disobeying that order.

“Actually, yes,” said Blue. She bowed her head and spread her hands in a peace gesture. “It has come to my attention that my … inaction during recent events in this town may have been poor
judgement on my part. I wish to apologise. And to offer any assistance in rectifying the damage done.”

“She says this now that we’re almost finished,” Robin whispered unsubtly in Regina’s ear. She chuckled lightly in agreement, and Blue pretended not to notice either of them.

“Actually, we’re almost done rounding up the monkeys,” said Emma, with a sideways glance at Robin and Regina. Then she turned her head to look at the marshmallow monkey, who was still struggling to free himself. “But, uh, if you wanted to lock him up somewhere safe …”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Great.” Emma’s phone then vibrated in her pocket. “Sheriff Swan … Again?! … Alright, I’m on my way.”

She groaned out loud and hung up with more force than was necessary.

“Anything I can help with?” asked Blue. Emma shook her head.

“No. I need to sort this one out on my own. Will you be alright getting them back to town?”

“We’ll manage,” Regina told her. Emma nodded gratefully, then began the muddy trudge back to the road. Regina sighed. She did not envy Emma her job at present.

“There’s an arrow in my butt!”

“Yes, Dopey, I know. Now, for heaven’s sakes, sit still!”

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Zelena gaped. A terribly undignified thing to do, she knew, but the part of her brain responsible for controlling her motor movements appeared to have shut down. Along with all other functions.

Her father?!

For one thing, he was far too young. He could not have so much as five years on her. No grey marred his hair at all. No wrinkles or liver spots lining his skin. A jagged white scar running from his left ear to the middle of his chin was the only imperfection on his face.

Yet he remained unperturbed.

“I’m your father,” he repeated, as if she were an idiot who hadn’t heard him the first time. “I – I have to admit, this is not how I imagined we would meet for the first time –”

“You’re not my father. Any father of mine would have to be at least sixty years old.”

“Sixty?” Jonathan – or whatever his name really was – chuckled. “That was a long time ago. Fae magic,” he added when she narrowed her eyes. “Does wonders for the skin.”

“You’re a fae?” Zelena asked dumbly.

“You never wondered where your power came from?”

“Of course I did! I’m not a fool!” she snapped. Yes, she knew she was half fae – telling her that little fact had been the only useful thing Glinda ever did for her – and knew that it had to have
come from her father’s side, since Regina was obviously *not* one. That didn’t mean Jonathan was telling the truth.

Or maybe he was. The more Zelena studied him, the more she wondered – despite the scar, his chin shape *did* seem familiar, and so did the shape of his ears. And his eyes. Jonathan was right, she didn’t have Cora’s eyes. But there was a pair right in front of her that could have easily been her own in a mirror.

“*It is a foolish thing to lie about,*” said Jonathan. She nodded – he was right about that. And easily proved, if she had access to her magic.

“If – if it *is* true –” Zelena started hesitantly.

“It is.”

“*THEN WHERE THE HELL HAVE YOU BEEN?*”

The words came out before she could stop them, echoing off the station walls and disturbing the still-snoring dwarf. There was the long-lost, deadbeat father whom she had never bothered to ask about – for she had assumed that he would be just like the man who had raised her, and it appeared that she had been right. Her legs also carried her forward of their own accord, hands raising as if to slap him – but intercepted by the long-forgotten cell bars, which burnt her palm upon touch. She yelped and backpedalled to the rear of the cell.

“Best to keep it down,” said Jonathan, waving a hand over the dwarf. The insipid snoring resumed. “*This place isn’t soundproof.*”

“Forty years,” Zelena continued as if he hadn’t said anything, cradling her red-raw skin next to her chest. “Forty years, and this is the first time you’re bothering with your own daughter?”

“Zelena –”

“Did you even bother to find out what happened after you slept with her?” Zelena demanded, the sound of her name coming from his lips only fuelling her rage. “Or was it just a late-night fling, intended to be cast aside the next morning, with unfortunate consequences you never bothered to take responsibility for?!!”

“Zelena, I didn’t know!”

“You didn’t know?” she scoffed. “You didn’t know my mother was pregnant?”

His gaze fell to the floor. “No, I – I knew about that,” he admitted weakly, rubbing the back of his neck in shame. Zelena scoffed again and glared at the ceiling so she didn’t have to look at him. *Men,* she thought. *All the same.*

“I – I didn’t know where she sent you,” Jonathan continued. “After you were born – I didn’t know that she would send you away. I didn’t know where you’d gone, or if you’d even survived–”

“You would have if you’d stuck around.”

“Fae and human don’t mix well,” he defended. It was a poor excuse and they both knew it. “For what it’s worth, I do regret leaving. But it was for the best.”

She stayed focused on the ceiling. The cracked plasterboard blurred as angry tears seeped into her eyes.
“Zelena, please look at me.”

“You have no right to ask anything of me.”

“I know I don’t. And I am sorry that it’s taken so long. But it is what it is, and I’m here now. And I really would like to get to know you.”

She took a breath, shut her eyes and reopened them, still focused on the ceiling. Then she blinked, sighed and granted his request.

“Can you get me out of here?” she asked. She was still angry, but if it was possible that he could help her escape – or even better, to complete her plans to take everything away from Regina – then she was prepared to wait before telling him to shove off for good.

“Not yet,” he said. As she scoffed again, wondering what she had ever been thinking, he gently tapped a finger against her cell bars and grimaced. “Iron.”

She looked down at her own injured hand as the skin of his finger turned painfully red. “Of course,” she murmured. Iron wasn’t completely impervious to fae magic, but it did complicate matters.

“But I will,” he added. He delicately extended an arm between the bars, reaching for out for her. She refused until she realised that he was looking at her injury. It burnt red-hot and scalding like acid whereas the same mark on his hand had already healed. She hesitated a moment more before the pain won her over and she held out her palm. The moment they touched, magic poured over her like rainfall in the desert, healing not only her palm but various other aches and pains, and the red-raw marks on her wrists. Zelena shut her eyes to relish in the feeling, but he pulled away and it ended.

“I promise.”

The effort to reconnect all of the displaced peoples of the Enchanted Forest with family and friends was the slowest part of the recovery process, as Archie was quickly learning. Now that the curse was broken, Regina was able to pour a little magical effort into the building project – in fact, almost a quarter of the planned houses were near completed thanks to her efforts. The industry and public spaces she was leaving for the builders to do themselves to keep as many of them employed for as long as possible. That just left finding out who they had in town, and to convince everyone else that the census was for information purposes only.

“What did you say your brother’s name was again?” Archie asked the tall redhead at the front of his line. He rubbed the back of his neck; he’d been doing this since five-thirty and really needed a coffee.

“Uh, Prince Frederick,” answered the unshaven youth, fidgeting uncomfortably in his jeans and woollen sweater. Modern clothing took a bit of getting used to, as Archie remembered. “He’s from the Southern Isles. Married Princess Abigail of Hellas a few years ago …?”

“Oh, Kathryn! Of course.” That was the other thing causing delays – cursed names. Some – like Archie – had chosen to keep the names given to them by the Dark Curse. Others had gone back to their old names, and some chose to answer to both. But anyone who had come over with the second curse would only know a person’s original name, leaving it up to Archie and the dwarves to try and remember who was who. “Try here,” he told the young man. “If not, you might find him at the
elementary school. Frederick Cole. He’s a gym teacher.”

“Great!” said the youth, snatching the address and reading it. “Thanks so much!”

“Hey!” Archie called before he could dart out of the door. “In case they come looking for you, what’s your name?”

“Hans!” shouted the youth. Archie watched him go – he was obviously in a hurry and shoved past several people on his way out of the door.

“Hmm,” he muttered to himself, and thought no more of it as he moved onto his next client.

Going back to the library had been harder than Belle liked to admit. For one thing, after spending fourteen months cooped up inside of one, she was, quite frankly, a little sick of books. For another, despite Rumple’s assurances that he was fine, she knew that wasn’t true. It wasn’t like him to suddenly lose focus as he had at breakfast, and she knew he hadn’t slept. Neither had she. But they couldn’t stay in the house forever – Rumple had to show up at the shop sometime, and she needed to reopen the library.

That would have been a much easier task if Belle hadn’t kept looking around corners for clawed hands or a flash of black fur that turned out to be just a dancing shadow. She opened all of the windows and found some string to tie the blinds together so the clinking – which sounded far too much like a witch’s cackle – would stop. But it was rather cold, so she eventually shut the windows and set a record to play on the phonograph. Just to have some sort of noise.

*She’s gone,* Belle reminded herself once more. Maybe that time it would stick. *She’s trapped and powerless and can’t hurt you, or Rumple, or anybody else.*

“Hey.”

Belle screamed. Then again, maybe it hadn’t stuck.

Robin put his hands in the air, eyes wide and looking about as startled as she felt. He ducked and she realised that she had raised the book in her hands above her head as if to strike him with it.

“Whoa!”

“Sorry.” Belle lowered the book, breathed deeply and held a hand to her chest, where her heart hammered on her ribs. Robin, for his part, grimaced apologetically. “What are you doing here?”

“Roland wanted to come and say hi.”

“Hi, Miss Belle!” greeted the six-year-old. “Why’d you try to hit Papa with a book?”

Belle grimaced. “Sorry. Your papa gave me a bit of a fright, that’s all.”

“Old habits,” Robin added. Roland shrugged and went off to explore the children’s section – which Belle *still* needed to alphabetise. “What *is* that?”

“It’s called a phonograph,” she told him as she wheeled the shelving trolley around the returns counter. “It plays recordings of music out loud. Don’t ask me how. I’m still wrapping my head around radiators.”
“Are you saying that there’s a tiny orchestra inside that thing?”

“No, it – did you ever hear how the instrument sounds echo inside ballrooms? Well, it’s like someone caught that echo and put it inside the record – that’s the black circular thing.”

Robin was clearly impressed. “And they did that without magic? Clever.”

“I thought so too when Rumple showed me. Has Regina taught you to use a blender yet?”

“Yeah. And scared the daylights out of Roland. He wouldn’t come out from behind the sofa for almost an hour.”

“Poor kid.” Belle chuckled. “I think it was the radio that frightened me the most. Rumple tried to tell me that there weren’t actually tiny people living inside the box, but I was still checking under the bed every night to make sure that they hadn’t escaped.”

That made Robin frown thoughtfully. “Oh, so you – you didn’t know? You didn’t have a – what did Emma call it – a ‘real world personality’?”

“No. I was a – a sort of special case.”

She decided against mentioning that Regina had purposefully left her a blank slate during the first case and locked her in the asylum, all to make sure that Rumple would never know that she was there. That was for Regina to tell Robin when she was ready. Belle knew True Love when she saw it, loved Robin like her own brother, and she knew that Regina had changed for the better. The woman had apologised, done her best to make amends and was now trying to run the town to the best of her ability. Despite the harms done in the past, Belle thought Regina had earned a second chance.

Robin nodded and didn’t press further. “Actually, there was something that I came here for. These are yours.” He dropped a woven cloth satchel onto the counter. Inside, Belle found all of the things she’d left in Regina’s workroom the day the Witch kidnapped her – her knife, her favourite book, and chipped cup. She picked out the cup with a gasp. “Alan found them in with his things a couple of days ago.”

“You hung onto these?” Belle asked in amazement, turning the cup over in her hands.

“I – I guess I hoped that I’d be able to give them back one day. See, when – when Zelena took you, I wanted to go after you. I would have, but the Blue Fairy told us you were dead.”

“She did?”

“Well, she told us that Zelena had managed to bring Rumplestiltskin back from the dead and that doing so required a human sacrifice. We assumed the worst, since Zelena had succeeded, and we hadn’t heard anything from you. Any – anyway, what I wanted to say was that I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what it must’ve been like to be stuck with her all that time.”

Belle laid a hand on his arm to stop him from rambling. “Robin, I’m glad you stayed.”

“Aye, but I could’ve –”

“You’d be dead,” she said with certainty. “And I would be too. Bae told me that it was you who found me in the creek. At the very least, I would’ve frozen to death had you not been there.”

He pulled his hand away, but only so that he could hold hers. “I’m still sorry.”
She then caught him by surprise by standing on her toes and hugging him tightly. “I know,” she murmured in his ear. “And if there was anything to forgive, I would.”

And she needed him to know that she meant it. Belle didn’t know what it was like to have a flesh-and-blood sibling, but months of chasing ogres up and down the Gaulish highlands with him had turned Robin into just about the closest thing she’d ever had to a brother. At the end of the day, the Witch had not won – and by God, Belle intended to make sure that Zelena knew it.

His head hurt. No, that was an understatement. His head felt like someone had smashed a pot on it, followed by the whole damn kiln.

Killian groaned and reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. He didn’t have the first clue where he was, nor the inclination to find out. Beneath his back was a hard, lumpy mattress and he could hear paper rustling somewhere. So no immediate danger, then.

“I know you’re awake.”

Killian groaned again. The woman’s voice already haunted his dreams and fantasies – did it really have to invade his hangover hallucinations as well?

“How?”

“What do you want?” he snapped, refusing to open his eyes. He knew that if he looked at Emma, he would break.

Listening to her sigh wasn’t much better.

“You wanna tell me why you keep picking fights with drunk guys in bars?”

“Everybody needs a hobby.”

“Well, get one that doesn’t land you in jail every other night!”

Reluctantly, he forced himself into a sitting position, wobbling because he couldn’t see the floor, and slowly cracked open his eyes. And there she was, looking like an angel even from behind bars and one sleeve of her red jacket streaked with mud. She’d swept her hair up in a ponytail instead of letting it fall over her shoulders the way he wished she would and scowled furiously, hazel eyes ablaze and setting his soul on fire.

God, she was beautiful.

“Maybe I just wanted to see you, Swan.”

“That’s Sheriff to you.”

“Since when?” Killian tried to stand, found that his knees wouldn’t take his weight, and passed off the motion as an attempt to brush some dirt off his trousers. “I’ll admit we’ve had our recent differences, but that’s no reason to relegate a valued relationship to the state of impersonal titles.”

“And if you’re going to be like that, that’s the way it’s going to stay.”

“Be like what?” he asked, putting on his best smile. Emma scowled harder.
“Don’t start.”

She walked away from the cell. Killian wished his headache would vanish so he could enjoy the view. He pinched his nose again. Then the sound of keys being dropped in a drawer caught his attention. He looked up to see Emma grab her jacket, say something to the sentry dwarf, and head for the door.

“Wait a minute. You’re just going to leave me in here?”

“Yup,” she confirmed, shrugging her jacket on.

“Until when?”

“Until letting you go doesn’t have you straight back here the next morning.”

She stormed out despite Killian’s protests, leaving him alone with the dwarf and – he realised only then – Zelena.

“If that’s how you usually charm your girlfriends, it’s no wonder they keep leaving you for relatives of the Dark One,” mused the Witch, reclined on her own lumpy bed and humming while she read the newspaper.

“Hey!” shouted the dwarf. “No talking!”

Zelena obeyed and blew a raspberry instead. Killian opted to roll over on the bed and bury his face in the pillow. Maybe if he wished hard enough, it would turn into a whale and swallow him whole. Because without the Jolly Roger, that seemed to be the only way he’d ever get out of this godforsaken town.

Belle was surprised when Rumplestiltskin asked if she wanted to go to lunch in the park with the family that afternoon. Actually, quite surprised. She knew that Baelfire had invited them along, and knew that Rumple wanted to see his son and grandson. Between alternate personalities, excursions to jungle islands and an unfortunate affliction known as ‘death’, Rumple hadn’t been able to spend as nearly as much time with his son as he would have liked. Belle hadn’t seen much of Bae either, save for a few short visits. Still, she had thought that Rumple would reappear in the Storybrooke public gradually, using Dove to make his presence known until he had recovered fully from being the Witch’s prisoner. With so many people around, most of whom still thought of him as the Dark One – and many of those believing that he had sided with the Witch voluntarily, because they could hardly publicise exactly what the Dark One’s dagger was capable of doing – Belle didn’t blame him for hiding in the manor house.

It had to be a good sign that he was trying to get out and about, Belle told herself while they looked for the right picnic table. She knew Rumple had never been one for people, but the extended isolation couldn’t possibly be good for him.

Still, she aimed to keep an eye on him. If worst came to worst, they could always duck out early and have Bae come around for dinner with Emma and Henry.

Finding the rest of the party turned out to be easy – The Family With Too Many Surnames (since nobody had come up with a reasonable alternative) had taken over a table near the playground. Roland waved to her from the top of the castle, as did a young girl of about nine or ten with red hair and a face full of freckles who Belle guessed was Alan’s daughter. She laughed to herself. The
family she had inadvertently found herself a part of was becoming more and more insane by the
day.

Snow and Regina were at the table, along with a blonde woman, which appeared to have been
magically extended to fit twice the number of people that it usually would. In the open space
beyond, the lads and Ruby had started a game of three-a-side football, and Regina held Jesse while
Snow assembled a sandwich. The boy was fast asleep and looking adorably squishy in a mouse
onesie. Belle found herself staring at him – she’d always loved babies, even as a young woman
who’d thought of marriage as a necessary evil in world that wasn’t always kind.

Then her stomach growled, interrupting her thoughts, at the smell of something Much was tending
in a pot stewing over a portable camp cooker.

*Granny had better hire him soon, or she’s going to have serious competition before long.*

“Watch out!”

Belle ducked behind a tree and Rumplestiltskin froze as a flying football was stopped in mid-air by
a flick of Regina’s wrist. Between the beats of her racing heart, Belle noticed that neither Snow nor
Regina was particularly perturbed, and guessed that it had happened before.

“Sorry!” Bae panted as he ran to collect the ball, Henry and Robin right behind him and equally out
of breath.

“No matter,” Rumple told him with a smile, plucking the ball out of its invisible cage and tossing it
to his son. “Who’s winning?”

“Oh, you know, we’re not really keeping score or anything –”

“We are,” Robin interrupted, pointing to himself, Alan and Little John. “No offence, mate, but your
lot are lousy at football.”

“Yeah, yeah. Just wait ‘til I introduce you to basketball – then *I’ll* give you a thrashing.”

Robin laughed. “If you say so.” And raced Henry to the field, intercepting the ball as Bae threw it
to Ruby.

“I need to talk to you,” said Regina, looking at Rumplestiltskin. She stood up, the task made
awkward by her need to hold onto Jesse, so Belle reached out for him.

“I’ll take him.”

“Thanks.”

Jesse squirmed a bit during the transfer, which made Belle worry that he would wake up. He
cracked open his eyes as if to check on his newest holder, deemed the situation satisfactory and
went back to sleep. Snow watched as any new mother would – frankly, Belle thought she fretted
more than Jesse did.

“We’ll be fine,” she reassured the older woman, who nodded and went back to her lunch, though
she did continue to glance at her baby every few seconds.

“You must be Belle,” said the blonde woman as Belle took Regina’s abandoned seat. After
checking on Rumple – he seemed fine enough – Belle nodded. “I’m Evelyn. Alan’s told me a lot
about you.”
“Oh, hi! Nice to finally meet you.” They shook hands, somehow managing not to disturb the baby in the process. Then to Snow, she asked, “Where’s Emma?”

“Oh her way. She got held up at the station,” Snow explained as she spread mustard on her sandwich. “Some trouble at the pub on Short Street. The Broken Pipe, or Horn, or something like that.”

Belle sighed. “Hook again?” she guessed.

“Well.”

There were some days that Belle envied the action and adventure that came with a job like Emma’s. This was not one of those days. The very best that she could make of Hook’s determination to alienate everyone in town was that at least he hadn’t tried to kill Rumple again. Or shoot her in the back.

She felt a nudge in the centre of her chest, and realised that Jesse had woken. Groggy, as was to be expected of a five-day-old infant, but alert and gazing straight at her. Like any young baby, his eyes were blue. Belle wondered if they would stay that way. Emma had her mother’s hazel irises – perhaps Jesse would too. Or they could always stay blue. After all, David had light eyes.

“I guess we’ve already got a lot in common,” Belle murmured so that only Jesse would hear. Snow and Evelyn were talking with Much and not paying attention. “I lost my daddy too, recently.”

Although if Belle was entirely honest with herself, she had lost her father a long time ago. She and Maurice had once been as close as anything, but then the ogres attacked their lands and her mother had lost her life. A part of Maurice died on the same day as his wife, the peasant-born inventor who fell in love with a duke’s son. He’d become distant – for the sake of keeping the duchy safe, he had claimed, but Belle knew it had really been his way of coping with grief.

But before that, they had been close. Maurice was the one who had taught her to ride, to read – though it was Colette who’d fostered Belle’s love of books – and stayed up with her when thunderstorms had frightened her in the middle of the night.

Jesse would have none of that. His father had never so much as held him. In fact – Belle realised with a pang – David had probably not even known that he’d had a son.

“He was a great man,” she continued, gently rocking in the seat – partly because Jesse seemed to like it, and partly to stop herself from crying. “You know, he once saved my life. And a whole kingdom full of people, too. And I know he loved you. So much, even before you were born.”

She sniffled, and felt someone watching her. It was Snow. Belle felt her cheeks flush as noticed the tears welling in the corners of Snow’s eyes and a weak, grateful smile that Belle returned.

David died in the hope that it would save them all, and it had. Belle couldn’t bring Jesse’s father back, but she could make sure that he knew why David had died. It was the least she could do – for David, and for Snow.

“What do you want, dearie? I wouldn’t like to remind you that you already owe me one favour.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” Regina huffed as she and Rumplestiltskin stepped away from the others. Not that this conversation really needed to be kept private – she had nothing to hide anymore – but old
habits died hard. On the field, somebody cheered and Regina grinned proudly – Henry had blocked a goal from Little John and was practically skipping in ecstasy, high-fiving everyone in sight whether they were on his team or not.

“They grow up so fast, don’t they?”

“Why, Rumple, is that nostalgia I hear?”

“Hmm. He is my grandson,” Rumplestiltskin said with just enough of a sneer that his teeth showed. And don’t you forget it, was the unspoken message. “Family. The most important thing in the world, don’t you think?”

“It’s because she’s family that I’m giving her a chance,” Regina snapped. Rumplestiltskin hummed non-committedly. “Whether I like it or not, she is my sister. I owe her that much.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.”

“You would do the same.”

“Hardly. I killed my own father because he represented a threat to the town.”

“To your son and Belle,” Regina corrected. She knew him far too well ever to think her old mentor would sacrifice himself for anybody else. “And he was a demonic teenager. There was no reasoning with him.”

“And I would argue that there is no reasoning with Zelena either.” He then turned to her, a coy smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “I don’t intend to break our deal, if that’s what concerns you. I will not harm her nor interfere in any way as you send her out of town.”

“Good.”

“And I would remind you that if anything goes wrong – be it that Zelena tries or succeeds in escaping – then all bets are off.”

Regina sighed, gritting her teeth as she withstood the fury in his eyes. That stipulation had been the only way to get him to agree in the first place, and she wasn’t sure if she regretted it or not.

“Understood.”

“Excellent. Now, what was it that you dragged me over here for?”

“We downed the last of the monkeys this morning,” she told him as another cheer sounded from the field. “That only leaves us with the leader, which means we’ll be taking Zelena to the town line tomorrow evening.”

“And?”

“Do you want to be there?”

“No,” he said instantly. “No, thank you. Just a courtesy call once she’s gone for good.”

Then Much bellowed at the table. “OI! Lunch is on, lads!”

“It seems we’re being summoned,” Rumplestiltskin remarked impassively. They had taken two steps towards the rest of the family when he stopped and held up a hand. “One last thing, Regina. Family she may be – that’s for you to decide, not me – but be careful that misguided loyalty
doesn’t lead to someone you truly love getting hurt.”

“Excuse me?”

But he walked off without offering further explanation, leaving Regina to stand alone until Robin’s call broke her out of the trance. Sending Zelena out of town was the best option they had, she was sure of it. Regina couldn’t kill her own sister, however twisted she may be, and between herself, Tink and Emma, they had enough enchanters on hand to make sure things went off without a hitch.

So why did Rumple’s warning give her such a sick feeling?

Emma arrived late, just in time to hear Much bellow for everyone to come to the table. She said hello to everyone and then grabbed Neal. “Hey, can I talk to you for a second?”

“Sure.”

The picnic table was flooded and noisy, so Emma grabbed them both a cup of juice and walked over to the swing set. She could say hi to Henry later – he was busy attempting to score a goal with Alan standing in the way, and so far hadn’t gotten within five feet of the net. “I need a favour.”

“Anything.”

“Could you have a word with Hook? I don’t know how much longer I can keep this up.”

“No-one ever said that you had to,” Neal said, downing half of his juice in one go. “If he wants to be an ass, it’s not on you to set him straight.”

“It’s the not the fact that he’s an ass. It’s the fact that I have to keep cleaning up after him. He’ll be on the public enemy list before Easter at this rate. Do you think you could talk to him?”

“And say what?”

“I don’t know. Something. Just get him to accept the fact that he’s stuck here and it’s no use throwing a tantrum about it.”

Neal made a face. “You know that’s not what the tantrum is about, right?”

At that, Emma had to roll her eyes. If she hadn’t, she suspected the wiring would have snapped in her head. This again, she grumbled. Why did grown men insist on behaving like overgrown toddlers – better yet, why did she know so many of them?

But it wasn’t Neal’s fault that Hook was such a pain in the ass. “Look, I don’t care what it’s about,” she snapped, dodging the implied topic. “I’m sick of having to disinfect the car every morning after he’s vomited on the back seat. Can you talk to him?”

He sighed and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Alright,” he said after a moment’s contemplation, although he was obviously less than enthused about the idea. “I’ll talk to him, but I make no promises about whether or not he listens to me.”

“I know. Thanks, anyway.”

It would have all been so much easier if she’d never had to encounter Hook again – but she was the sheriff, and disturbances of the peace were her responsibility. Emma let out a loud sigh and rested
her head in one hand.

“Hey, you wanted to be a sheriff.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he chuckled. Then there was a lot of cheering from the table, and she looked up to see that Henry had finally managed to get a goal past Alan. She smiled as Neal whooped proudly – Hook aside, it was still a good day.

There were still a lot of things Robin had yet to adjust to in this world, which was why he had been glad when Regina and Snow suggested a cook-out in the park. That was a far more civilised way to do things, in Robin’s opinion. And the fresh air didn’t hurt.

“Alright everyone, I apologise in advance if this turns out a tad spicy,” Much announced to the congregation as he took a sip from the ladle. “I learned how to make this in Antioch. And boy, do the Agrabahns like their seasonings.”

He started to fill everyone’s bowls. Henry sniffed his suspiciously. Frankly, Robin didn’t blame him. “What is it?”

“It’s called khoresh, I believe,” Robin told him. “Like a stew, and very common in the northern parts of the Agrabahn Empire. Tastes good. It has mutton in it.”

“Huh?”

“Lamb,” Regina filled in for her blank-faced son.

“Here, have some rice with it,” Alan said, passing over the pot. “Helps dilute the taste of saffron.”

Henry eyed both of them warily before he speared a strip of meat and nibbled on the end. Robin chuckled – so did Regina and Belle – as he crinkled his nose, chewed, and then shrugged, apparently finding it acceptable. Although he did immediately reach for the rice.

Robin took a bowl for himself and a plate of rice for Roland – his son didn’t particularly like Uncle Much’s exotic dishes, but he would eat a bit of mutton and carrot out of his papa’s bowl. Marian had been exactly the same. Not for the first time, Robin felt a pang at the thought of his late wife. He wouldn’t ever forget her, even if he had wanted to – having Roland made that impossible – and did, he had to admit, sometimes feel guilty, because he was happy once again. But not with her.

Then he remembered that Regina once told him she felt the same way – suffering the loss of her first love in even more tragic circumstances – and had also told him of Daniel’s last request – “Love again.” Robin would never know if Marian wished the same for him, but a part of him believed that she did. Oddly enough, it was also the part that continued to love her, and always would.

Grandmamma did say that love was complicated, Robin thought with a soft chuckle that no-one but Regina heard. Amabel Locksley had been a far-sighted woman, certainly, but he wasn’t so sure that even she could have predicted any of this. Waking from a sleeping curse a woman who had once been called the Evil Queen certainly hadn’t made Robin’s list of things he thought he would ever do; neither that he would one day sit down to share a meal with the Dark One, his son, two queens and a princess.

His only regret was that there was one face missing. As he poured a cup of juice for Roland, Robin
caught himself watching Jesse stir in Belle’s arms. Like Roland, that boy had a parent he would never know. Despite the hundreds of times he told himself that David had made his choice, Robin still kept thinking it over and wondering what anyone could have done differently.

Nothing, he told himself once more. They’d had six months to find an alternative route to the Land Without Magic and come up with nothing. By Regina’s account, Rumplestiltskin had tried for two hundred years and never succeeded. And if they had chosen to stay, Zelena would have taken Jesse and erased everything they ever held dear. No, they’d not had a viable option.

It wasn’t as if Jesse didn’t have a family that couldn’t tell him about his father. Everyone at the table owed their lives to King David; and one day, Robin vowed he would make sure Jesse knew what his father had given his life for.

Well, it wasn’t going as poorly as one might have expected. Rumplestiltskin had made it ten minutes into the family luncheon and had yet to feel the urge to make a slug out of anybody. Or ride home and hide, whichever came first. Part of it was the smile on Belle’s face – he could put up with anything as long as it made her happy. Bae and Henry greeted him warmly too, and he forced himself to focus on them. That was why he was here, and why he could make himself stay.

"It won’t last," nagged Zoso. "You will let them down eventually. You always do."

“Hey,” murmured a voice at his left. Rumplestiltskin thought it was in his head until he felt Belle’s hand on his arm. “Are you okay?” she asked concernedly.

“Yes, of course,” he said after realising that he had clenched his jaw so hard that his teeth may have cracked. Belle didn’t look convinced.

“Are you sure? We don’t have to stay the whole time –”

He cut her off with a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be fine,” he murmured in her ear.

She blushed. In her arms, Jesse cooed. The noise and light must have been fascinating him, as he was clearly fighting sleep. It occurred to Rumplestiltskin that this was the first time he had actually seen the boy properly, save for a brief glimpse at Granny’s. Jesse would look like his father – Rumplestiltskin could See that much. A child of True Love, with incredible power just like his sister. He would hopefully be at least a little less block-headed, however. Heavens knew the world did not need another Emma Swan.

Then in his mind’s eye, an image formed, of another child with blue eyes, but chestnut hair instead of blonde …

"You would only fail her as you failed your son."

Rumplestiltskin ignored the voice. Zoso was persistent – and Fafnir even worse – but they were weaker here, in the presence of his family. He gave Belle a smile, and even managed to extend it to Jesse. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Bae watching them with an approving grin. Henry was next to him, talking to the stocky outlaw about Agrabah.

"Hold onto them, won’t you?" said a voice Rumplestiltskin hadn’t heard before. He tried to shove it down – as he had all of the others – but it pushed through. "Trust them. Let them in. They can help you."
Curious, he turned away from the rest of the family and murmured, as softly as he could, “What are you talking about?”

But the voice didn’t respond. Rumplestiltskin frowned. From the look of things, he had two scenarios to pick from. The first was that he was imagining voices in his head to go along with the ten that were already there. The second was that he had just encountered the first friendly Dark One.

But how could that be possible?

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 3: Blue Blood in Abundance, in which Ruby organises vigilante justice, Emma runs into a wall, Hans finds his brother and Belle has a visitor

Once again, thank you so much to everyone who nominated 'There But for the Grace of God' and 'Intervention' for the Espenson Awards! That was incredible! Now please go vote! I mean, if you want to ... I can't exactly make you do anything after all ... :D
After almost ten years of sleeping on a cold, hard forest floor, Robin had become an early riser purely from the discomfort of sleeping any later than necessary. Although, to be fair, he hadn’t been one to sleep in even before that – relaxation didn’t come easily to him, and sitting around for even a few minutes with nothing to do made him antsy.

So he was downstairs making a pot of tea – once again thanking the stars that the written language in both worlds was fairly similar – a good half-hour before Regina was awake and sat at the kitchen table, reading a book that Belle recommended to help him figure out how all of the bizarre things in the Land Without Magic worked. He still wasn’t convinced that it wasn’t really magic – after all, the book’s explanation of electricity certainly sounded like sorcery – and was in the middle of bookmarking sections for further research when Regina plodded down the stairs in her pyjamas.

“Morning,” she greeted sleepily, giving him a kiss on the cheek before wandering into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. “Uh, the crumbs on the counter –”

“I had to turn the cooker upside down to get the toast out.”

He didn’t miss Regina’s muffled giggle, or the fact that she rolled her eyes despite looking away from him. “I told you, it does that automatically.”

“After it’s burnt the bread to an inedible crisp that no reasonable human being would consider eating.”

“And that’s why you turn the dial down.” She demonstrated the appropriate action. Robin waved it aside.

“Bloody ridiculous contraptions anyway. I think I should just build a campfire in the backyard.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Regina said, highly amused as she took the seat to his left while waiting for the coffee to brew. “Where’s Roland?”

Robin jabbed his thumb in the direction of the living room. “He’s been corrupted into your son’s world.” A few days ago, Henry had introduced them to television and a programme called Sesame Street. Roland was absolutely fascinated, especially the counting and alphabet segments. Henry, for his part, seemed to regret this somewhat, as he was now forced to pick between Elmo and Jesse’s morning screams. Hard choices for a twelve-year-old.

“Oh, well. At least it’ll prepare him for school.”

Robin wasn’t entirely sure how a talking puppet was going to help his son get ready for school, but then he had noticed Roland’s vocabulary expanding considerably in the past week. Another aspect of this world’s unorthodox form of magic-that-wasn’t-called-magic.
Then the coffee maker dinged, but Regina didn’t react. She stayed in her chair, rubbing a thumb across the handle of her mug. Robin nudged her gently. “Gina?”

“Hmm?” The appliance dinged again. “Oh, right!”

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, of course,” she insisted, pouring out a cup. Robin wrinkled his nose. He didn’t mind coffee – there had been a lot of it in Agrabah, imported from the Southern Continent and the Islands – but wasn’t fond of it in general. And the stuff that they drank in this world seemed considerably worse than the stuff back home. He had no idea how Regina tolerated it.

She claimed her seat again, still with that far-off look in her eyes. He waited – she would talk when she was ready, and pressing the matter would only make her clam up entirely. It didn’t take as long as he’d expected.

“It’s been a week,” she said softly, looking down at the mug. “Zelena’s time is up. We have to send her out of town by the end of the day.”

“How do you feel?”

“Honestly?” She snorted. “Like I should have done more to help her. Like I didn’t buy her enough time.”

Robin sighed internally. They’d had this discussion practically every night for the past week. He knew Regina was torn – at the end of the day, Zelena was her sister and that meant she felt some sort of familial obligation to her. But he still wished she would stop wracking herself with guilt. So he reached out a hand to squeeze hers.

“You did everything that was humanly possible,” he reminded her, not for the first time. “You bought her a week that she never would have had otherwise. The rest of the town would have killed her the moment she was powerless. It’s not your fault.”

“I know.” She didn’t sound entirely truthful. “And by the end of the day, she’ll be gone, and we’ll never have to worry about her again.”

“Exactly. And we can safely take the boys to a carnival without worrying about them being bitten by and turned into flying monkeys.”

She laughed, more at him than at his bad joke. “You understand why I’m finding this so difficult, right?”

“Yeah. Well, somewhat. It’s hard to judge, given that none of my siblings turned out to be homicidal maniacs. Although Simon did come close.”

“Was he the one who stuck you in a barrel with a rotting fish?”

“No, that was Jack. Simon was the weird one who collected dead insects and ended up a barber surgeon.”

“Oh, right.” Regina chuckled again, that far-away look returning. “I know that this is for the best, but –”

“But?”
She sighed. “But I grew up alone. I listen to you talk about your brothers and sister and I – I feel cheated. I’ll never have any of that with Zelena.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, we did try to kill each other plenty of times.”

She grinned weakly. “That doesn’t help.”

“Ah. Sorry.” He drained his tea, then got up and gave Regina a hug from behind. “Well, it’s like you said. By tonight, she’ll be gone, and we’ll never have to worry about her again.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “I know.”

Frederick was cooking breakfast when the doorbell rang. Abigail – who had been sitting at the table reading a law school textbook – went to get it. He heard them talking – it was probably Uncle Oskar, come to see if they would join him against Regina despite the number of times they had already turned him down – and set the eggs to boil when he heard Abigail call his name.

“It’s your brother!” she called from the door.

“Which one?” Frederick muttered. He had twelve of them, after all. The odds were that some of them had made the trip with the second curse, however unpleasant that thought was. Sighing, he made sure the timer was set and walked out of the kitchen to the front door. Abigail leant casually against the wall, and a face Frederick had hoped never to see again smiled at him from the doorway.

“Hey, Fred,” said Hans. “Been a while.”

Frederick pulled his wife out of the way and slammed the door in Hans’ face. Abigail protested as he then proceeded to shut the windows and drew the curtains. Meanwhile, Hans pounded on the door, hard enough that the bookcase next to it began to rattle.

“Fred! Fred, please open the door! I just want to talk!”

“What is going on?” Abigail demanded, staring at him as if he had gone mad.

“Don’t open the door,” Frederick told her, moving onto the back windows. “Call the sheriff.”

“What? Why?”

“Fred, I know you think I did a horrible thing and I’ll never convince you otherwise, but I’m begging you! Please, just let me in!”

Abigail frowned, and then made for the door despite his protest. Hans stumbled as it opened.

“Thanks, Abby.”

“Get out,” Frederick insisted, flicking his wrist sharply as Hans put one foot over the threshold. “Get the hell out of my house. In fact, you can get the hell out of this town. Emma has enough problems without having to deal with your shit.”

“Frederick!” Abigail gasped. Hans gulped nervously, and took another step inside, palms out in a pacifying gesture.
“Okay, look. I know you have no reason to trust me, but if you would just hear me out –”

“Hear you out?” Frederick interrupted. “After the stunt you pulled in Arendelle?”

“This isn’t about that right now,” Hans said with his hands still outstretched. “The town’s in danger. And I need your help to stop it.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard that before.”

“I’m serious!”

“Frederick,” Abigail murmured pleadingly, eyes wide. He sighed. He knew she had the best intentions, but she didn’t know the whole story. He pondered the best way to chuck his little brother outside – unfortunately, Abigail was now between Hans and the door, complicating matters – when the egg timer rang. All three of them looked at each other.

“I’ll, uh, I’ll get that,” Abigail offered. She shut the door and quickly strode around Hans and Frederick, who hadn’t moved a muscle. “While you two … talk.”

Frederick sighed again. “Fine. We’ll talk.”

Hans let out a breath. “Thanks, Fred.”

“You’ve got ten minutes.” When Hans chuckled, Frederick looked at his watch and announced, “Nine minutes and fifty-five seconds.”
I’m not allowed through.”

Emma thought for a minute, tapping her fingers on her legs. The two goons hadn’t moved. She walked straight up to them and waved a hand in each of their faces. Nothing.

“Hey!” she shouted. “You’re blocking a public road! Now clear off, or I’ll arrest the both of you!”

The man on the left then spoke. “We are under orders that supersede yours, sheriff, and we will not move from this position.”

“King Richard himself has requested that we allow no-one passage without his personal approval,” said his companion, whose voice was unusually squeaky for such a big man.

“I suppose in your world, that’s supposed to be a high honour or something?” Emma asked half-sarcastically. Neither of them moved. Frustrated, she turned back to Nala and Michael. “I take it you didn’t have much better luck?”

“Fraid not.”

Emma groaned. “Alright. Mr Tillman, head back to town. I’ll explain the situation to your boss.”

“What are you two going to do?”

“I don’t know – I’m making this up as I go.”

Michael nodded, looked confused, then jumped in his truck and performed a complicated turn-around. Nala then pulled Emma aside.

“They can’t do this!” Emma thundered.

“Evidently, they can.”

“So Richard just walls off a whole section of the town overnight and we’re just supposed to let him?”

Nala frowned. “So I take it you haven’t heard? This isn’t the only one. While you lot were off chasing the Witch, Richard and Weselton have been slowly gaining support in the districts least loyal to Regina and Snow. King George came out of the woodwork a few days ago and pledged the support of the Carolingians. They built this one, and another two on Elm Street and Pinnacles Avenue.”

“What?” Emma shouted, louder than she had intended. “They can’t – this isn’t – they can’t do this!”

“It’s old world politics, Emma. I’m not sure that you’d understand,” Nala said with a shrug. “Things here don’t work the way they did back home. Back home, power belonged to those strong enough and smart enough to hold onto it.”

“Yeah, but we’re not in the Enchanted Forest anymore.”

Nala chuckled. “Well, good luck telling them that.”

“So what, we’re gonna end up at war with half the town just because some people think that Regina is still the Evil Queen? She’s changed!”

“I think you’ll find this has less to do with Regina than you might think.” Nala had adopted an
annoyingly motherly tone, the same one Snow used whenever she thought Emma was being stupid or overreacting, and Emma did not like it. “Yes, she’s in power here and that’s why she is the target, but this would be happening if Snow was the mayor, or even Josef or myself. And second, not all of us had the benefit of seeing the Evil Queen redeemed with our own eyes. I believe you, but there are plenty who don’t.”

She glanced at the wall again. “Look, for what it’s worth, Regina still has her defenders. The fact that Snow is on her side has convinced a lot of people that it’s worth backing her. But if I were you, I’d advise her to start collecting allies and quickly, or you will end up going to war with half of the town.”

With that, Nala turned and started to jog away. Before she disappeared, Emma called after her, “Whose side are you on?”

Nala turned back with a grin that showed a lot of sharp teeth. “Well, they didn’t let me through the barricade, did they?”

As the smell of bacon filled the house, Frederick and Hans continued to stand opposite each other in the foyer. Frederick crossed his arms and stood stoically; Hans fidgeted and gestured to the sofa. “Can I take a seat?”

“No,” said Frederick sharply.

“Oh.”

He had no intention of letting Hans get comfortable. He would say his piece, and then either leave quietly or get thrown out onto his behind. If the weasel hadn’t been his little brother, Frederick would have been prepared to do much worse.

“Uh, okay then. I suppose I can do this standing up –”

“You mentioned something about the town being in danger?”

“Yes. Yes, I did and I’m getting to that –”

“Then get to it.”

Hans gulped. “Okay. Uh, look, I know you don’t trust me, but there’s something you need to know. They’ve taken up residence in the woods, just a bit short of the town line – I don’t know how many of them came over, could be a dozen, could be their whole clan –”

“What are you talking about?”

“The trolls. They’re in Storybrooke.”

Frederick laughed. “Trolls? Those stupid little bridge-dwellers? That’s what you’re going with these days?”

“Fred, you have to believe me!”

“I don’t have to do anything. Now if you’ll excuse me, I was in the middle of a perfectly lovely breakfast with my wife –”
“WILL YOU PLEASE JUST LISTEN TO ME?”

“WHY?!”

The combined echoes reverberated off the walls, and Frederick thought he heard a dog bark outside. He didn’t care – Hans was asking for it, and it was high time that somebody told him what they really thought.

“After what you did to that poor girl, why would you expect anybody to trust you? What the hell is wrong with you?! That is not the kind of men that Mother raised us to be!”

“Fred, please!” Hans begged. “You know me!”

“I thought I did.”

“It wasn’t me!”

“What?!”

“Listen.” Hans put up his hands again, bravely taking a step closer. “There is a curse –”

Frederick scoffed. That old line again.

“I’m not lying!”

“Yeah, right.”

“It was the trolls, Fred,” Hans insisted. “Remember the rock trolls that Nanny used to warn us about? The ones that lived in the mountains and kidnapped naughty children from their beds?”

“Old wives’ tales meant to scare children into behaving.”

“No. They’re real. And I can prove it. They’re right here in Storybrooke.”

“And they, what? Tricked you into trying to murder Queen Elsa?”

“More or less, yes.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I’m your brother?”

Frederick scoffed again. “A brother that once set my bedroom drapes on fire and said that the dog did it!”

“Which goes to show what a terrible liar I am!” Hans exclaimed, spreading his arms wide. “And while we’re on the subject, aren’t you the one who convinced me to eat a pig testicle, claiming that it was an apple?”

“That doesn’t make you trustworthy,” Frederick said while laughing internally. I still can’t believe you fell for that one.

“Yeah, I know.” Hans sighed deeply and shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. “Look, I – I know you don’t believe me. But, please, just give me a chance to prove it. I can show you where the trolls are, and you’ll see it for yourself.”
“How do I know you won’t stab me in the back once we get to wherever it is?”

“Well, for one, I’ve got no idea where my sword is,” Hans said with a shrug. Then he pointed to the mantelpiece, where Frederick’s blade – a gift from Midas, to commemorate his and Abigail’s engagement – rested in its scabbard. “You can bring yours along, if it makes you feel better.”

“Good. I will.”

“Great.” Hans did not sound enthused but defeated, like he had no alternatives.

“Not today,” Frederick added. “I’ve got to get to school, and the fourth graders have soccer tryouts this afternoon. We can go over the weekend.”

“This is important,” Hans insisted.

“So is my job,” Frederick jabbed back. “I’m sure it can wait a couple of days.”

*If it’s even true at all.*

“…*But by then, Grandma was the size of a matchstick and still shrinking fast,*” Belle read to the first graders from a truly marvellous book that had come in with the latest delivery. Despite the childish nature of them, Belle had found herself staying up late to read the whole collection, and the children were hanging onto her every word. “*A moment later she was no bigger than a pin. Then a pumpkin seed. And then … and then …*”

“‘Where is she?!’” cried Mrs Kranky. ‘I’ve lost her!’

“‘Hooray!’ said Mr Kranky.

“‘She’s gone! She’s disappeared completely!’ cried Mrs Kranky.

“‘That’s what happens to you if you’re grumpy and bad-tempered,” said Mr Kranky. ‘Great medicine of yours, George.’

“George didn’t know what to think.”

As the story came to a close, Belle shut the book, allowing herself a bit of dramatic flair. “And that’s the end. Thank you so much for coming in! You were all so well-behaved today!”

Sitting at the back, Ms Muffet smiled. “Say thank you to Miss French, everyone!”

“Thank you, Miss French!” chorused the first graders.

“Alright, now it’s time to go back to class! Everyone in two lines, please …”

The first graders being first graders, that particular task was much more difficult than it should have been. Belle headed back to the counter to finish filing all of the returns with a grin on her face. The visits from the first, second, third and fourth graders were the best parts of her week. Everybody needed children in their lives. And books. And a good pot of tea.

After Lucinda Muffet rounded up the last of her class, found a missing hat, tied a few shoelaces and walked the children out of the door, Belle turned the phonograph on. It wasn’t as necessary when the library was full, but now that it was quiet again she felt jittery. Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* helped
somewhat, but she was still on edge.

The library didn’t have a huge collection of literature related to mental health, so Belle had been forced to resort to the Internet. She had yet to sort through the plethora of unhelpful and misleading information for anything that could explain why, weeks later, she was still hearing monkey chatter in quiet corners and swore that she had seen green smoke in the corner of her eye more than once.

Archie may have been able to help her – in fact, Belle had made it to the front door of his office the other day before leaving abruptly. She had a million reasons. Archie was busy. He had other people to look after, real patients with real problems. She could look after herself – no, there was no real need to bother him.

“Excuse me.”

Belle jumped in her chair. This time she managed to swallow her scream and didn’t try to hit her visitor with a book, although it was close.

_I have got to stop doing that._

“Oh, I do beg your pardon,” said the newcomer, a well-dressed man of maybe forty who looked vaguely familiar. He held up his hands apologetically. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“That’s alright,” Belle told him, tucking a strand of hair back behind her ear and unclenching her fists. “I just didn’t hear you come in.”

She pointed to the phonograph by way of explanation. The man frowned at it and cocked his head the same way that Robin had. He was obviously new – if his bewilderment at modern technology hadn’t given it away, the fact that he wore his vest inside out did.

“It’s, uh, Belle, isn’t it?” the man asked after a moment of studying the phonograph. “Lady Belle of Avonlea?”

“Just call me Belle,” she said, shaking his hand. “Can I help you with something?”

“Actually, yes. I’m new in town – obviously.” He chuckled and ran a hand over his head. That was when she noticed the large and raised scar on the left side of his face. He must have been a soldier in the Enchanted Forest, she thought. Or something similar. “I was, uh, looking for somebody and wondering if you might be able to help me.”

“Well, why don’t you try the town hall?” she suggested. “Doctor Hopper and the dwarves are compiling a contact list for everyone who’s trying to get in touch with their families.”

“Ah, see, that won’t work,” said the man. He put his hands in his pockets and stood straighter. “The, uh, _person_ that I’m looking for is … shall we say, not somebody that one announces association with in public, if you understand what I mean.”

Belle stopped halfway through stamping a book card and glanced up. He was smiling and rocking on his feet, a boyish charm about him that made most people lower their guards. But the smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, and there really was something disturbingly _familiar_ about him. She finished stamping, put the book aside and then casually reached under the desk for her bag. Her knife was inside.

“What did you say your name was, again?”

He grinned wider. “You really are a clever one, aren’t you?”
Belle stood, knife in hand and quickly stepped out from behind the desk. Her chair slammed into the wall. The man did not seem at all concerned.

“What do you want from Rumplestiltskin?” she demanded. That had to be it – after all, if the man was a friend of his, he would have just gone straight to the pawnshop. Everybody knew where to find Mr Gold – and, apparently, his librarian girlfriend. Belle held the knife higher whilst slowly backing towards the shelves. She would have run for the door, but that happened to be on the other side of the man.

“Nothing particularly important,” said the stranger. “Now put the dagger down. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Good.”

Belle had learnt a thing or two from her time with the Merry Men, and that included some basic fighting skills. She closed the gap between them in two quick strides and slashed at his abdomen. For some reason, that did absolutely nothing and he grabbed her wrist, wresting the knife away. She punched him in the stomach. He twisted her other arm using the hand that was currently holding her knife, and the blade cut into her flesh.

“Not bad,” he commented dryly, whilst looking her up and down with vague interest as she let out a gasp of pain. “Curious, though.”

She never found out what was curious, however, as he shoved her away and she skidded between two shelves, coming to a stop only when her back hit the wall opposite. Her knife was at his feet, and the door was behind him. That left her with only one option.

As he strode confidently towards her, she scrambled to the elevator and slammed the door shut. It had worked once before, there was no reason it couldn’t work a second time. Then something heavy impacted the door, and Belle stumbled back, hitting the wall and sliding to the floor.

_Bang!_

Was it her imagination, or was it getting awfully dark inside the elevator?

_Bang!_

“Rumple,” she whimpered pathetically, sliding to the corner and trying to make herself as small as possible. But he wasn’t coming. He didn’t know she was in trouble, and her fumbling fingers couldn’t find her phone anywhere.

_Bang!_

“Rumplestiltskin …”

__________

“CLEAR!”

The great old spruce fell with a mighty crash, sending needles and splinters flying. A few people unfortunate enough to be too close got hit by a wave of mud and leaves. Robin leant against the stump and wiped his forehead. In spite of the cold weather, he was sweating. Good, hard work would do that.

On the other side of the stump, the former Prince Philip (who was now happy to go by his family name, Philip Solberg) had a drink and then passed Robin the flask while the loggers got to work
cutting the spruce up into manageable pieces. The wood was to be milled into lengths appropriate for use in buildings – using half a dozen designs found in the town archives to save time on architectural work – and the scrap distributed as firewood. Robin knew there were still a lot of things that some of the higher-ups – Marco, in particular – were concerned about, instability and land erosion and the like, but the fact was that they had four thousand people to try and house within a reasonable timeframe. They had mothers, young children and elderly people sleeping in tents in the middle of winter – they could worry about all the fiddly bits later.

“So,” said Philip, resting his axe against the stump. They had been introduced to many of this world’s machinery, but seeing as how even those who had a working knowledge of chainsaw operation looked to be in danger of lopping their own legs off at any given time, Robin was happy to stick to a good old axe for the time being. “What were you about to ask me …?”

“Oh, right.” Robin took another sip of water before continuing. “I wanted to know where you stand in regards to the leadership of the town. Who you’re willing to back, that is.”

“Why do you ask?” Philip eyed him suspiciously, more as a precaution than a threat. The young prince was far from inexperienced and had a decent head on his shoulders, so Robin could appreciate his careful footing.

“Just interested in knowing where we stand, in the event that it comes down to a contest.”

“Is that likely?”

“If I say yes …?”

Philip sighed heavily. “Well, I wish I could say that I trusted Richard not to go to those lengths, but from what I’ve heard, he’s not the sort who takes being told ‘no’ lightly.”

“No, he is certainly used to getting his own way,” Robin observed. He knew that better than most.

“And you’re asking which side I’m going to stand with?”

“Well, that’s assuming you don’t form your own camp, or even want to get involved at all.”

Philip chuckled, then shrugged. “I’ve had a lot more to do with Dowager Queen Regina than I ever did with the Evil Queen. Thankfully, the Borderlands was far enough away. And, as odd as this may sound, the thought of settling down with my wife and son doesn’t seem like the worst life in the world. Regina seems to know what she’s doing. So if it comes down to a contest, I’m happy to stand by her.”

He extended a hand for Robin to shake, which he did gratefully. Robin doubted that they would ever intimidate Richard into standing down, but the more people they could pull away from him, the fewer people would get hurt in the long run.

“What was that?” asked Philip. Robin looked at him in confusion until he heard a shout, and a crash, coming from the mess tent. They glanced at each other again before heading off to investigate.

There was a lot more shouting inside, and a crowd bunched together near the serving tables. Robin fought his way through – Philip on his heels – until he became aware of flailing fists and a scuffle. A fight had broken out.

Robin reacted, grabbed the person in front of him, pinning their arms to their sides before they could throw another punch at their fallen victim. Philip did the same to another assailant, twisting
them around so as to stand between the fighters.

“Oi! OI! BREAK IT UP!”

It took a moment before enough things stopped moving that Robin could make sense of what was going on. He spotted Much come out from behind the serving table – he would have been right in the line of fire – and a few people in the crowd looked on guiltily for not doing anything about the fight. He didn’t recognise the man whose hands he had twisted behind his back, but Philip had restrained somebody he did; Sir Clarence, a former knight who had been a battalion commander in Richard’s army. Clarence sported a nasty bruise below his eye that was already beginning to swell. On the floor was a black-haired boy, the Pridelander named Kovu. From the look of his knuckles, Robin guessed that the black eye had been Kovu’s work. And somebody else had grabbed hold of his twin sister, keeping her separate from the grey-haired man in Robin’s grasp.

“Alright!” Philip shouted, immediately taking charge. “Would somebody mind telling me what on earth in going on here?”

“Not my bloody fault!” snapped the grey-haired man. “We were standing in the chow line, getting served, when this little whelp comes up and starts throwing punches!”

“That true, kid?”

Kovu winced, pushing himself off the floor into a sitting position. “We’re on strict rations, sir. These two were trying to take more than their fair share.”

“That’s not for you to dictate, you bastard scullion!”

“OI!” Robin shouted, holding the man’s elbows tighter to make him shut up. “Right. That’s better.”

“Agreed,” said Philip. “Alright. Now, everyone knows that we’re on rations for a reason, so if I hear anything about anyone exceeding his given allotments, it’ll be half rations for a month! Understood?”

Clarence nodded; the grey-haired man growled grudgingly.

“And you two –” Philip pointed at Kovu and Vitani in turn, giving each of them the look of a cranky grandfather in turn (which Philip seemed to have mastered three decades in advance). “The next time there’s a problem, you don’t take care of it yourselves; you report it, properly. There’ll be no brawling under my watch. Is that clear?”

It was.

“Good. Now get back to it. GO!”

Slowly, the crowd began to disperse. The grey-haired man scowled at Robin as he left; though Robin didn’t recognise him, he took care to note the man’s features for future reference. Just in case.

“Hellfire,” Philip swore under his breath for only Robin to hear. “You know that’s not going to be the last of it.”

“No.” On rations, in the cold, trapped in an unfamiliar world – frankly, Robin was amazed that scuffles weren’t happening more often. The quicker they got everyone settled, the better.
“Do you know a guy named Jolly MacDonald?”

As they had most days this week, Mulan and Dorothy had come into the diner to help out during the lunch hour. With so many people tied up trying to get all of the newcomers sorted out, Ruby and Granny were short on workers. It didn’t help that the cook had called in sick and the dishwasher abruptly decided to stop working, so Ruby was left trying to do all of the cleaning by hand.

“Yeah, he owns the Black Sheep pub on the north side of town,” Ruby answered whilst scrubbing the fry pan and Mulan sloshed a wet mop on the floor. “His brother’s a farmer. Jack splits most of his produce between us and Jolly.”

“Well, apparently he’s been getting trouble from some of Weselton’s lot,” said Mulan. “One of the bartenders is an old friend of mine, and she says that they’ve been extorting protection money from a few of the smaller businesses in town.

Ruby set down the dish she’d been washing with a clunk, and Dorothy looked about ready to throw the potato peeler in her hand. “What?! Are you serious?”

“Completely.” Mulan smiled, her eyes flashing. “Almost wish they’d come here.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” said Dorothy. She flicked the peeler in Ruby’s direction. “They know you and Granny are too close to Regina and Emma. Plus you could maul the lot of ‘em before they got a foot in the door.”

“This is true. Let me guess, they’re using the money to fund their own little war against the established authorities in this town?”

Mulan nodded. “Yep. And people are pretty scared of them. They’re being smart about this – from what Isabella told me, they’ve targeted establishments that are furthest away from the town centre, where it’s hardest for Emma to protect them.”

“Cakes and kettledrums,” Dorothy spat, chucked the newly-peeled potato into the pot. “Don’t these idiots know that we’ve got enough problems to deal with already?!”

“That’s the point,” Mulan observed. “They want control of the town for themselves – the more people they can turn against Regina, Snow and Emma, the better their chances. And now’s the best time to do it, because there’s already so much that they have to take care of. Emma can’t stake out every bar in town every night by herself.”

“So maybe we should lend her a hand,” Ruby suggested, an idea taking shape in her mind. She knew practically every business owner in town, and knew which ones would be most likely to cave – or already had, as the case may be.

Mulan grinned, catching onto Ruby’s train of thought. “What did you have in mind?”

“Maybe we pay ol’ MacDonald a visit – coincidentally, the next time the weasel and his bully boys drop in. Rough them up for a change.”

“Friendly or unfriendly?”

“Depends on who gets hit first.”
While Mulan chuckled, Dorothy bit her lip uncertainly. “Shouldn’t we let Emma know about this first?”

Ruby shrugged. Technically, Dorothy had a valid point. But as Mulan had pointed out, Emma already had a million and one fires to put out, and Ruby was fairly sure that the three of them could fight their way out if anything went wrong. “We can see what happens first. If it goes badly, we’ll get Emma involved. But I think the three of us can probably handle a bunch of goons armed with pointy sticks.”

There were times that Rumplestiltskin hated being a landlord. Oh, he didn’t mind the power he held over people, and the money wasn’t bad, but it meant that he had to deal with these idiots anytime any little problem came up. Usually, he had Dove handle it – one appearance from the gentle old giant had most people cooperating in under five minutes – but this particular fool had the gall to actually show up at the shop, stinking of cheap brandy. And now he had to deal with him, instead of spending time at home trying to dig out that strangely friendly voice that had emerged at the family picnic yesterday. Rumplestiltskin fought the urge to turn Mr Blau into something small and repulsive for the headache he was fast becoming. As convenient as that would have been, murder had recently been removed from his bag of tricks. And there were other ways – some much more fun ways – to remind people of exactly who they were dealing with.

"He’s bloody whipped," snapped Fafnir.

“I’m sorry, Mr Blau, but under the terms of your lease –”

“Rack the effin’ lease, Gold!” Mr Blau shouted, slamming his dirt-encrusted hand onto the front counter for good measure. “That’s a load of bull, made up by you and that bint who calls herself the mayor! You ain’t got no rights to my property and you can tell your – your –”

“Henchman,” Rumplestiltskin offered dryly.

“Henchman! Yes! You can tell your stupid henchman to take his stupid evictors and shove it up his effin’ arse!”

Rumplestiltskin raised an eyebrow. This was no longer amusing, and he had work to do. So he picked up his cane – resting against the counter where he had always left it during the first curse, even though he no longer had a need for it – and shoved Mr Blau in the centre of the chest with it.

"Really? That’s just pathetic – at least bruise the moron!"

“It’s my property, dearie,” he growled, poking again to emphasise his point. “You are my tenant, and a distasteful one at that. I would be quite glad to be rid of you.”

“You wouldn’t dare –”

“Don’t forget that there are a hundred other people looking for accommodation in this town. I can easily find a much more pleasant replacement inside of an hour. So, if you don’t mind, get out of my shop and ensure that your rent is paid, or I will be paying you a visit. And believe me, I can make things much worse for you.”

Rumplestiltskin.

“Shove it, Gold. We all know you gone soft now –”
“Shut up.”

*Rumplestiltskin!*

There it was again – Belle’s voice, absolutely unmistakeable. And desperate. Rumplestiltskin felt his heart skip a beat. She was in trouble.

“What’s the matter, Gold? Your *sweetheart* got you on a puppy leash –”

Magic cracked out of Rumplestiltskin’s hands without him thinking. It hit Mr Blau squarely in the chest and propelled him onto the street outside, where he bounced ungraciously on his rear end all the way to the intersection of Main Street. The door slammed shut and locked itself, but Rumplestiltskin was already gone, having teleported himself straight to the library.

“Belle?” he called upon arrival. She wasn’t at her desk, nor could he see her among the shelves. He couldn’t see any sign of life, or that the library had been in any way disturbed. But then he spotted a fallen knife, and spots of red staining the carpet around it. He knelt down. A quick inspection confirmed that it was blood.

“Belle!”

"*Hahaha, you lost the girl!*" said Zoso in a sing-song voice. "*Wonder who attacked her now – the witch, or maybe the pirate again? Oooh, let’s gut him! With his own hook!*"

“Get back in your corner,” Rumplestiltskin growled under his breath. The elevator doors were shut. Belle didn’t usually keep them that way, and he could smell smoke. A faint tang of rust hit the back of his mouth. Magic was in the air.

“Belle!” he shouted, pounding on the elevator door. “Belle, are you in there?”

There was no response.

"*Maybe she offed herself? Last, desperate measure to rid herself of you–*"

Rumplestiltskin waved his hand. The door slid open, and a blue-eyed cannon ball launched itself at him, hitting and scratching anything within reach. Despite the shock, Rumplestiltskin realised it was Belle and struggled to hold her still. It was like wrestling a squid.

“Belle! Belle!” he cried, hoping the sound of his voice would get her to stop fighting. “Hey. It’s okay. I’m here now.”

She yelped. *Damn it.* The underside of her left arm was cut and bloodied – it didn’t appear too bad, but it clearly still hurt. He wrapped his arms around Belle more fully and held her until she went limp, breathing rapidly and small frame shaking. “Rumple?” she murmured weakly after far too long a silence. He nodded.

“Yeah. It’s really me. You’re okay now. They’re gone.”

Belle blinked, wiped her too-pale face with the palm of one hand – and then burst into tears. She clung to him, buried her face in his shirt and shook even more violently than before. Rumplestiltskin swore to himself. Whatever it was, it had been bad – and *he* hadn’t been there to protect her. Her legs gave way; he couldn’t hold them both up, so he gently lowered them to the floor and held her as tight as he could practically, rubbing her back to try and comfort her.

“It’s alright, sweetheart. I’m here.”
“I’m – I’m sorry!”

“It’s not your fault.”

And whosever fault it really was, Rumplestiltskin intended to make them pay.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 4: Juris Et Du Jure, in which Neal attempts to talk some sense into Killian, Rumplestiltskin embarrasses his son, and trouble strikes
Rumplestiltskin would have taken them back to the shop, but he could tell that Belle needed privacy right now and the shop was just too public. One never knew when one of the Charming clan – or worse, some idiot nobleman – was going to barge through the door, so he took them home instead. Once there, he made her sit on the sofa, healed the cut on her arm and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She had yet to explain exactly what happened. But he didn’t need her to tell him that it had been bad.

This wasn’t like the last time, when Hook went after her in the library. Then, Belle had been fine enough to go chasing the stupid pirate on his own ship. Now, she could barely get a word out and had only just stopped shaking.

He would find whoever had done this, Rumplestiltskin swore, and ensure that it was the last time anybody dared to attack somebody he loved.

“I’m just going to put the kettle on, alright?” he told her, disentangling himself from her arms and planting a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll be right over there. Not far at all.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

Tea made everything better. Well, usually. On rare occasion, he’d found that nothing substituted for wrecking a disposable room with his cane. Something told him Belle wasn’t likely to respond the same way, however. So Rumplestiltskin set the water to boil and then rummaged in the pantry for the tea bags, glancing into the living room to make sure Belle was still there. She’d wrapped the blanket around herself more fully and was gently rocking on the sofa.

"Poor girl."

There was that voice again. “Who are you?!” Rumplestiltskin muttered under his breath – no need to distress Belle any more than she already was – but there was no answer. Not the one he wanted, anyway.

Siegfried was the one who interrupted this time. "If I may institute a personal opinion–"

“No, you may not.”

"I think you’re going nuts."

Rumplestiltskin growled. Leave it to his predecessors to be maddeningly unhelpful at a time like this –

Wait a second.

The kitchen door was open. He took the kettle off the stove and put the teabags in to soak, then walked over to the door just in case he really was imagining things. Unfortunately, no. He pulled the door open. The handle and area around the lock were smeared with blood. Rumplestiltskin growled. So the infiltrator had first gone after Belle, injured her, and then circumvented the wards on their house using her blood. Stupid – he should have anticipated that.
And what were they after?

Rumplestiltskin’s heart began to race. He forced himself to walk as he left the kitchen and quickly trotted up the stairs to his study. Hands quivering, he tested the second set of wards — those appeared unaffected, so he entered, shut the door behind him and gently prised up the floorboard that concealed the dagger.

The knife was still there.

He allowed himself to breathe again. Whoever had broken in had not been after the knife, and the chipped cup was in the safe in his shop. Anything else was of little importance and could wait until after he had made sure Belle was alright.

“Is everything alright?” Belle asked. She was in the kitchen when he returned, and had noticed the damage to the door.

“It seems someone broke in,” he told her gently. No point in hiding it. “Nothing important was taken.”

By which she knew he meant the knife. She nodded, but didn’t seem relieved.

“Tha’t’s not a coincidence, is it?” she murmured, pulling the blanket firmly around her shoulders and sniffing. “They — they went to the library because they knew you’d come for me and — and —”

“Hey.” Rumplestiltskin put his arms on her shoulders and made her look at him. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Somebody could have taken the knife and —”

“They weren’t after it, sweetheart. The protection spells weren’t even touched.”

He saw where she was going, of course. This wasn’t the first time it had happened — Hook had once attacked Belle with the intention of distracting Rumplestiltskin long enough to steal Bae’s shawl from the shop. But that hadn’t been Belle’s doing, and neither was this.

The road was still full of puddles from last week’s storm as Snow drove out to the edge of town with Jesse peacefully dozing in his car seat. Technically speaking, she shouldn’t be driving for another few days — she should’ve gotten Neal or Emma to come along — but Snow needed to do this alone.

She pulled off the dirt road that looped around the grounds and stepped out into the chilly wind, grateful that she’d thought to bring a raincoat. Then she managed to get Jesse out of the car without waking him — she and Emma had figured out that he would drop back to sleep after being picked up if they held him upright with his head on their shoulder. He fussed for a few seconds, but that was all. Hopefully he would be warm enough, or this was going to be a short trip.

The frost had killed off most of the weeds, and it looked as if what remained of the grass had recently been mowed. She passed by rows and rows of headstones in various stages of decay. Some of the oldest were crumbled and cracked, with moss and lichen growing in spots over the ancient grey stones, bearing names no longer remembered by the living. She recognised a name or two — a general who had served in her army during the war against Regina, the elderly mother of a much-loved servant who took ill one winter, an unfortunate stable boy killed in an accident with an
unbroken colt – but not the one she sought the most.

She found Moe French’s tombstone near the bridge that marked the entrance to the hiking trail, the off-white marble Gaulish cross like a lighthouse in a sea of green. A single rose lay at its base. Belle had obviously been by recently. Snow stopped to adjust her hold on Jesse, and then spotted it.

It was near the top of a knoll, next to a scarred and leafless yew tree. Frost had overtaken it, so Snow had to kneel in the grass and brush the icy crust off the grey marble tombstone with her gloved hand.


So the curse had brought his body over. Or at least a memorial, since they hadn’t exactly had the time to hold a proper funeral once the curse started rolling. Snow didn’t remember much of those last few minutes, too busy staring at the fallen body to pay attention to what else had happened.

“Hi, David,” Snow murmured. Jesse squirmed in her arms; he was awake but not complaining, happily taking in the overcast sky and making gurgling noises. “I – I wanted you to meet someone. It’s our son.”

Jesse gurgled again, louder than before as if to say hello to his father. In spite of the grapefruit growing in her throat, Snow smiled.

“His name is Jesse,” she continued. “Jesse David. Like we talked about, but I – I gave him your name instead of – instead of my father’s. Henry’s already started to call him JD.”

The yew tree creaked as a light breeze blew through the grounds. Snow reached into her jacket for the snowdrop flower she’d found the day before, growing alone in a patch of frost, and laid it on top of the headstone.

“Everyone – everyone really misses you. Leroy made a beautiful speech at Granny’s for you. Emma and Neal are getting married. Next year. I – I wish you could see them. Henry’s so happy. He’s barely shut up about it.”

She sniffled and wiped her nose. The grapefruit in her throat was growing bigger by the second.

“I – I don’t know how I can – how I can do this without you. I – I’m trying to keep it together but I – I don’t – I don’t know how to – to keep going anymore. It’s – it’s like I – I–" I lost a piece of my own heart the day you died, Snow finished off inside her head. And it’s never coming back.

She held Jesse a little tighter as he shivered. That was why she kept going, why she had to keep going. For their son. She knew David wouldn’t have wanted her to give up. And she wouldn’t.

“I’ll come back soon. I have to get Jesse out of the cold, but I’ll be back. I promise.”

Snow somehow managed to leave the cemetery, drive home, feed Jesse and put him to sleep before collapsing onto her bed. And that was when she finally let herself cry.

With his hangover gone, Killian suddenly found himself with nothing to do. He had paced the
small space of his cell a total of fifty-one times, counted the bricks in the wall (there were two hundred and seventy-eight of them, if anybody cared), stared at the ceiling for an hour and sung every sea shanty he knew at least four times. And that was just the morning. The dwarves had no conversation whatsoever, except during shift swap over and to demand that his singing ceased. He even considered picking a fight with Zelena just to have someone to talk to, but the Witch had been uncharacteristically silent for days. So no help there.

Humming the chorus to *Devils and Black Sheep*, Killian lay back on the bed and tapped his foot against the wall in tune with the song. He wasn’t sure how much longer he could put up with this – in fact, he reckoned that the next time he saw Emma, he would probably end up embarrassing himself by begging to be released. Well, if she wanted him to grovel then –

“Hey, Hook.”

Killian jerked upright. There was Baelfire, with a paper bag from Granny’s in one hand and a thermos flask in the other. He nodded to the dwarf, who scowled in disapproval but dug out the keys nonetheless and unlocked Killian’s cell.

“What’s this?” Killian asked. Bae held up the bag and gestured for him to follow.

“Come on, I brought lunch.”

If he had hoped to be released, Killian was soon disappointed. There was another dwarf waiting outside, looking extremely grumpy indeed and armed with a pickaxe Killian somehow did not doubt that he knew how to use.

“Sorry, he’s gotta come with us,” said Bae, sipping his coffee as he headed down the corridor, away from the exit. “Some insurance thing. I talked him out of handcuffing you, though.”

“Thanks,” Killian drawled. The dwarf glared and palmed his axe in an obviously threatening manner. Killian got the message and started after Baelfire.

Bae directed them to a room a few doors down from the sheriff’s office and gestured for Killian to go in ahead of him. This room was even more boring than his cell – drab grey walls with no markings whatsoever, an unobtrusive filing cabinet fixed in the corner, and a simple plastic table with matching chairs in the centre of the room. He took a seat – assuming that was the expected action – and Bae plonked the bag down on the table. The dwarf remained outside, though Killian noticed that the door had a window in it that allowed him to see into the room beyond.

“Granny’s bagels,” Bae announced with a grin, pulling two out of the bag and passing one to Killian. “Not as good as what you could get in a New York bakery, but can’t be too fussy out here. You want a coffee?”

“I don’t suppose you have any rum in that flask?”

“Sorry, just the coffee.”

“Pass.”

Bae shrugged and poured himself a cup before sitting in the opposite chair, watching Killian closely over his baked flour ring. Killian eyed his own bagel, acutely aware of the growling in his stomach. He couldn’t remember the last time he ate a proper meal – such as it was – since the dwarf’s idea of breakfast had been some horrid, lumpy sludge served up with a side of sickeningly sweet, gold-coloured liquid that came out of a bottle with a picture of a bear on the side. Needless to say, Killian had refused it and the dwarf hadn’t put up much of an argument. None, actually, and
downed the lot right in front of him.

His stomach grumbled again and Killian’s resolve melted. He tore a chunk out of the bagel and sniffed it before putting it into his mouth. The best he could say was that it beat ship’s biscuits on a long voyage.

“So,” Bae started, talking around a mouthful of bread, “Emma tells me you’ve been making an enemy out of Storybrooke’s shadiest drinking establishments.”

“Did she?”

“Wanna tell me why?”

Killian shrugged. “Gotta earn a living somehow.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie. Unless he wanted to take up thievery – which he wasn’t above, but also not something he was particularly skilled at – then food cost money, and Killian knew only one way of obtaining money. Besides, the people he was cheating were mostly criminals anyway. That, or drunken fools who were just begging to be robbed.

“There are other ways to do that. Storybrooke has a large fishing industry. The trawlers are always looking for an extra set of hands, and you’re a good captain–”

“No offence intended, Bae,” Killian cut in, holding up a hand to stop him, “but I’m a pirate, not a fisherman.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to find something–”

“Says who?”

“Hook, you can’t spend the rest of your life swindling people out of their spare change–”

“It was working just fine until your fiancée stuck her nose in where it wasn’t welcome,” Killian said with a sneer.

“Emma is just doing her job,” Bae snapped. “She’s the sheriff, and being the sheriff means it’s her responsibility to keep the peace in this town. Which she can’t do when she has to haul your drunken ass off the floor every other night!”

“Then maybe your charming family ought to leave people to their own devices,” Killian shot back. “Tell Emma I appreciate it, but I don’t need the help.”

“I can name three bartenders who think otherwise.”

“Don’t try to tell me what’s best, Baelfire. I’m no hero, not like your little family club. The only person I have to look out for is me, and believe me, I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

“Look, I don’t give a damn if you wanna be a selfish asshole. That’s your prerogative, and if you wound up in a ditch somewhere with your own hook jammed through your skull, I really wouldn’t care less. But the fact is, whether you like it or not, you’re stuck here, so get used to it. Or we’ll have to arrange something a bit more permanent than that cell, if you catch my drift.”

Somewhat stupidly, Killian laughed. “Well, look who’s finally grown into his knackers.”

Sometime in between making that statement and Bae shoving the table as he got out of the chair and stormed to the door, Killian felt a flicker of regret. But it quickly vanished as Bae asked the
grumpy dwarf to take him back to his cell.

They let him have the rest of his lunch. That was the only positive thing to come out of the conversation, in Killian’s opinion.

He shouldn’t have lost his temper. Neal knew that, had known what was happening but had allowed it to happen anyway. Okay, so Hook had been an ass and totally asking for it. It didn’t justify anything.

The fact that he’d had about twelve hours of sleep in three days probably hadn’t helped matters.

*Sorry, Emma. I tried.*

“So,” Leroy announced as he joined Neal in Emma’s office, “any plans on what we’re gonna do with him? Speaking as a former drunk, it’s not likely that he’s just gonna walk out of there and never come back.”

“I know,” Neal agreed. “But honestly, I just don’t know.”

Because the truth was, it seemed like Hook had gone back to his old ways – a pirate who only cared about himself. And Neal had no idea how to make him believe any differently. Threats were no good against someone like Hook and pushing him out of town just put the problem onto other people. Zelena was different; she was too dangerous to keep around town, and virtually powerless outside Storybrooke, whereas Hook would just be a nuisance wherever he went. So the question remained; what the hell were they going to do with him?

Fortunately, there was a knock on the station door before Neal had to try and contemplate that problem. Though, if the look on his father’s face was any indication, it seemed that he was about to have another one.

“Pop?”

Rumplestiltskin jumped slightly, as if he hadn’t expected someone to address him. Neal frowned – he’d noticed his father have a few episodes like that since breaking free of Zelena’s control. Short bursts of dissociation, where he didn’t seem to be entirely sure of what he was doing. He considered mentioning it to Belle, but she did live with him and had probably already noticed. If she had, then that probably meant there was nothing to worry about. Although Neal hardly found that thought comforting.

“Hey. Is Emma here?” Rumplestiltskin asked after a moment. Neal shook his head.

“No. She’s gone out somewhere. What’s up?”

Rumplestiltskin started to say something, but then seemed to crack when he glanced sideways in the direction of the cells.

“We’ll be outside,” Neal said quickly to Leroy before grabbing his father’s arm and shepherding him into the hallway, making sure to shut the door behind them. Hook and Zelena were easily the last people his father would want to be within ten miles of right now. “Sorry – I didn’t even think about them.”

“That’s alright,” said Rumplestiltskin with a wary scowl at the closed door. “Just glad to see that
the both of them are still incarcerated. They haven’t been anywhere in the last couple of hours?”

“Not that I know of, but Happy said that he’s had no problems. Why?”

“Someone attacked Belle at the library.”

“What? Is she okay?” Neal’s imagination immediately went through the worst possible conclusions, stopped only by the rational part of his mind remembering that his father would hardly be the calm, refined man that he currently was if his girlfriend lay unconscious in a hospital bed. Thankfully, Rumplestiltskin nodded and confirmed this.

“Yes. She’s at Granny’s right now.”

Neal let out a small sigh of relief, then had another thought. “So – forgive me for being blunt, but what are you doing here?”

“I came to report the incident to the sheriff.”

Neal stared. The Dark One he had known would’ve already tracked down the attacker and slit his throat. If the bastard was lucky.

“Oh, don’t take this the wrong way—”

“Well … yes.”

It wasn’t that Neal was ungrateful that his father was actually going through the proper channels as opposed to taking justice into his own hands – that had a history of creating more problems, and gods knew they had enough already. He wondered if Belle had asked that he go to Emma, or whether Rumplestiltskin had made that decision on his own. Neal supposed it didn’t really matter, and reminded himself that just because his father was going to Emma now didn’t mean that he intended to let her be the executor of justice on the day.

“Well, for one thing, I have no idea who they are,” Rumplestiltskin said with a shrug. “Belle’s description is unfortunately rather vague, and they didn’t leave anything behind that I could use to identify them. I thought Emma might have some luck with her modern talents.”

“Oh. And you came round here to check that they were—”

“That Hook and Zelena are still safely locked up, yes.”

Neal nodded, head full of conflicting emotions. So now they had another person running around Storybrooke causing problems.

“Great. Just great.”

There was one thing that small towns did very well, and that was gossip. Everybody knew everybody’s business, from the ten-year-old Pokémon card trader to the grandmothers’ knitting circle. Belle tried to focus on the ice tea she had ordered. Somebody had walked in with a wet jacket; it smelted like damp monkey. The coffee pot whirred. Sharp yellow teeth flashed in her field of vision, the whirring became more of a growling and she had to cover her ears to make it stop. She could feel eyes on the back of her head and swore she heard somebody whisper her
name. In the corner of her eye, she spotted Ruby mutter something to Archie near the cake display, suspiciously glance her way, and shortly afterwards Archie unsubtly plonked himself on the stool to Belle’s left.

“How’s it going?”

“Did Ruby tell you to check up on me?”

Archie ignored the question and pointed to her tea. “You’ve been sitting here for ten minutes and haven’t touched that. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” Belle answered methodically. She sipped her tea. The icy refreshment didn’t have the same kick to it, and Archie had not moved. “Somebody attacked me in the library.”


“Yes. Rumple’s gone to the station to report it.” At least I hope that’s what he’s done. “And I don’t know. He didn’t exactly introduce himself.”

“But it was a man?”

“It was a man. I think maybe forty-five at most, short brown hair, and he had his vest on inside out,” Belle described, trying to remember the details in case it was important. Archie had been working non-stop to help all the newcomers settle in; maybe he would recognise something. “And a scar on his face. Right along here,” she added, running a finger down the length of her jaw to show him. Sadly, Archie shook his head.

“Sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

Belle shrugged. It had been worth a try.

“How are you feeling?”

“Huh. Honestly?” She chuckled humourlessly and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t really know. It was a bit of a shock, I guess.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No. And I don’t think he wanted to.”

Not that I’d know, given that I sat and cried in the elevator like a trapped worm.

She shifted in her seat to look Archie in the eye, biting her lip as she did. If there was anybody in town she could trust … “He was just there to distract Rumple.”

He leant in, curious. “What makes you say that?”


“Ah. And … you think that they targeted you so that Rumplestiltskin wouldn’t notice when they broke in?”

“Why not? It’s not like this hasn’t happened before, Archie. This is the third time!” Belle cried, louder than she had intended. Fortunately, the diner was busy with the lunch trade and nobody noticed. “First it was Regina, then it was Hook, and now this. Who’s to say there won’t be a next time? I just – I feel –”
“Feel what?”

“Helpless,” she admitted. “Every time I’ve tried to help, all I’ve done is made things worse.”

“You know that’s not true.”

“Isn’t it? I went after Hook when he stole Bae’s shawl and he almost killed Rumple. I gave Zelena what she needed to know to bring Rumple back from the dead and a man died for it. Archie, I helped her! I saved her life when she came back to the Dark Castle with two arrows in her chest. I could’ve let her die, but I didn’t. And look how that turned out.”

*I spared her life, and people got hurt because of it*, she added unconsciously. *David. My father. It’s my fault.*

“Belle, acting on what you believe to be the right thing is never wrong,” said Archie. “And despite what you may believe right now, you do not make things worse. Remember, you saved my life when you went looking for Hook on his ship. You stopped Rumplestiltskin from murdering a man. And you refused to kill a woman in cold blood despite everything she had already done, both to you and the man you love.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” she murmured. Archie sighed.

“Have you talked to Rumplestiltskin about this?”

“No.”

“Do you think maybe you should?”

“No. He has enough problems of his own to deal with right now.”

She had pretended not to notice his lapses in concentration, hoping that it was just a side effect of his recent resurrection and that it would go away eventually. But it had been *days*, and it didn’t seem to be improving. If anything, it was getting worse. She *desperately* wanted to believe him when he said that he had it under control. But what if he didn’t? What was she supposed to do? What *could* she do?

“Well, can I suggest that you at least think about it?” asked Archie. “I think he might be the best person to help you.”

Belle nodded absentmindedly, only half-listening. Oh, she was sure Rumple could help her – but could she help *him*?

So Emma hadn’t been joking after all.

The great conglomerate wall of furniture stood at least ten feet tall, held together by rope, nails and a prayer. Regina crossed her arms as she inspected the work. The bottom of the wall was primarily furniture – desks, chests of drawers, packing crates – with sheets of metal hammered around the more vulnerable areas. The builders had even added castle-style ramparts at the top, made from what seemed to be dirt and snow compacted into plastic bags. Crude, but they would be damn near bulletproof and could do a lot of damage if they fell onto anyone. It was hardly fortress material, but clever in its own way. Climbing it would be difficult, as one would never know when a slippery foothold or a loose drawer would send them plummeting down to earth. Not to mention
the archers and slingshots that were undoubtedly hidden on nearby roofs, waiting to take out anybody who did make it to the top. Burning it was also out of the question – any fire large enough to take it out would easily spread to the neighbouring buildings. A truck might have been able to barge through, but Regina doubted that they’d be able to find a truck sturdy enough or driver crazy enough to attempt it. And there was no way to know who was waiting to get hurt on the other side.

“Blimey,” Robin exclaimed on her left. He stared up at the wall, along with Henry and Snow. “Richard’s been busy.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” said Snow, who had Jesse perched on her shoulder. The baby slept on, unaware that anything was wrong; Regina would have gladly swapped places with him right then. They had been supposed to start organising things to banish Zelena from town after Regina picked Henry up from school, but ended up taking a long detour to Elm Street. So far, Nala’s claims about the barricades checked out. Regina might have sworn if the boys weren’t there. Wasn’t it enough that she had to banish her own sister today – she had to deal with crazy former kings as well?

“I don’t understand,” Henry added. “What’s the point of walling off sections of the town and not letting anybody through?”

“It’s a power play, Henry,” said Regina. She took a step closer to the wall and – when nobody shot her – another one. “Richard and Weselton know that they don’t have the numbers to take the town by force. This sort of thing enables what little manpower they do have to count for something. And it undermines the existing authorities.”

*It makes me look weak,* she added silently.

“I still don’t get it.”

“Richard wants control of the town,” Robin explained. “Right now, Regina’s in power. The only people who are interested in that changing are the nobility. The peasantry won’t care who is in charge; as long as they’ve got food, shelter and know that someone’s going to protect them from the bad guys, they’ll be happy with things the way that they are. Richard needs to win them over to gain control of the town. And if Richard wants to do that, he has to prove that we can’t protect them. Laying claim to parts of the town right under our noses is actually a pretty good way to do it.”

“But Mom said that all they’ve taken over are some warehouses and the car repair shop. How is that a threat?”

“It doesn’t matter what they’ve taken,” Robin continued. “Just the fact that we couldn’t stop them from doing it is enough to cast doubt.”

“Exactly,” Regina declared, rolling up her sleeves. “And it stops right now.”

Richard had certainly covered the bases where a human army was concerned, but that didn’t mean he could stand up to a sorcerer. All she had to do was blast through the wall. Then everyone would know who was the real power in Storybrooke.

“REGINA, NO!”

Snow’s cry cut through the street, loud enough to rattle the barricade. It woke Jesse from his nap, much to the baby’s displeasure, which he made clear to everybody within two blocks. Roland ducked behind his father’s legs, and Henry had actually covered his ears.

Snow grimaced apologetically, and continued in a voice just loud enough to be heard over Jesse’s
wails: “Don’t you see? This is exactly what Richard wants. Oh, Jesse, I’m sorry …”

She shushed the baby, which seemed to quieten him somewhat but he continued to make pitiful whimpering.

“What do you mean, ‘this is what he wants’?”

“If you fight against them as the Evil Queen,” Snow explained, bouncing Jesse on her arm, “it will validate everything that Richard has been saying. We could lose everyone on our side.”

“Much as I hate to admit it, Gina, she’s got a point,” said Robin. Regina glared at him; he gave her a shrug back. “Richard’s not the type to be intimidated. You blast through that wall, all he’s gonna do is use it against you.”

“We have to do this diplomatically,” added Snow.

Deep down, Regina knew that they were right, but that didn’t mean she felt any less like they had ganged up against her. “So what do you want me to do?” she demanded, fighting the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. “Just sit back and let them tell me how to run my own town?”

“No, but we do need to get them to the negotiating table,” said Snow. “If we can get enough people to realise how stupid this all is, take away Richard’s support – well, he can hardly wage a war on his own.”

“There’s no chance that Richard’s gonna back down?” Henry asked, looking worried. Robin shook his head.

“No.”

“The problem is that it isn’t just Richard,” said Regina. “I know Weselton; he’s a greedy bastard. He might back down, but it’d cost us an arm and a leg to make him do it. And while Ernest could be persuaded to back off, George won’t be.”

That news had been the biggest surprise. Nobody had heard from King George since he’d framed Ruby for murder and wrecked Jefferson’s hat; why, Regina still wasn’t sure, but the point was that he had now come out of the woodwork. And while he had less reason to hate Regina than others did, she knew he was still sore that David had taken the throne from him. David’s death wouldn’t change that, not as long as Emma and Jesse lived and laid a claim to Carolingia’s throne. So he would stand against Snow by default.

“I know.” Stepping past Snow, Robin reached out to take Regina’s hand. “I’m not saying any of this is gonna be easy, but fighting on their terms won’t solve anything. Heck, if I know Richard, he’s on the other side of that wall just waiting for you to blast through so he can claim that the Evil Queen isn’t really gone. You have to prove that she is.”

If it had been anyone else, Regina would have snapped that she shouldn’t have to prove anything. But Robin was right – she owned the mistakes she had made in the past whether she liked it or not. And though the small group of people she had come to call family knew different, recent events had reminded her that the Evil Queen’s reputation wasn’t truly dead.

So she turned away from the barricade and let Robin put his arm around her shoulders. The fight – such as it was – could wait one more day. Right now, she had to send Zelena out of town before her sister became the cause of another crisis.
After calling his fiancée to pass on Rumplestiltskin’s report of the break-in, along with Belle’s best
description of the culprit, Neal found himself sitting down to a late lunch at Granny’s with the
three of them. And, despite the hectic occurrences of the day, they were laughing. Well, his father,
Belle and Emma were. What had started off as a discussion about something funny that Henry had
done turned into a recollection of Neal’s most mortifying childhood memories.

“Yes, it was terribly amusing when he started digging in the hay bales looking for lambs,” said
Rumplestiltskin with a grin poorly concealed behind his coffee. “And when he couldn’t find them,
came to me all worried about where the baby sheeps were.”

“In my defence, someone didn’t bother to correct me until I was almost nine,” Neal grumbled. And
it had been a reasonable assumption at the time – the shepherds put out the bales to feed the flocks
in winter, and the lambs came in spring when the bales were all gone. Therefore, he had logically
assumed that the baby sheep came out of hay bales.

Emma at least had the courtesy to hide her giggles behind her hand, whereas Belle didn’t bother.
Neal shot his father a deadly glare and swore that he would get him back one day, somehow.

If someone had told him a year ago that he would sit down to a civilised meal with his wife (as he
had believed her to be back then), his father and a woman who was fast on the track to becoming
his stepmother, Neal would have said they were crazy and phoned the cops. A part of him still
couldn’t quite believe that any of it was real – that Emma didn’t hate him for one, and that the
father he’d once had was starting to truly shine through the skin of the imp that had overtaken him
for another. He could do with fewer childhood stories, though, and was just grateful that Henry
was at Regina’s for the weekend.

“Thanks, Pop, for thoroughly embarrassing me,” said Neal, rising from his seat and collecting their
plates to take up to the counter. Rumplestiltskin smiled coyly.

“My pleasure. I don’t suppose you remember when you were ten, and your friend Morraine’s little
brother –”

“Yeah, let’s not get into that today,” Neal said hurriedly, cutting across his father. But the damage
was done, and Belle’s curiosity was not to be abated.

“What? What happened?”

“Well, it involved a rather unfortunate goat, to be honest –”

Emma’s phone rang before Rumplestiltskin could really get into the story, and Neal sighed in
relief. That was, until Emma went pale listening to the person on the other end, and turned to him
looking as if someone had just told her that the moon was about to hit the earth.

Oh, crap.

Emma rushed to the station with a blank mind. She felt numb, emotionless, disbelieving – so
dumbfounded that no thought made it through her mind at all. It couldn’t be possible. It just
couldn’t be possible.

But then she shoved the station doors open, Neal on her heels with Rumplestiltskin and Belle not
far behind, to the smell of smoke and beeping of the station’s fire alarm. She looked down. Happy
was on the floor by her desk, crouching over an unconscious Sleepy. Hook was also out cold,
slumped against the bars of his cell as if he had fallen there.

And there was a gaping hole in the next cell. Emma stared. The Witch was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 5: The Night That Won’t Rest, in which the heroes figure out how the Witch escaped, nobody can sleep, and Rumplestiltskin comes into possession of a certain hat
“This is your place?”

Zelena looked around the squalid apartment on Grimm’s Road, fighting the urge to turn up her nose at the second-rate quarters. It looked more like the sort of place one to expect to find a little old lady with too many cats, not an ancient fae who had just broken through the magic of three of the most powerful enchanters alive. There were books piled haphazardly on a side table, newspapers and magazines strewn across the settee, which had a hand-knitted quilt draped over the cushions in a sickeningly sweet pattern of pinks, purples and autumn gold. Jars of every jam imaginable – plum, cherry, strawberry, blackberry currant – were laid out in neat lines on the kitchen counter. The faded wallpaper was marked with cracks, a light spotting of mould grew in the corners, and a pantheon of watercolour landscapes – not particularly good ones – covered every available inch of wall space.

“Sorry about the mess,” Jonathan said, setting a bag of groceries on the table. For some reason he had made them drop by a corner store to pick up a bag of cat biscuits. “The last owner was a bit of a hoarder and I haven’t got around to throwing away her things yet. Have I, Miss Ginger?”

He was speaking to a dark shape crouched behind the sofa, which answered him with a hiss. Zelena ducked to look and realised that he was talking to a fat ginger tabby. Presumably the granny who used to own the place.

“I hate cats,” Jonathan remarked by way of explanation when Zelena threw him a confused look. “But it does make for good cover. As far as anybody knows, this place is owned by Miss Sophia Ginger, a recluse renowned for complaining about everything under the sun. It also happens to be on the other side of the barricade constructed by King Richard, so nobody is going to come here looking for us.”

“Looking for you,” Zelena stated simply. “Thank you for your assistance, but I will be leaving now. I have a sister to destroy.”

She pivoted on her heels and was halfway to the door when it slammed shut. Opening it proved impossible, so she grudgingly turned back to Jonathan with a scowl. He grinned innocently and put his hands in his pockets.

“Go where, exactly?” he asked. “You’re known in this town, and it won’t be long before Regina starts looking for you. Not mention you still have those on –” he gestured to her wrists, where Tinkerbell’s iron cuffs remained, leaving a red rash and lesions on the skin beneath – “which means you have as much magic as the average sewer rat. Not great odds, by any means.”

“Fine, give me a sword! I’ll cut my hands off!”

“What, both of them at the same time?” Jonathan shook his head. “Nah. I’ve got a better idea.”

Regina arrived at the station exactly five minutes after Emma called her. The door was open – thankfully, otherwise she may have blasted straight through it – and her son’s other mother stood in the entrance, staring at the melted bars in disbelief before uttering the understatement of the century.
“Oh, shit.”

Fortunately, Sleepy hadn’t been hurt – the worst of it was a bruise on his chin where he’d hit the floor. Hook was steadily coming around – Neal and Belle took care of him – and Rumplestiltskin was scanning the station for traces of magic. At least, that was what Emma thought the muttering and flicking of his wrists was all about.

“What the hell happened?”

“Not sure yet,” Emma told Regina as Robin, Snow and Henry joined them in the station. “Happy went to get the security tapes.”

Regina turned to Rumplestiltskin. “What about you? Have you found anything?”

“No,” said the old sorcerer. “It’s strange. The magic is from a mixture of sources. But I can tell you that it’s not Zelena’s.”

“So what? You’re saying the cell just happened to melt away and she walked out on her own?!”

“Regina,” Snow said sternly while adjusting her hold on Jesse. “We don’t know what happened. Let’s find out first before we start jumping to conclusions.”

Right on cue, Happy arrived with the tape in hand. “I’ve got it!”

“I can’t believe the station still uses Betamax,” Neal muttered under his breath as Emma tried loading the tape.

“Well, we haven’t exactly got around to updating the system,” said Emma, giving him a look. She heard him chuckle to himself as the video flickered to life, playing the same scene that she and the others had just walked into – Sleepy and Hook out cold on the floor, the cell bars melted away and no sign of the Witch.

“Alright, Happy said that Sleepy made his hourly check-in at three o’clock and missed the four o’clock one,” Emma murmured, hitting rewind. “So let’s go back to half past three and … there we go.”

She hit play and leant forward to watch with Henry in the chair beside her. She figured that there was no point to making her son leave – Henry would find out one way or another. As for the video, it was all pretty boring. Hook, from the look of things, was trying to entertain himself by singing (for which Emma was grateful there was no audio). Zelena didn’t seem to be doing anything unusual at all – just sitting in her cell reading the newspaper, as she had been doing every day for the last week. Then she noticed that the Witch had been reading the same page for the last ten minutes, but didn’t have time to ponder on the meaning of that as a wave of light spread throughout the station, knocking both Hook and Sleepy unconscious.

“What the hell?” Emma muttered.

A figure emerged from the bottom right-hand corner of the video, a man Emma didn’t recognise. But Zelena seemed to know him. She discarded the paper and stood near the back of the cell as the man poured something liquid from a vial over the bars, which melted away as if they had been dipped in sulphuric acid. Then the man put a hand through the hole, shook for a second, then there was another blast wave and the protection spells keeping Zelena contained fractured into pieces and collapsed. After that, the two of them walked out of the station, leaving the unconscious dwarf and pirate snoring on the floor.
“Who’s that?” asked Henry. Emma rewound the tape back to the man and pressed pause. It was blurry but clear enough to make out a few details of his face.

“Anyone recognise him?” Neal asked the group while Emma fought the urge to swear loudly. There were children around. “Pop?”

Rumplestiltskin shook his head, as did Regina. Belle, surprisingly, nodded.

“I do.”

Everybody turned to look at her in confusion, except Rumplestiltskin, who pointed at the video. “That’s him?” he asked. Belle nodded again.

“That’s him.”

“That’s the guy who attacked you in the library?” Neal asked for confirmation.

“What?” Robin, Henry and Snow exclaimed together.

“And broke into the house,” Rumplestiltskin continued, staring straight at the screen. “The potion he used on the bars – I’d say he stole the ingredients from me.”

“You left them lying around?!” Regina thundered. “For any half-witted sorcerer to walk in and take –!”

“There wouldn’t have been a problem,” Rumplestiltskin returned, turning to face his former student with a calm façade that Emma recognised all too well, “if you had just done the responsible thing in the first place –!”

“Alright!” Neal interrupted, jumping in between his father and Regina. The last thing that they needed right now was a shouting match. “It doesn’t matter. She’s out, and that’s what we need to worry about right now.”

“Yeah, that and one other thing,” said Robin, staring at the frozen video while Roland hugged his leg. “There’s someone in town who would actually want to help her.”

“And is either powerful enough or desperate enough that they would steal from the Dark One,” added Belle.

Everyone looked at each other, the weight of those words sinking in. Emma met Neal’s eyes and felt reality come crashing down on top of her.

She hadn’t thought of that. Zelena was bad enough, but this guy …

“Crap.”

The Black Sheep was a quaint little inn located on the outskirts of town, so most of the proprietors were farmers. It struck Ruby as odd that farming folk would be so easily intimidated – a lot of them were also seasoned veterans, from the Ogre War, Agrabahn Crusade or else had fought with Snow against Regina. So either Richard had a decent amount of manpower at his disposal, or his influence extended a lot further than they’d originally thought.

Either way, Jolly was happy to lend a hand and told them the date and time of Sir Guy’s next visit, which just so happened to be the day after Ruby, Mulan and Dorothy decided to do something. It was early in the evening, so there weren’t a lot of people around when the three women claimed a
table underneath an awful painting of a pig – not that anyone would ever tell Jolly that, he was rather proud of his minimalistic art skills – and each ordered a drink. Toto stayed under the table, his head on Dorothy’s foot but ears perked and alert for trouble.

As a few more people filtered – mostly families come for a reasonably-priced meal that they didn’t have to cook themselves – Ruby grimaced. She would have preferred to have less of an audience for this.

“Remember, it’s all recon until absolutely necessary,” she reminded Dorothy and Mulan, who both nodded. None of them particularly wanted a fight, but each knew they could handle themselves if it came down to it.

Then the door opened again, allowing a decent gust of the February wind through, and Toto whined under the table.

“That’s our man,” Dorothy murmured.

Guy was perhaps best described as slimy, the sort of trash that one might find outside the Rabbit Hole on a Saturday night. Ruby turned her nose up straight away. He wasn’t bad-looking, but he smelt like trouble, and he held himself like a man who was used to getting his way. So did the four other fellows who followed him.

“Seriously?” she hissed in an undertone. Through the window, she could see two more heavy-set men – bringing the total up to seven. “How many idiots did they think they’d need?”

Mulan flashed a cocky grin. “I’ve got this,” she declared, sidling out of the booth. Dorothy grabbed her arm.

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

Mulan gave her a wink. “Of course I’m not. There are only seven of them. And if there’s one thing a man never turns down, it’s a challenge.”

“Yeah, I’m still hung up on the number ‘seven’,” Dorothy muttered, though Mulan was long gone by then. When Dorothy turned back, Ruby shrugged.

“Oi, Jolly!” Guy roared, thumping his fist down on the counter. He had a hunting knife strapped to his belt, Ruby was not pleased to note. “Jolly! Three brandies and an ale, and make it quick.”

Jolly’s eyes flashed briefly in Ruby’s direction. ‘Three brandies’ was the code word for the extortion money, as he had told them while they planned out this operation. While Jolly dawdled at the tap, taking his time in removing a canvas bag from amongst the glasses, Mulan strode straight up to Sir Guy and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hi,” she greeted, leaning casually against the counter. “You in charge of this racket?”

Guy glanced from Mulan to Jolly and back again, looking murderous. “Who the bloody hell is asking?”

“ar name is Mulan. And I’d like you to leave here without your money and never return.”

A chorus of laughter rose up from Guy’s cronies. The knight chuckled too, looking Mulan up and down with a smarmy grin. “Oh, yeah? Let’s say I don’t plan to do that.”

“Then you leave me no choice but to challenge you to a duel,” Mulan returned, drawing herself up
to full height, which was still a good head shorter than Guy. “If you win, you get your money. If I win, you leave The Black Sheep and Jolly MacDonald’s family alone. Deal?”

Guy smiled. “You know, as much fun as a tumble with you sounds, I’m really not in the mood tonight. How about we try this little tête-à-tête next week?”

His cronies chuckled, one of them giving Guy a pat on the back. Mulan waited until they finished, laughed dryly, and then clubbed Guy in the jaw. He landed painfully on his backside. He whimpered on the ground, a hand clutching his face, and the four knights all turned their weapons on Mulan.

“No, now, boys,” Ruby announced, making her presence known by the click of the safety coming off of Granny’s crossbow as she stepped out of the shadows. She had the arrow trained on something the nearest knight could ill afford to lose, and the people around him stared. The pub was as silent as the new moon forest. “We wouldn’t want to make a scene, would we?”

“What, you think that peashooter scares us?” scoffed the knight. “There are two of you!”

Or so he thought, until a bolt thudded into the floor between his feet. It hadn’t come from Ruby.

“So what’s it gonna be? You can take my friend’s deal, and leave here peacefully with your pride intact, or you can suffer the humiliation of losing a public duel.” Ruby added a snarl to that last part, baring her teeth. The knights had already started to falter, so that did the trick. The one in Ruby’s sights slipped his knife into his belt before bending down to help Guy get to his feet, then ushered the rest out of the door. As they left, Dorothy poked her head out of the kitchen, crossbow still in hand, and Ruby added one final jab – just so it was clear to everyone:

“Mayor Mills sends her regards.”

Once again, Belle couldn’t settle. Part of it was that her arm – despite Rumple’s ministrations – was still sore where the mystery man had cut it. But mostly it was because, once again, somebody had used her to get to Rumplestiltskin.

She made a pot of tea while Rumple had a shower to try and calm her nerves. Zelena was out and undoubtedly up for another shot at revenge. And this time, she had help. Belle tried not to panic, but her heart raced and hands shook the more she thought about it. Even the chamomile wasn’t helping.

Soft footfalls thudded on the stairs. She knew it was Rumple, but started all the same, jumping at the sound of her own name and grateful that she had put her cup down.

“Hey,” he greeted softly, pyjamas creased and his hair still damp from the shower. “What are you doing down here?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured, casting a sideways glance at the door. Nobody was coming through it, but that didn’t mean anything.

He nestled down next to her on the sofa, put an arm around her shoulders and used the other to brush her hair back from her forehead. She fought the urge to flinch, knowing the scar was still there, ugly and prominent. A constant reminder of the Witch every time Belle looked in a mirror. Rumplestiltskin didn’t seem to mind, and laid a gentle kiss on her brow. “Do you want to go to bed?”

“No.”
She kept looking towards the door as if expecting somebody to come barging through it. Knowing that Rumple had fixed the wards (so they couldn’t try that trick with her blood again) didn’t help. They had found a loophole once, and Belle had no reason to believe that they couldn’t do it again. She wiped at her eyes, determined not to cry but failing. It was just that, for the first time in her life, she felt so damn helpless, and unsure, and with no idea what to do next.

Rumple, perhaps sensing everything she found herself unable to verbalise, pulled the blanket off the back of the sofa and draped it around the both of them. Then he gently made her lie back, found the television remote and switched it on. Neither of them watched a lot of television – Rumple had a hard time sitting still for that long and Belle, quite frankly, got bored – but it was a welcome reprieve from their current worries. The programme was some slapstick medieval satire that Belle suspected Mr Gold would have found amusing. It was rather funny – even she had to admit – though the witch-trial portion was a bit on-the-nose.

Still, it meant she could lose herself in Rumple’s embrace, at least for a little while, and even drift off to sleep, there on the sofa.

“So?” Neal murmured as he and Emma lay on their bed. Jesse was finally asleep – he’d woken at seven o’clock, screaming for milk, and refused to go back down for over an hour. He would probably be awake again shortly, so they should have been trying to get some shut-eye; however, Neal was unable to do so, and knew Emma wasn’t sleeping either. She was too still for that. “What are we going to do?”

She let out a long, heavy sigh. “I don’t even know. Robin’s right; it’s bad enough that Zelena’s out, but the fact that somebody actually helped her to do it –”

“And it wasn’t the monkey?”

“No, he’s still caged up in the convent. I checked.”

Damn. Neal turned over so that he was facing his fiancée and propped his head up on his elbow.

“We’re not gonna make the same trick work twice; not if somebody’s working with her this time,” Emma continued, whispering just in case the noise disturbed her brother. “And if he could break through the combined magic of Regina, me and Tink, then –”

“Yeah, but don’t forget – Pop’s on our side this time,” Neal murmured. “He can handle Zelena.”

“But can he handle the other guy?” Emma countered, turning her head. He couldn’t see her eyes in the low light, but he could still tell that she was worried. Really worried – worried enough that she wasn’t hitting or destroying anything, and that was saying something. “He attacked Belle. If that doesn’t say how little he fears your dad, then I don’t know what does.”

Neal didn’t know what to say. Because she was right. He rolled onto his back, contemplating things with worms twisting knots in his guts. If they had known where to start, or who the hell this guy was, then he might have felt better. But they didn’t have a clue and no way to find out. Eventually Emma rolled into him, resting her head in the crook of his arm. He stroked her hair, trying to be reassuring. Downstairs, he heard Jesse gurgle in his sleep, and Neal sighed.

“It’s not gonna happen again,” he murmured in Emma’s ear. “We know what she wants; we’ll be ready when it happens.”

Now if he could just convince himself that would really make a difference.
The next morning, Regina somehow made it to her office without a confrontation. Oh, she was going to give Richard one later – that wall was just as good as a public declaration of war, in her opinion – but for now, she had other problems.

Ella was walking out of another office when Regina and Snow made it up to the level, her young daughter in tow, and looked at them with some surprise. “Morning, Regina. I thought you were going to be out of town until this afternoon?”

“I just got back,” Regina lied easily, waving the young princess along with what she hoped was not obviously a forced smile. She supposed that it was a small blessing that, for once, a secret had been kept in Storybrooke. The dwarves had obviously kept their agreement to silence until they figured out what they were going to do, and Hook was still shut up in the sheriff’s office, incapable of telling anyone anything.

Ella looked uncertain and glanced at Snow, who just waved. Then she was thankfully distracted by her daughter, who reminded Mommy that she needed to go ‘twoy-let’ and dragged her off down the corridor. Snow continued to keep her mouth shut until they were safely sequestered inside Regina’s office.

“You know this won’t stay a secret forever,” said her stepdaughter, planting Jesse’s carrier on the table.

“No, not between you and the dwarves. I know, I know,” Regina added quickly, rubbing her brow and ignoring the look Snow shot her. She and Robin had been up most of the night, trying to figure out a plan of action, and it was fairly easy to tell that Snow hadn’t slept either. They did not need to be at each other’s throats right then. “I just want to keep it between us until we actually have a plan – if we let it out now, people are just going to panic. Not to mention the backlash that Richard and George will throw at us.”

“What if it gets out some other way, and people find out that the town leadership has been keeping things from them?” Snow countered, and Regina loathed her logic.

“I know, alright? I know. I just cannot deal with that right now.” She sighed, rubbed her brow again, and then warded her office against eavesdroppers. “Let’s just get things under control first, then we worry about what to do next.”

Snow grimaced uneasily, but nodded anyway and then took a step back from the table, though she kept one protective hand on Jesse’s carrier. While she made cooing noises and rocked her son, Regina rummaged in her desk drawers for a hairpin.

“You’ll want to hold him. This will hurt,” she told the young mother. Snow did as she asked, propping Jesse up on her shoulder while Regina carefully pricked his heel. Of course, he started screaming, so she quickly drew some blood and put a Band-Aid over the wound (she really needed to teach herself a healing spell or two).

“So what exactly is this spell going to do, again?” asked Snow in between her son’s agonised howling.

“It’ll instantly transport him here in the event that Zelena breaches my protections on the loft or comes within ten feet of him outside,” Regina told her, flicking the droplets off the hairpin and onto her desk. In all honesty, a hair would have done the trick, but blood guaranteed a stronger spell and where her sister was concerned, Regina wasn’t ready to take any chances. “There’s an alarm trigger built in, so I’ll know straight away if it activates.”
“Right. Wouldn’t it be easier just to put stronger protections on my house?”

“Ideally, yes, but with my magic, Emma’s and Rumplestiltskin’s all woven in, it’s about as strong as it’ll ever get. And we’ve already seen Zelena’s friend break right through those, so this is a backup – if they do manage to get into the loft, at least Jesse will be out of the line of fire.”

“And your office –?”

“Because it’s closer to the loft and less likely that Zelena will think to come here looking for him.”

Snow still looked doubtful, bouncing her son up and down as his cries subsided into whimpers. It was the best that anybody could do, short of Snow and Jesse leaving town – which, frankly, Regina was tempted to suggest. Failing that, she pressed her palm into the table and muttered under her breath in elvish, feeling a sharp tug somewhere in the vicinity of her kidneys as the spell locked in place. A whoosh of reddish-purple light resonated from her hand, forming a bubble around the office and a ripple across Jesse. The boy blinked, curiosity temporarily superseding pain; it passed quickly, and he went back to whimpering into his mother’s shirt.

“There. Done.”

Snow sighed. “Are we so sure that Zelena will try to cast her time-travel spell again?”

“There’s no reason to assume that she won’t,” said Regina. “Look, if the worst does happen, at least he’ll be safe.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Granny’s diner was surprisingly quiet after the breakfast rush, so Robin had no trouble putting in an order for two burgers. Roland was spending the day with Alan and Evy, and Regina had to work, so Robin decided to take Belle out for lunch. It had been a while since the two of them caught up, and he figured that she could use the distraction.

“Two beef burgers, one without tomato?” asked the counter manager – apparently Ruby had taken the day off. Robin thanked him and took their meals over to the booth, where Belle was not drinking her iced tea.

“Here you go,” he said, startling her out of her trance. Belle smiled weakly.

“Thanks.”

God, had she slept at all last night? As she picked at her food, she brushed her hair back and the white scar on her forehead stood out, stark against her pale face. He wondered if the reason she was letting her fringe grow out was to cover it.

“So,” Belle started, nibbling on a fry, “do we have a plan about what to do yet or –”

“Not yet,” said Robin. He wished he had better news. “But it’s only been a day. We’ll come up with something.”

“Yeah. Wish I could share your optimism,” she murmured, almost so quietly that Robin didn’t hear. As the bell above the door jangled, he grimaced at the defeat in her voice; it wasn’t like her to sound so helpless.
“Hey.” He rested his hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “It’s gonna be okay. We got her once; we can do it again.”

“I know, it’s just –”

“–lets the Evil Queen and the Dark One run loose, makes you wonder who’s really runnin’ this town–” muttered scruffy blonde man who had just walked in the door, clearly oblivious to Robin or Belle’s presence. His mate folded his receipt and grunted.

“And she wants to banish the Witch instead of executing her. Just wait ‘til the Dark One shows his true colours. Everybody knows they were workin’ together – you have to wonder what he’s got on her to keep him out of jail–”

Belle’s cheeksflushed as she pushed her tea to one side and slid out of the booth. There was a flash of something in her eyes that put Robin on edge, so he followed her to the counter and stood behind her as she whacked the blonde man in the face. The few people in the diner all jumped at the sound of the thunderclap and stared at Belle in shock.

“How dare you?!” she all but screamed as the man staggered, his friend looking down in confusion as he tried to connect the angry red mark on his mate’s cheek with the tiny, blue-eyed ball of fury simmering below his collarbones. “You have no idea what the Witch put Rumplestiltskin through! Don’t you dare ever make assumptions again when you know nothing about–!”

“Whoa, whoa, okay,” Robin interjected. Now that the shock of seeing Belle actually slap someone had worn off, he became extremely conscious of the fact that there were people around, and both of those men stood at least a head taller than him, let alone how much they towered over Belle. With that in mind, he took hold of her arms – she was shaking, her muscles tensed to the point of breaking – before she could do anything she would regret. He also shot the men a disdainful scowl, just in case they misinterpreted his intervention. “Alright. Come on. They’re not worth it.”

“Hey, aren’t you the outlaw who’s bedding the mayor?” asked the blonde man, revealing more and more of his idiocy by the second.

“Yup,” Robin shot back as he gently directed Belle down to the booth. “So we’ll both give you what for if you don’t shut your mouth.”

The blonde man looked like he was about to respond, but thankfully his mate had some sense and quickly shepherded him out of the diner. Other patrons continued to stare unsubtly; Robin shot each of them a look in turn until they decided to mind their own business and returned to their meals. Then, after about ten seconds of listlessly picking at her food, Belle removed herself from the booth and walked to the back of the diner, hiding her face. Robin followed.

It was only in the shadows, out of the prying eyes of others that she broke, a heart-wrenching sob escaping from her throat. Robin caught her before she fell and held her close with his arms wrapped around her back and her face pressed into his shirt. All of her pent-up anger and frustration came pouring out at once, and he waited patiently. She would be alright. Just not right now.

Rumplestiltskin opened the shop, but went into the back room to tinker rather than do nothing in the front. He just needed to be doing something, anything to keep himself distracted from current realities.

On one hand, the fact that they hadn’t yet heard from Zelena meant that he had more time to steel
himself for when it eventually happened. On the other, there was no way to know what she and her friend were getting up to, so Rumplestiltskin had to be prepared for any and all possibilities. Starting with some basic protection spells on the house and Snow’s loft – already done per Regina’s phone call that morning – and personalised ones to put around his family for when Zelena undoubtedly attempted to target them. Bae would protest, he knew already, but he hoped that common sense would bring his boy around. There was no reason to assume that Zelena wouldn’t try to regain control of the dagger, or any proof that she wouldn’t go after his family to do so. Rumplestiltskin had died once to save his family – and would do it again in a heartbeat – but that didn’t mean he was prepared to chance any of them getting hurt in the process.

Being unable to spin made the task much slower, however. Rumplestiltskin fought the frustration – and the urge to smash something because of it – and batted aside the Dark Ones’ attempts to distract and anger him. Almost literally – he had since discovered that shutting his eyes and imagining a cricket bat actually did help, remarkably, in keeping his predecessors at bay. Quite fascinating, and it prompted further research when more pressing matters had been dealt with.

In fact, he was so focused on the job that he didn’t even hear the bell ring when somebody walked into the shop. Or hear the person shout “Hello!” into an empty room, searching for a proprietor who wasn’t there. It was the moving shadow on the floor that got Rumplestiltskin’s attention and it would have made him jump if he hadn’t been handling a rather delicate potion at the time.

"Pity," snapped Siegfried. "Seeing black beetle eyes explode would have at least been INTERESTING."

“Ah, shut up,” Rumplestiltskin growled in return, beating the age-old darkness back with his imaginary bat before he stepped outside. His wards hadn’t detected a threat, so there was no need to walk in with the intention of turning anybody into a toad.

“Hello?” repeated his customer, a little old lady with thick spectacles that magnified her eyes ten times. Harmless enough, but potentially extremely irritating.

Rumplestiltskin coughed to announce himself as he stepped out of the back room. “Begging your pardon, madam. My work caught up with me.”

“Oh, of course!” said the little old lady, removing her glasses to clean them so she could see properly. It didn’t seem to improve anything. “You are Mr Gold?”

“I am.”

“Mrs O’Gorman,” she said, offering her hand. Rumplestiltskin shook it tentatively – it was extremely sweaty. He didn’t recognise her name. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, however. With the explosion of new people in town, he hadn’t yet learnt who was who – and in spite of what some said, he had not done business with every single denizen of the Enchanted Forest. “I am told you are a purveyor of rare artefacts?”

“It depends on what you are looking for.”

“Oh, I am not looking for anything,” she announced with a wave of her hand. Rumplestiltskin curled his nose at the smell of lily-of-the-valleys. “I am selling.”

“Oh?” His interest was entirely faked. He had seen plenty of elderly grandmothers through his shop during his time as Mr Gold, and they were almost always the ones who gave him the most grief. Insisting that their wares were valuable family heirlooms over several hundred years old when in fact they had, in all likelihood, been fished out of a box in someone’s garage sale.
Rumplestiltskin had more important things to do than to listen to yet another long tale of some obscure relative’s journey to fantastical – and probably fictional – islands.

“Yes, it is a sad tale. My husband passed away four years ago this spring and I have, unfortunately, found myself in dire straits – well, I suppose I can spare you the story – would you care to take a look?”

She dumped the contents of her arms onto the table without his answer and launched straight into the various origin stories of each piece. Rumplestiltskin pretended to listen, nodded and ‘ah-ha’ing at the appropriate moments, until something did catch his attention.

“May I take a look at this?” he asked, reaching for the cloth that the old woman had used to carry her pieces in.

“What, this old thing? You can have it if you like – dirty rag, been meaning to throw it out for ages –”

But once again, Rumplestiltskin had stopped listening. As soon as the rag was in his hands, he knew it was more than what it appeared. The ancient and weathered cowhide was covered in nicks and patches, fixed up with mismatching pieces of fabric. He turned it over and its shape became more apparent – like a hat, in fact –

“– what would you have it for?”

He started. The woman’s giant eyes stared straight at him. “I’m sorry?”

“What would you have it for?” the woman repeated, waving a hand over her offerings. Rumplestiltskin spared it a glance – he could have the things appraised, they probably weren’t worth much more than a few hundred altogether. But the hat was a different story, if it was what he thought it was –

However Mrs O’Gorman ever got her hands on it, Rumplestiltskin didn’t know or care. He ended up writing her a cheque for two thousand just to settle things quickly, then dumped the rest of his sales into a box and shoved them into a cabinet for later. Turning the sign to ‘closed’ and locking the door for good measure, he then returned to the back room and set the hat on his workbench.

Acrid metal stung the back of his throat as he felt ancient magic surge through him, resonating through the shop with the hat as the epicentre. It shuddered. Then the potion began to take effect. Centuries’ worth of tanning fell away in pieces and the patchwork peeled away, leaving behind dark blue cloth embroidered with gold patterns. Within seconds, the hat looked exactly as it would have when it was brand new, and the imp emerged from deep within Rumplestiltskin to perform a giddy little dance.

He had been truthful with Belle when he told her that he did not know of a way to sever his connection to the Dark One’s dagger. Over the centuries, he’d explored many possibilities, come up with a thousand and one theories on how to do it, but not one had ever come to fruition. He simply did not possess the power.

But the Sorcerer’s Hat may have been the one thing in all the realms that could do it.

Chapter End Notes
Next, Chapter 6: The Princes and the Troll, in which Emma gets a deputy, Belle ‘borrows’ a book, Hans tries to make his point and Frederick gets ice in his eye
She was in a dark room. Pale light spilt through a window that she could not find. There was a wall. And another wall. A corner.

Somebody screamed.

“Rumple?”

More screaming.

She couldn’t find him. She had to find him –


“Rumple!”

Belle woke, eyes flying open and breath coming in gasps. There was a warm blanket over her body, a soft mattress under her back, and Rumple was snoring softly by her side. The first restful night he’d had in weeks …

She turned her head to watch him sleep. He was lying on his stomach, so his hair had fallen over his face, gently wafting with each intake of his breath …

It’s okay, she told herself. He’s right here. He’s not going anywhere.

But she did need to use the bathroom. She carefully extracted herself from the bed, somehow without waking him, and walked to the en suite. The thumping in her chest slowly decreased while she splashed cold water on her face. Then she caught sight of her reflection and had to stop herself from shouting.

She knew she had been struggling, not sleeping or eating well, but nothing could have prepared her for this shock of seeing that alien creature staring back at her with her own eyes. Dark circles under her eyes, limp hair falling over her face, the ugly scar like a lightning bolt against her sickly white skin …

Oh, God, she thought. She dropped her head into her hands, bracing her elbows on the sink. What’s happening to me?

Yesterday, she’d hit a man in Granny’s. A total stranger. Over something she wasn’t even sure she had heard properly. The fact that she had been on edge, anxious and frightened because of Zelena’s jailbreak didn’t excuse anything.

“Belle?”

“In here.”

The door clicked as Rumple came in.
“Sweetheart?”

She unpeeled her face from her palms, wiped her nose and tried to slow her breathing. “Just had a bad dream.”

“Oh.”

He stepped closer, fingers ghosting her side. She moved against him so he would know it was okay. He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her nose in his hair.

*It’s okay,* she told herself again. *We’re both here. We’re both safe. Neither of us is going anywhere.*

“I love you,” she murmured, her nose pressed against his ear.

“Shh,” he whispered while gently stroking her hair. “I love you, too.”

After slipping on the hundredth slick of mud, Frederick was about ready to call the whole thing off. He was cold, wet and hungry, *and* marching off into the woods after a known maniac. Hans trudged on, undeterred. Frederick had to admit that he was curious enough to see this through. He made a note to pick up the strongest brand of detergent from the store on the way home and hurried after his brother.

He did keep one hand on his sword at all times, though. Brother or not, it didn’t hurt to be careful.

They came to a steep rise that they almost had to climb on all fours. It evened out, but Hans pulled Frederick back down when he made to stand up.

“Stay down, they’ll see you.”

“What?”

Hans put a finger to his lips and wriggled to the top of the rise, pulling a spyglass out of his backpack as he did so. Frederick found his binoculars and sidled up next to him. Hans pointed animatedly at something beyond the rise.

At first glance, it looked like a perfectly ordinary, if somewhat muddy, little valley full of perfectly round grey rocks of all different sizes. Although there were an awful lot of them … and if Frederick wasn’t much mistaken, some of them seemed to be moving …

“What on earth?”

As he watched, one of the rocks rolled down the hill and, with a *pop,* became something vaguely human. It was maybe three feet tall, had massive bat-like ears, wore clothes that appeared to be sewn together from moss, and could have been carved out of granite. It walked — actually *walked* — to the centre of the valley, where a dozen more of the strange creatures congregated around a pit fire, roasting an unfortunate pig. Behind them, they seemed to have filled in an open part of the valley with a shimmering wall of solid ice, with a crack in the middle just large enough for a person to fit through. Frederick shifted to get a better look. One of the trolls — a bit bigger than the rest and dressed in a way that looked important — got up and trundled to the opening. A figure emerged — it was human, male, maybe in his mid-forties, with light brown hair and a scar down one side of his face. There was someone else with them, but they stayed in the shadow of the ice wall, so Frederick didn’t get a good look at their face.

“Alright, then,” he announced, putting the binoculars down to look at his brother. “Let’s say I
believe you. What are they up to?”

“Do you see that mirror hanging on the wall?” Hans asked, pointing. Frederick looked and found it without trouble. “That’s the source of the curse. It’s called the Spell of Shattered Sight.”

“Yeah? Which does what?”

“Basically? It turns people into the worst possible version of themselves,” Hans said with a heavy sigh. Frederick spared him a glance, then went back to examining the mirror.

It looked like a curiosity that one might find on the wall of Mr Gold’s pawnshop; the mirror itself was circular, set in the middle of an intricate wrought iron snowflake. Ice crystals hung off the edges, glowing with unnatural blue light.

“And you’re saying that’s what happened to you?”

“Yes.”

Frederick sighed. He set the binoculars down, slid down the hill so he could sit upright, and faced his brother.

“Okay. Explain this to me; why did the trolls curse you to make you try to kill Queen Elsa?”

“Trolls have a long-standing feud with human sorcerers,” Hans explained, sitting back with his weight on his elbows. “I’m not saying that they’re evil – they’re shady and usually have hidden motives when they’re dealing with humans. Look, I don’t know why, exactly. Maybe it’s because the sorcerers have somehow been a threat to them that we don’t know about. Maybe it’s ancient history – the trolls fought against us in the Fae Wars, so that might have something to do with it. But I do know that trolls all over the realm have been somehow linked to the death of almost every major sorcerer in the last century.”

“That doesn’t explain why they’d curse you.”

Hans looked uneasy, and cleared his throat before continuing. “Okay. Well, this is purely conjecture, but I think they were trying to get a foothold in the Arendelle royal court. If they’d killed Elsa themselves, then Anna would have become queen and no-one would have ever trusted them again. But by having me do it–”

“They had a scapegoat.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re right: it’s pure conjecture.”

Hans groaned. “Fred–”

“We’ve been in Storybrooke for almost three weeks. Why would they wait this long before doing anything?” Frederick asked, sliding further down the hill. “You keep telling me they’re a threat, but I haven’t seen or heard a single thing that indicates anything of the sort. Look, I came on this little nature trek, saw some talking rocks, now I want to go home. Come on. Abigail’s putting on a roast. If you make us late and it gets cold, I’m going to strangle you myself.”

He marched off down the hill, half-slipping and sliding, without bothering to check if Hans was following.
“Why won’t you tell me where we’re going?” Zelena demanded after stubbing her toe on yet another tree root. Once again she cursed the cuffs – without them, she and Jonathan could have simply teleported to wherever it was he was taking them and not bothered with all of this walking.

Then again, without the cuffs, she wouldn’t be stuck with him anyway.

“You’ll see.”

She growled to herself and kept walking. If she’d just had a plan to get rid of the cuffs herself, then none of this would have been necessary. So she trudged on, kicking mud and leaves off her shoes and counting down the minutes until she had her magic back.

They eventually cleared the thicket of pine trees, and Zelena had to hide a gasp. Up ahead was a great wall made of solid ice, glowing unnaturally blue and shimmering, but not from sunlight. She shut her eyes and breathed in – or rather, tasted in the back of her throat – the smell of bluebells and wild heather.

“Trolls?” she asked Jonathan. He stopped in the shadow of a crevasse just large enough for a person to fit through.

“Have you ever met one before?”

“No.”

“Excellent,” he declared, rubbing his hands together. When he had gone ten steps into the crevasse – Zelena had not moved an inch – he shouted back, “Well, are you coming or not?”

She growled again. Why the hell did he have to be so damn insufferable?

Twenty steps later – she had to bend over and squish through some of the narrower sections of the gap – and she stopped just behind Jonathan, who was standing in the entrance talking with the most bizarre creature Zelena had ever seen. It was perhaps three feet tall and looked like one boulder that had been stacked on top of another, with stony legs, feet, massive ears and prominent nose. Its eyes were the same colour as the lichen that covered the exposed parts of its body. Mushrooms grew on its shoulders and it wore clothes that seemed to have been sewn together from deer hide, moss, leaves, bird feathers and other forest debris.

“Zelena, meet Grand Pabbie. He’s – well, you could say that he’s the king of the rock trolls,” said Jonathan. “But don’t call him that, because they don’t believe in monarchies. Grand Pabbie, this is my daughter.”

“How do you do?” the rock troll greeted, extending a rough granite paw. Zelena shook it. It was warmer than she had expected. “Highly irresponsible of you, Faílinis. Fathering a human child.”

“I’m not human,” Zelena protested, unsure if that comment was meant to be an insult or not.

“Indeed, or you would not suffer your present affliction,” Grand Pabbie observed, raking his eyes over Zelena’s wrists. She twisted her arms in front of her self-consciously and regretted the action almost immediately when the iron brushed her unprotected forearms.

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“How do you do?” she asked almost desperately. That was what they had supposedly come here for, after all.

Pabbie nodded and held out his hands. After glancing at Jonathan – he smiled encouragingly – she did the same, allowing the troll to access her wrists. Pabbie touched a finger to each of the cuffs.
There was a click and a puff of green smoke, and the cuffs popped open. Zelena shook them off instantly.

“It will take a day or two for your power to return to normal,” said Pabbie. He whistled and a smaller troll tumbled – literally – down the slope, picked up the now-useless cuffs and rolled away with them. Zelena wondered what Pabbie planned to do with them and then decided that she didn’t care. They were off, she was free, and now she could get back to work.

“Thank you,” she said, both to Jonathan and to Pabbie. She could feel her magic again, and set it to work healing the angry, red, raw marks on her wrists. That was a bad idea; her knees almost gave way beneath her even from that small exertion of power.

“Here,” Jonathan offered, reaching for her. Before she could protest, he had grabbed hold of her elbows and began supplementing her magic with his own. In seconds, the blisters were gone, the pain subsiding to a slight stinging sensation akin to pins and needles, and the skin started to return to its normal pink colour. “Pabbie’s right. It’ll take a couple of days for the iron to leave your system completely, so don’t over-exert yourself.”

“I don’t need your help,” Zelena snapped, shaking Jonathan’s hands away. Although as much as she hated to admit it, he was right about the state of her magic. Teleportation was definitely beyond her current capabilities, so walking back to town it was. She was done with Jonathan now.

Or so she thought.

“Where are you going?” he called before she had taken three paces.

“Back to town,” she replied. “My goals haven’t changed.”

“You still intend to alter your history?”

“Yes. Have you changed your mind about assisting me?”

“No.”

“Then we’re done.”

“Tampering with time is forbidden magic for a good reason!” he shouted after her, repeated a hundred times by echoes in the icy crevasse. “Zelena, I can’t allow you to do this!”

She kept walking.

“But I can help you get revenge on Regina another way.”

She stopped.

_Do not turn back_, she told herself sternly. _You know what you have to do, and this isn’t the way to do it._

But she was weakened, and he had a lot of power at his disposal … any ally who could fight through Rumplestiltskin’s wards and another who could remove Tinkerbell’s shackles with a simple touch couldn’t possibly be the worst thing in the world …

Zelena sighed, shut her eyes and then walked back along the length of the crevasse. Jonathan was waiting, blue eyes expectant.

“Alright. I’m listening.”
Granny had not been happy when Ruby confessed what she, Mulan and Dorothy had been up to on Friday night. In Ruby’s defence, it hardly qualified as a bar brawl when nobody got hurt, only one person was punched and the most damage incurred was a small dent in the floor (which Dorothy had already fixed). Nonetheless, Granny had now put her on the morning shift for the next three weeks, so Ruby was stifling a yawn all through the breakfast rush on Sunday.

“Hey, Emma!” she greeted the sheriff when she came into Granny’s at half past ten. “Just the usual: grilled cheese and cocoa?”

“Yes, please. Uh, before you run off—”

Emma beckoned, sidling to the end of the counter. Ruby put in her order and joined her.

“Mayor Mills sends her regards?”

“Ah.”

She flashed a grin, and Ruby shuffled her feet guiltily.

“Look, for the record, I appreciate the fact that nobody got hurt. But if it happens again, or somebody complains, or I catch you at it, I may have to press charges.”

“Understood.”

Then Emma looked shiftily from side to side and beckoned Ruby in closer. “Off the record, could you drop me an anonymous line the next time you’re out? So that I know what areas to avoid.”

She winked, and Ruby laughed. “Right. I can do that.”

“I do appreciate it, you know,” Emma said as Mulan came out of the kitchen with a cocoa and grilled cheese. “Thanks, Mulan. Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Do you wish to berate me as well?”

“No, I was going to offer you a job. I seriously need a deputy.”

Ruby started, frozen halfway through refilling the coffee pot. Mulan’s only reaction was a slight rising of her eyebrow. “Me?”

“Sure, why not?” Emma said with a shrug, taking a sip of cocoa. “You’re tough and you can take care of yourself. I’d need you to stop punching guys in bars, but for the most part, it’s right up your alley.”

“My alley?”

“Never mind. What do you think?”

Mulan bit her lip, thinking, and looked at Ruby. As much help as she had been around the diner, Ruby knew her friend was bored. Mulan’s strengths simply didn’t lie in the burger-flipping industry. So she nodded and enthusiastically jabbed the coffee pot in Emma’s direction.

“Alright, then,” Mulan said after another moment’s contemplation. She shook Emma’s hand.
“Great! Do you mind popping around the station tomorrow morning, just to get a few things sorted out?”

“I can do that.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

After Emma had left, the bell on the door jingling after her, Ruby slapped Mulan on the shoulder. “Hey! Congratulations, Deputy!”

It was a weekend, so Henry finally managed to convince his parents to let him take the day off and shoot some targets in the park with Robin. Better still, the weather had held off and was warm enough that Grandma Snow felt okay taking Jesse out for a walk. Henry was happy; he knew that she had been going a bit stir-crazy cooped up in the loft all the time and she was still mourning Grandpa. Henry had no idea if Jesse was having fun – his baby uncle was conked out on his dad’s shoulder – but Grandma Snow seemed to be doing better.

His mom was a bit of a different story. Zelena’s escape had come as a shock – Henry knew that as well as anyone – but that wasn’t all. There was something there that Regina just wasn’t saying. But not the sort of thing where she was actively keeping secrets. Henry knew what that looked like, and this wasn’t it.

“I know Zelena’s her sister and all,” he said to Robin after failing to hit his fourth consecutive target. “But they barely know each other.”

“I know,” said Robin, sneaking a glance at the picnic table where Neal was talking with Grandma Snow. Regina was supposed to be coming, but she’d just called to say she’d been held up at the town hall and would drop by the loft later. They were trying to figure out what to do about Zelena; that wasn’t going to be as easy as before, not when they knew she had help this time. “Remember to aim about an inch above the target.”

Henry did. It hit the bottom of the board, which was at least something of an improvement.

“Okay. Now, you’re letting the string slip through your fingers before you loose so … here, hold it a bit more like this …”

Henry whooped. The arrow lodged into the middle red ring.

“Good! Alright, try that a few more times.” While Henry went to collect the arrows, Robin leant back on his elbows and looked thoughtful. “Have you ever wanted a sibling, Henry?”

Henry shrugged. “Yeah. When I was little, I was always asking Mom if I could have a brother. That was before I knew I was adopted.”

“Do you still want one?”

Henry frowned suspiciously. Did he mean …?

Robin quickly shook his head.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I’m getting at. I guess—” he sighed, looking over at the trees as if hoping the answer would jump out of the woods. “I’m trying to understand it myself, really. I had two
brothers and a sister, and we drove each other mad. Not to the point of trying to wipe out each other’s existence, mind you, but I still wonder what it would be like to be an only child.”

“It’s lonely,” Henry told him after a moment’s thought. “After a while, you kinda just want someone your own age to talk to.”

“Yeah?”

Henry shrugged. “I dunno. I guess it Mom had it a bit worse than me – you never met her mom, did you?”

“No, but from what Regina tells me about her, I’m rather glad to have never had the privilege. Bit of a nutter, wasn’t she?”

“I think Mom always wondered if Cora really loved her.”

“‘Not the warmest person in the world’, I believe is how she put it.”

“Something like that,” Henry replied. He dropped the arrows back in the stand. “Do you think that’s why she doesn’t want to hurt Zelena? She’s trying to redeem her because deep down, she wants a sister?”

“I think there are a lot of factors involved that either of us would have a tough time understanding,” said Robin. “Hell, sometimes I wonder if even Regina does. Two fingers below, one above.”

“Oh, right.” Henry adjusted his hold, concentrated and fired. Blue ring, but just barely.

There hadn’t been any hold-up at the town hall at all. Regina arrived on the landing of Doctor Hopper’s office and stood there for several minutes, a thousand and one emotions bubbling in her chest. Thankfully, Archie spared her the trouble of opening the door.

“Regina?” exclaimed the psychiatrist, standing in the threshold with Pongo’s leash in one hand and a surprised look on his face. “Are you here to see me?”

She hesitated in the hallway. “Are you busy?”

“No, no, of course not,” said Archie, shepherding her inside. “Just about to take Pongo for a walk, but it can wait – would you like to talk?”

“Zelena broke out.”

She hadn’t meant to say it like that – the words literally tumbled out of her mouth the second he shut the door. Archie, for his part, stood there in stunned silence, as if expecting somebody to jump out and shout ‘April Fool!’ When nobody did, the colour drained from his face.

“Uh –”

“It’s been almost two days,” she continued, still speaking in a ramble. “I don’t know where she is or what she’s planning. Something’s blocking my attempts to track her. Jesse is as safe as I can make him, but somebody is helping her. A man. I’ve no idea who he is or what he wants, but he dismantled the enchantments on her cell like they were nothing.”

Archie collapsed onto the sofa, let out a breath and removed his glasses. Upset about being denied
his walk, Pongo sat on the carpet and whined.

“Okay,” said Archie slowly. He rubbed his eyes, then noticed that she was standing and gestured for her to take a seat. “Is that what you wanted to talk about? Your sister?”

Now that she had stopped rambling, Regina wasn’t entirely sure what to say. “I don’t know.”

“You said it’s been two days,” he observed, eyes widening. “You haven’t told anyone but me, have you?”

“My family knows,” she confessed. “Henry, Emma, Neal, Snow. Robin. Rumplestiltskin and Belle. Hook and two of the dwarves were also there, so I doubt it’ll stay a secret for long.”

“Why do you want it to stay a secret?”

“What makes you think I do?”

“Because you haven’t told anyone who didn’t already know.” He replaced his glasses. “Are you afraid people will panic?”

“Yes.”

“Is that all that you’re afraid of?”

“No.”

“What else?”

“That they will blame me,” Regina admitted in a small voice, looking down at her clenched hands. Archie nodded understandingly.

“You don’t exactly have the best relationship with your sister, do you?”

She chuckled dryly. “Where have you been for the past year and a half?”

“How do you feel about that?” Archie prodded, leaning forwards with his elbows braced on his knees. “The anger that Zelena feels towards you?”

“Her feelings are her own. It’s not my fault.”

“But how do you feel about her?”

The temptation to yell and storm out was powerful. Regina quickly squashed it before it overwhelmed her. Archie had helped in the past. And despite her reservations, she felt that she just needed to talk to someone who wasn’t emotionally involved.

“Angry that Cora kept her existence from me. Cheated.” She swallowed, tasting bile. “I don’t know how to help her.”

“How do you feel about her?”

Realisation dawned on him. “You’re referring to the time that Snow spared your life, believing that you could change your ways. Stop being the Evil Queen.”
“And she was right,” Regina murmured, grateful when Archie nodded in agreement. “Don’t I owe Zelena the same chance?”

“You don’t want people to go after her because you’re afraid that they’ll kill her.”

“I’m afraid that I may end up with no choice but to kill her.” Once again, the words had just slipped out. What did the psychiatrist aerate his office with? “I think about her and … it’s as if the person who first cast the Dark Curse came out and slapped me in the face. A constant reminder that I can’t shake. Added in with everyone in this town who still sees me as the Evil Queen …”

“You want her gone.”

“Yes.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“Like a failure,” she murmured. “Like I shouldn’t feel that way. That I should be doing more to help her.”

Archie continued to nod, looking thoughtful. “Are you worried about slipping back into your old habits again?”

“A little,” she told him truthfully. The circumstances may have changed – now she knew how to dodge the obstacles, how to stay on the path of good – but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t ever worry about relapsing. “I don’t know how to deal with any of this as plain old Regina.”

“Do you want to go back? To deal with it as the Evil Queen?”

“No.” To say it required some force, but it was the truth.

“That’s good, Regina. That’s how you know that you won’t,” Archie said with a kind smile, one that Regina may once have laughed out. Now it felt nice. “Everything else we can work on.”

Well, it hadn’t gone the way Hans had hoped. His brother trudged on ahead, jumping from one patch of solid ground to another in an attempt to dodge the mud. The wind had picked up, blowing freezing air off the mountainside. Hans pulled his sleeves down over his hands and tried not to dwell on his disappointment.

What had he been hoping for, exactly? Vindication? Frederick was right, he had no proof except his word – and that was hardly valued at all anymore, if it ever had been in the first place –

“Oh!”

“You alright?” Hans called, catching up to Frederick with a few long strides. His brother had stopped, rubbing furiously at his left eye.

“Yeah. Just got something in my eye.”

“Here, let me –”

“No! It’s fine!” Frederick insisted, jerking away from Hans’ touch. “You’ll just make things worse, as usual,” he muttered, so low that Hans had to double-check that he’d heard correctly.
“Huh?”

“Oh, don’t play stupid,” his brother snapped, glaring at him while still rubbing his face. “I’m cold, miserable and not in the mood to deal with you right now. You’re always getting in the way and being a pain. Well, your birth order was not my fault! Yeah, we picked on you – that doesn’t entitle you to any special treatment, Lackland.”

He made to march off. Hans stared at him, reeling at Frederick’s use of his hated nickname. How could he? Frederick had always been the reasonable one, the only brother who had ever apologised for overstepping his boundaries or hurting his feelings –

“Self-entitled little brat. Elsa should’ve had you hanged for what you did – would have saved us all a load of trouble –”

“Fred?”

Why did he keep rubbing his eye? Hans hurried to keep up. Something was wrong with his brother –

“What the hell do you want now?” Frederick demanded when Hans caught up to him. “Father was right – you are useless. Just a pathetic waste of space –”

“Fred, let me look at your eye.”

“Ha! Like I’d let you touch me.”

“Frederick –”

“Piss off!”

Hans swung, grabbing hold of Frederick’s left hand with his right. His brother shoved back – Hans slipped in the mud, landing painfully on his back. Frederick kicked him, then swung his leg for another go, so Hans lashed out and kicked Frederick’s knees out from under him. He scrambled up before Frederick could and pinned his brother to the ground. Something blue and glassy glinted in Frederick’s left eye –

“Hold still!”

His brother obviously had no intention of doing so and punched Hans in the jaw. So Hans bashed him in the side of the head, and Frederick became still.

The Dark One was working on the Hat, Blue observed through the shimmering wall mirror in her office. So far, there was no sign that he had detected her safeguards on Myrrdin’s last existing possession. The Witch’s break-out had undoubtedly made him desperate.

Good. Desperate humans made mistakes – and despite his thick skin, Rumplestiltskin was still human underneath.

The image rippled briefly as the door of the pawnshop opened and young Belle French walked through. Blue frowned. That girl was one she would have to keep an eye on.
“Hey!” Belle called from the front of the shop, flicking her hair over her shoulders as she adjusted her jacket. “You ready for lunch?”

“Hmm?” Rumple murmured, bent over something on the counter. Belle frowned; he had been home very late last night and left early in the morning, and hadn’t said why. It wasn’t that unusual for him to become so engrossed in something that he just plum forgot to mention it – Belle figured that he would let her know when he was ready. She called his name and he looked up, slightly startled like a squirrel caught in the lamplight. “Oh, right! Sorry, won’t be a minute.”

“Okay.”

He pecked her on the cheek before disappearing into the back room, taking whatever he had been working on with him. She heard the sounds of drawers opening and papers being put away, and let out a long breath.

The last couple of days had been rough, certainly, but they could get through it. They could get through anything.

Speaking of which …

Belle glanced at the curtain – Rumple was still making noise in the back room – and then walked over to the bookshelf next to the counter. She knew he kept most of his magic books in the basement, for security reasons, but she had spotted some basic ones the last time she’d helped him to do inventory. Nothing particularly powerful, but then she didn’t need powerful.

There were four books on the top shelf that dealt with her area of interest; she pulled out the smallest, a thin black hardback with silvery star patterns on the cover. A rough translation of the title was Magic for Beginners. Belle flicked through the pages and bit her lip, thinking.

She had thought about it all morning, and though it maybe wasn’t the best plan in the world, it was the best one she had at the moment. She could probably translate it, mediocre though her Elvish was. If Regina and Emma could learn magic, then Belle didn’t see why she couldn’t. She had done a little bit before – with Rumple’s help, granted, but she’d done it all the same. And it wasn’t like she wanted to do serious magic – just some basic skills to help in the fight against Zelena and her friend. Just to stop feeling so damn helpless all the time …

For a second, Archie’s voice boomed inside her head, replaying his recommendation that she talk to Rumple. He would gladly help, she knew that …

No. She needed to do this on her own. At least to start with.

She heard the thud of Rumple’s shoes on the floor and slipped the book into her purse. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he echoed, shrugging on his coat. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, just fine,” Belle told him, keeping her voice level. Something flashed in Rumple’s eyes but it was gone as soon as it came. He shrugged and proffered his arm.

“Shall we?”

She gave him a smile, linked her arm through his and they left the shop together.
“How much do you know about the Black Fairy?”

The question came out while Zelena and Jonathan ate in a mess hall several metres below ground. Zelena almost missed the query, too busy admiring the trolls’ handiwork. Their underground fortress was hardly Emerald City, but the tunnels were quaint in their own way, with carved stone columns holding up the roof and hundreds of little enclaves hidden away for use as storerooms, private quarters and meeting areas. The floor had a slight downwards slope, enabling the troll folk to effortlessly roll from one section to another. Great swaths of fluorescent moss lined the walls, casting everything in a pale green glow. Even the food wasn’t too bad; Zelena would have expected worms, but found that it was a conglomeration of scavenged materials from town that tasted quite pleasant in whatever sauce the trolls had chosen to cook it in.

“Not much,” she admitted before downing another spoonful of broth. She hadn’t eaten properly in days.

“What about the Fae Wars? What do you know about them?”

“Just that they happened hundreds of years ago and fairy-kind was almost wiped out by humans.”

“Sort of. A particular sect of fairy-kind was almost wiped out by humans because the rest of them failed to come to our aid. That was the group led by the Black Fairy after she split from her family,” Jonathan explained. “Her name is Damhsa a’Deireadh. She was sent into exile just before the war ended. By Rheul Ghorm. You know her better as the Blue Fairy.”

“I knew there was something off about her,” Zelena mused.

“Maybe more than you know. See, Rheul refused to become involved in the war until Damhsa was almost triumphant,” Jonathan continued. “Then the traitor sided with the humans, helped them end fae rule altogether and claimed credit for the victory. She did exactly the same thing last year: she allowed the ogres to grow in power until the humans could no longer stand against them and then came out of the shadows to lead the winning charge herself. Rheul is a coward, always was. But that’s a different subject. The real enemy was a human boy named Fionn. You might recognise his grandson’s name: Oscar MacCumhail.”

The name sparked a vague recollection deep in Zelena’s memory. Something from one of Glinda’s history books – “MacCumhail? Didn’t he have some association with the White Fairy?”

“Close. Fionn was the White Fairy.”

“You just said he was human.”

“Fairy in name only,” Jonathan explained. “He was given the title of ’Caomhnoir’ by Danu. Literally it means ‘guardian’, but some stupid historian mistranslated it to mean ‘angel’ in the fourth century. Over time, the legend was exaggerated more and more until it became what it is now – that Fionn was one of Danu’s own children.”

“Did you know him?”

“No. I was only a youngling when he died – about your age, actually. In fact, I missed the war entirely. That’s why I escaped exile.”

“Uh-huh,” Zelena murmured. “What does any of this have to do with me getting revenge on Regina?”

“I’m getting to that part. See, thanks to Fionn, humans were able to overtake fairies as the supreme
power of the Enchanted Forest. While mankind might live shorter lives, they can reproduce exponentially and survive conditions that would kill most other life forms. For hundreds of years, the only advantage we had over them was our magic – until Fionn came along. I understand you have first-hand experience of the power of an agape child?”

“Emma Swan.” It would be decades before she forgot the raw power that had, quite literally, knocked her to her knees.

“Precisely. Fionn was much the same, only with decades of intensive training behind him. And all human magic stems from True Love. Before Fionn, the fairies were able to keep the propagation of human magic under control by tracking down the infants at an early age and raising them under fairy tutelage. Somehow, Fionn escaped. He gathered together a group of similarly powerful beings – they were called the Fianna. Most of them were human, like Roland of Breton and Olivier de Vienne. A few were fae or half-fae; Myrrdin was a half-blood turncoat. I’m not entirely sure what Maugris and Gwydion were. Anyway. Damhsa rose to power in Misthaven after the death of her brother, Ruadh Fer Adharc –”

“The Red Fairy?”

“That’s him. And Rheul Ghorm was opposed to her rule. Frankly, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was Rheul who kept Fionn out of fairy hands as a boy. But even if she didn’t, she still made the mistake of siding with him, and that’s how humankind was able to overthrow the fae. Rheul has been paying for that mistake ever since. Both of us have been working for centuries to prevent another Fionn MacCumhail from rising to power – successfully, until our little Saviour came along.”

“But if she knew the danger,” Zelena murmured as a couple of young trolls came tumbling past them, “then why did she allow Emma Swan to be born in the first place?”

“Quite simple: the Dark One. Do you know where the curse comes from?”

“No.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I’m not sure how or why, but the curse arose in the south of Misthaven – the land now called Hellas – a short time after the First Fae War began. The monster has been a wildcard ever since. Now, for hundreds of years, that wasn’t a problem. The curse normally burns all the humanity out of its hosts within a century, usually less. There was even a time that we thought it was gone for good – obviously, that belief was unfounded. But, for whatever reason, Rumplestiltskin is different. He’s the only one to have survived this long, the only one to have mastered the darkness instead of the other way around. And most importantly, he’s the only one to have found True Love while under the curse.”

Zelena scoffed. Jonathan wagged a finger at her.

“Don’t be so blind. That girl is dangerous, and denying what she is won’t get us anywhere.”

She wasn’t convinced. Belle of Avonlea didn’t have a shred of magic, or the political influence of Snow or Regina; neither was she particularly impressive as a human specimen. Hardly a threat.

“Regardless, Rumplestiltskin is dangerous. Rheul tried to get rid of him hundreds of years ago – she slipped his son a magic bean, meaning to send them both into this world. Obviously, that didn’t work. There have been a few other routes by which Rheul may have disposed of him, but in recent years she seems to have got it into her head that it is a better idea to control the darkness herself. To that end, she allowed Emma Swan to be born and sent a boy into this world ahead of the Dark Curse with the girl. She maintained a correspondence with him, and eventually convinced him to
impersonate the Dark One’s son to gain possession of the dagger. I suppose she believed the task would be simpler in a land without magic. An equally foolhardy plan that went about as well as you’d expect.”

“What does she want with him?”

“She believes that combining the darkness with her own magic will give her the power she needs to reclaim total control of Misthaven. I won’t say that she’s wrong, but I do believe that she is making it unnecessarily complicated. The problem is that Rheul has never been willing to do what it is ultimately necessary to destroy True Love completely. And she overestimated how independent Snow had become without an evil stepmother to run away from. Worst of all, since Miss Swan was born, True Love has been running rampant. There are three agape children that I know of in Storybrooke, possibly four, and that’s not counting Miss Swan or the pairs that haven’t succeeded in reproducing. Including, among others, your sister and her outlaw. If Rheul doesn’t take drastic measures and soon, the only way she will ever reclaim power is through all-out war. Unfortunately, said ‘drastic measures’ involves killing at least half a dozen people and a fairy. Which Rheul, in all her foolishness, believes she can avoid.”

“She does?”

“Regrettably.”

“Why?”

Jonathan shrugged. “Rheul likes to think that she is the embodiment of everything good and pure. To that end, she can hardly stain her own hands with blood. Manipulate events that lead to an innocent man’s death, yes, but she’ll never outright take a life. Like I said, all that does is make things unnecessarily complicated.”

“But you think you have a better way?”

He smiled and nodded. “I do. There is one advantage to being in such a small town – curses are much easier to spread.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Grand Pabbie specialises in a curse known today as the Spell of Shattered Sight,” said Jonathan. “What it does, among other things, is turn people against even those that they would die for – to the point of a person killing their own lover. All we would have to do is set the curse in motion, then sit back and watch.”

The way he said it, it sounded so simple that even an idiot could have masterminded the plan. Zelena bit her lip, thinking. There had to be a catch.

“And you need my help to do this?”

There was a pause. Jonathan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Zelena—”

“I didn’t miss Grand Pabbie’s comment,” she snapped, staring him down. He only became more uneasy. “Why did he say that it was irresponsible of you to father a human’s child?”

“Like I said, fae and human is not a usual combination,” he said slowly, chewing each word carefully before speaking. “Hybrids are exceptionally rare and the few who have survived past infancy are – well, they’re notorious for being the catalysts of historical disasters—”
“You thought I would go mad and destroy the world?” Zelena finished for him, rolling her eyes as the pieces fell into place. “Is that why you won’t help me to fix my past? You think I’m crazy?”

“No!” Jonathan exclaimed, lowering his voice to little more than a whisper. A few curious trolls eyed them suspiciously – one glare from an angry fae and they scuttled away as quickly as their stumpy legs allowed. “By fae standards, you’re still young and relatively untrained and not in full control of your capabilities. As for why I came for you – Zelena, you’re my daughter. I don’t want to see you destroy yourself.”

“And yet you still left,” she spat. As he looked down in shame, she pushed her chair back and started to leave. “Why? Because you couldn’t face your mistakes? Did you hope I would die and your precious mistress would never know about your half-breed spawn?”

“I wanted to come back for you!”

“Then what the hell took you so long?!”

She was yelling loud enough that a sleeping troll at the very end of the tunnel could probably hear her through his snores. She didn’t care. She was fed up with people who only wanted to use her and throw her away. Like Cora had. Like Rumplestiltskin had.

“You have to understand, my work is … is dangerous,” Jonathan started carefully. He got to his feet and stepped around the table, ducking his head slightly to avoid the tunnel roof. “It wasn’t suitable for a child. When I left you with your mother, it was with the intention to come back when you were old enough to handle the danger. But by that time, you were long gone. I – I didn’t know where she had sent you. If I had, I would have come for you. I swear.”

Another pause. Zelena breathed deeply and clenched her fists. He waited expectantly – desperately. She blinked. He hadn’t moved.

“You – you have no reason to believe me,” he murmured. “I understand. I would be angry too. But if you take anything away from here, then let it be this – I came for you because I care about you. That is all there is to it, I swear. I – I know that you’ve been looking for family your entire life. Well … that’s me. And … if you would give me a chance now, then that’s what we can be. A proper family.”

Another pause. Zelena found herself staring at the wall, unable to meet his eyes. Inhale, exhale. Wait it out. The other shoe would drop eventually … all she had to do was wait …

But what if he’s telling the truth?

But he couldn’t be. No-one else ever had –

That doesn’t mean no-one could.

And he was still there. Slightly stooped in the semi-darkness, he suddenly looked old, like the eight-hundred-year-old fae he was as opposed to a man in his mid-forties. He was waiting, too … waiting for his daughter …

“I came for you because I want to know my little girl,” he murmured. “Can I?”

Blinking back a tear, Zelena finally met Jonathan’s eyes. The identical pair stared back, right down to the moisture gathering in the corners. Was he crying too?

He was.
She took one step towards him. Then another. And a third. And a fourth, right into his arms. With which he wasted no time in wrapping around her, and holding her close like he was afraid to let go.

“Owww.”

*Oh, gods,* Frederick moaned to himself as he steadily came to. He wasn’t sure how long he had been out, just that his head was thumping like a Spring Festival drummer and it hurt. He spat out a few choice words and rolled over. Something sharp scraped his nose.

“Ow!”

It was a rock, he noticed when he opened his eyes. For some reason, he was lying on freezing, muddy ground somewhere in the forest. The wet cold had soaked through his jacket and into his shirt. And his head still ached. He gingerly touched the sore spot and then inspected his fingers. No blood. Well, that was one good thing. But they were wet, and that was when Frederick realised that he had water dripping down his nose and forehead. He blinked. Not a good idea – his left eye stung and he let out a third cry of pain.

“Sorry about that,” said a nearby, familiar voice. “Try not to rub it.”

Frederick groaned and rolled onto his back, pinching the bridge of his nose as he did. Bits and pieces of memory started to bubble in his mind. Trekking into the woods with Hans, talking rocks, lots of mud, leaves, wet, cold –

And some entirely unpleasant things he had said to his little brother.

*Oh, gods.*

Where the hell had all of that come from? Frederick rather prided himself on his diplomatic nature – it had set him apart from most of his brothers as a child, it was one of the things that had drawn him to Abigail, and something that had helped convince Midas that he was a good choice for his daughter –

*What – the – hell?*

“What happened?” Frederick asked, unsteadily pushing himself into a sitting position. It was probably not the best idea in the world – not with the way he swayed and the forest spun around him – but his back was starting to freeze to the ground. Hans was perched on a tree root, Frederick’s water bottle at his feet and something in his hands. He held it up for Frederick to see. A shard of glass – or maybe ice – no longer than a thumbnail and as thin as a hair gave off a pale blue glow between Hans’ forefinger and thumb.

“What is that?”

“It’s a piece of the mirror,” said Hans. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully wrapped up the shard. Then he looked expectantly at Frederick. “Do you believe me now?”

Chapter End Notes
Next, Chapter 7: A Royal Counsel, in which news of Zelena’s jailbreak leaks out and the old royalty bump heads

Thanks so much for the comments and support, guys! It's been great! Please, keep telling me what you think!
Robin knocked on the door to the sheriff’s station. “Hey, Emma. You wanted to talk to me?”

“Hey. Yeah, come in.”

He followed her into the partitioned part of the office and took a seat while she shut the door. Her desk was still piled up with paperwork. A picture caught Robin’s eye; he picked it up to have a better look.

“When was this taken?” he asked, astonished at how young Henry looked.

“A couple of months after I came to Storybrooke the first time, I think.”

It was of Snow and Emma with Henry, by a place Robin didn’t recognise somewhere on the coast. From what he could see, it looked like a children’s playground in the shape of a castle.

“Good-looking family,” he murmured without thinking. “So, what did you want to see me for?”

“I was wondering if you’d be interested in the deputy’s job.”

“I thought you were going to ask Mulan,” he recalled, folding his hands in front of him on the desk.

“I have enough in the budget for two,” she explained with a heavy sigh. “And something tells me we’re going to need it.”

“Ah.”

“So …?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Emma was impassive, but Robin noticed the slight flash of disappointment and the way her eyes moved to the pile of folders on her desk.

“Look, you and Regina are in a tough enough position as it is,” he said, sitting forwards in his chair. “You don’t understand how much Richard hates me. Put me on the payroll, he’ll go out of his way to make your life miserable.”

“I can handle him.”

“I don’t doubt that, but the last thing we need is an insurrection. We need people’s cooperation. I’m more than happy for you to call me when you need an extra set of hands, but I think it’d be safer for a lot of people if I stay in the background.”

Not that he would’ve minded the stable employment, respected position or even the job itself. But Emma and Regina really were bizarrely similar, right down to their uncanny knack for making
enemies (although Robin was hardly one to judge). And David had underestimated Richard once – damned if Robin let his daughter make the same mistake.

“Okay, I get it,” said Emma eventually, still glowering at the pile. That gave Robin an idea. He pointed to the folders.

“Here, pass ’em over,” he said. She did, and he began thumbing through them. About a dozen in total, and a fair few names he recognised. “Would it help if I made a shortlist, see if I approve of any of these clowns?”

“You can do that?”

“Sure. One thing about being an outlaw, you soon learn who all the good officers are.”

“You’d also know who all the bad ones are,” Emma observed, narrowing her eyes cheekily. Robin shot her a grin in return.

“Minor details. Okay, let’s see who we’ve got – Gisborne? Nope.” Robin chucked his cousin’s file straight in the bin. Gisborne was Richard’s man through and through and would be arresting people just for speaking to him the wrong way.

“Nottingham?” Robin shivered. Even worse.

Emma’s phone buzzed on the table. When she answered, it was a loud and anxious caller.

“Wait, slow down … What?! … Okay. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Problems?”

“You could say that,” she said, violently jabbing the ‘hang-up’ button. “Come on; I’m temporarily recruiting you as a volunteer ranger.”

She offered no more information before charging out of the station door. Even though he was fairly sure the word ‘volunteer’ implied one actually volunteering for something, Robin followed. The door may not have survived the impact with its framework otherwise.

The town hall was a mess, the shouting and commotion plain for all to hear from one end of Storybrooke to the other. Neal had been trying to finish a report for his boss when the yelling woke Jesse from his nap. In between the baby’s wails, Snow’s efforts to calm him and Henry loudly demanding to know what was going on, Neal grabbed his jacket, told them both (with a stern look at Henry) to stay put, and darted out of the door.

Straight into a full-blown riot.

It was difficult to tell exactly what was being said, or who was saying it, or to whom, but as Neal pushed his way through the crowd he caught the words ‘witch’ and ‘escaped’.

Damn it. He told Regina that they couldn’t keep it a secret forever–!

Nearer to the front of the hall, Neal had to duck as someone swung a punch and there was more yelling. The loudest of it was coming from a little man standing on a crate in front of the doors … actually, the crowd was screaming in response to what he said … and there were people on either side of him dressed in tin armour wielding pitchforks and broomsticks with knives taped to the
And then a gun went off.

Everybody ducked, including Neal. He instinctively looked around for the shooter or the victim ...

Only to let out a breath of relief when he realised the shooter was *Emma*, and she still held the smoking pistol skywards.

“*ALRIGHT!*” she shouted over what little noise remained. Apart from the short man and his goons, people (wisely) stayed down. Neal spotted Robin on the ground a few feet away from Emma. He waved the outlaw over.

“What’s going on?” he asked, careful to keep his voice low. Robin shrugged.

“I was hoping you’d know.”

Emma had lowered the gun but kept it close and ready to shoot. “Who’s in charge here?”

“That’d be me,” announced the short man, who jumped off his pedestal and faced Emma with his arms crossed. Now that the mob mentality had worn off, Neal remembered who he was: King Richard. *Great.*

“You wanna tell me what the hell is going on?” Emma demanded.

“Do you want to tell *me* what the hell the Wicked Witch is doing running loose on the streets?” Richard shot straight back.

*How the hell did he – oh, crap.*

Neal groaned. *Hook.* Emma had told him it was a bad idea to let the pirate go with that information, but Hook had *promised* to keep it to himself –

*What the hell was I thinking?* Neal smacked himself on the forehead. *Idiot.*

Emma hesitated too long, and Richard practically snarled in triumph. Turning to the crowd, he pointed accusingly at Emma and continued, “You see?! This is exactly the kind of incompetence that proves–”

“That proves what?”

All heads turned. Regina had arrived, striding smartly up the driveway and glowing with fury.

“You want to challenge somebody, Richard? Then challenge *me.*”

“Hey, Dad.”

“Henry!” Neal exclaimed, practically jumping out of his skin as his son appeared at his side. “I told you to stay at the loft!”

Henry ignored him, sat cross-legged on the pavement and pulled an Apollo bar out of his backpack, of all things. Neal bit his tongue and gave Robin a look, but the extent of the outlaw’s helpfulness was a shrug. Neal groaned inwardly; he could reprimand his son later. Right now they had bigger problems.

“Is it true?” Richard demanded of Regina. The two old world royals stood opposite each other like
chess pieces; king against the queen. “Is it true that the Wicked Witch is once again at large?”

“Yes,” Regina answered instantly, with confidence and not a single waver in her gaze. “Yes, Zelena escaped custody late on Friday afternoon. It was not announced out of concern for people’s safety – the last time the Witch’s actions were made public, she directly threatened the town. People’s lives were put in danger. The authorities made a decision to work covertly on the Witch’s recapture as a safety measure.”

“That’s the most pathetic excuse I’ve ever heard.” There were grumbles of agreement from the people around the former king; though Neal noticed that some nearer to him looked uneasy, even sceptical. “You couldn’t face up to your own ineptitude. And now we’re all in danger. Again!”

“Two days have gone by, and we have not heard a peep from Zelena,” Regina retorted. “This time, we know where the threat is coming from and what form it will take. The sheriff and I have the situation under control. And Zelena knows it.”

“And we’re supposed to take your word for this? You, who allow criminals and brigands to roam the streets of this town freely? Not to mention the bloomin’ DARK ONE!”

If a lightning bolt had shot out of Richard’s index finger at that point, Neal would not have been the least bit surprised. As it was, he followed the direction of the king’s finger to his father’s antique shop. Neal cast a quick look around the crowd; he found Belle near the far side of the town hall, well out of Richard’s line of sight, with Ruby and Leroy. As for his father, Rumplestiltskin was nowhere to be seen. Neal wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or bad.

“Everybody knows the Dark One was working with the Witch before,” Richard continued. Neal felt a strong urge to hit him. “Why wasn’t he thrown in jail too? For that matter, why isn’t he a suspect now? If anybody was going to help the Witch, it would be him!”

It was Emma who spoke up.

“Rumplestiltskin had nothing to do with Zelena’s escape.”

“Oh, really?” the former king demanded, crossing his arms. “And what evidence do you have of that?”

“Because at the same time the Witch broke out, he was at Granny’s Diner. With me,” Emma retorted, standing strong under Richard’s boiling stare. She held her ground. A wave of pride rolled straight through Neal’s chest. That’s my girl. “Believe me, Rumplestiltskin is the last person who would willingly help the Witch.”

“I’ll repeat it for anybody who wasn’t listening the first time – why would we believe that when all we’ve got is your word –?”

“ALRIGHT!” Regina shouted, moving to stand between Richard and Emma. “That’s enough! We need to get this mess sorted out. I’m calling a royal counsel. All old world royals are to meet upstairs in my office in one hour!”

Richard shrugged. “Fine. I’m a reasonable man.”

“Yeah? On what planet?” Neal muttered so that only Henry and Robin could hear him.
“Good morning,” Doctor Whale greeted chirpily when he came into Kristoff’s room in the morning. “How’s the arm feeling?”

“Uh, a little numb but generally okay,” Kristoff reported, shifting stiffly on his bed so the doctor could get a better look. The limb was in a sling, which wasn’t overly uncomfortable, but the dressing made Kristoff’s arm itch like crazy. And he wasn’t allowed to scratch it either, for fear of tearing the stitches.

“Any pins and needles?”

“No.”

“Flex your hands for me.”

Kristoff did. Doctor Whale grunted, apparently satisfied, and gave the same set of directions that he had done for five days.

Wiggle your fingers. Squeeze my hands. Stretch both arms out as far as possible.

“Alright,” Doctor Whale announced once the exam was over. “Well, the good news is that there doesn’t seem to be any serious muscle or tissue damage, so I’d say that wing will be as good as new in a week or two. I can’t take those stitches out for another couple of days, however.”

“And the bad news?”

“You’re still stuck in Storybrooke with the rest of us.”

Apparently the doctor thought he was funny. Kristoff didn’t get the joke.

“Oh, and we finally tracked down that fiancée of yours. Chatty girl. She’s staying at Granny’s Bed & Breakfast with, uh, Elsa?”

“Her sister.”

“Ah. Well, they’re in the waiting room if you would like to see them.”

“Yes, please!”

Finally! Kristoff lay back on his bed and let out a long breath, running his good hand through his shortened hair (a side effect of the curse, annoyingly). Five days in the hospital, all he had wanted was some news of Anna and Elsa. Granted, the folks in town had their hands full trying to track down everybody’s families – he understood that, but five days with nothing to do but worry had made him antsy.

It didn’t take long before an auburn fireball came barrelling into the room and Kristoff found himself on the receiving end of a big bear hug.

“You’re okay!” Anna babbled in that rapid-fire way she did. “How do you feel? Oh, Pabbie’s going to be so relieved! Doctor Whale told me that you’d been a monkey – I told him that he was getting you confused with Sven, except that he’s a reindeer, not a monkey and–”

“Whoa! Anna! Sweetheart! Ow!”

“Oh! Sorry!”

She stepped back, hands over her mouth, having squished his bad arm into the bed railing. Kristoff
wriggled over so she could sit down without doing any damage, then kissed her on the cheek. Anna blushed.

“So you’re really okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Doctor Whale said you got shot!”

He showed her his arm. “Just a graze. It didn’t do any lasting damage.”

“Are you sure? I mean—”

He pressed a finger to her lips before she could get carried away again.

“Really, I’m fine. Where’s Elsa?”

“Oh, she got called up to the town hall. Some ‘royal council’ meeting or other. You know, important stuff that princesses don’t really get invited to. She said to say hello.”

“Well, Elsa,” Kristoff joked. Anna bopped him on his good arm and they laughed. “So what’ve I missed?”

“Oh! You have to come and see this adorable little shop with Elsa and me – you know, when they let you out of here and all. And there’s this thing called a telephone – I don’t really understand how it works, but if you press a certain combination of buttons and then hold it to your ear you can talk to someone all the way on the other end of town. Oh, and refrigerators! They’re like these cool boxes that don’t need ice – oh, bad news, I don’t think ‘ice sellers’ are really a thing around here so you may be out of a job…”

Still seething from the mess at the town hall, Regina made the most of her free hour by storming down Main Street. Wisely, people stayed back. If she didn’t work out her anger early, she had a feeling she would end up doing something she’d regret.

There was also one other thing she needed to do before talking to the rest of the old world royalty. She knew Belle had been amongst the crowd at the town hall, having spotted her with the wolf girl and the grumpy dwarf staying well out of sight of Richard’s cronies. For whatever reason, Rumplestiltskin hadn’t been there – which, given what had happened, Regina supposed was a good thing. If he had been there to hear Richard accuse him of working with Zelena, she couldn’t see the clown king leaving the town hall alive.

On the other hand, that would have saved her the trouble of killing Richard herself …

No, she told that part of herself firmly. I want to handle this as Regina, not the Evil Queen.

She opened the pawnshop door with more force than necessary, rattling the little bell and startling the two occupants.

“I see buying that ‘Closed’ sign was a worthwhile purchase,” Rumple quipped. Regina didn’t miss the slight shuffle that put him directly between her and Belle. “What can I do for you today, Madam Mayor?”
“Actually, I’m here to talk to your girlfriend.”

Both of them looked surprised.

“Me?” Belle pointed to herself as if to make doubly sure. Regina glanced around the room.

“Does your boyfriend have another woman I don’t know about?” Both of them glared at her. “Sorry. Look, I – I need your help. I’d – I’d like for you to come to the meeting.”

“Why?” Belle asked. “I’m not royalty.”

“No, but you do have influence,” Regina insisted, ignoring the suspicious glare Rumple threw her way. “A way of – a way of getting through to people. Look, the situation is getting out of hand. I need someone who can be the voice of reason.”

Ah, Belle mouthed. “In other words, you need someone who can be more level-headed than yourself.”

Regina bit back a growl. “Yes.”

It took a moment – which felt like an eternity – before Belle nodded. “Okay. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.”

“Be careful,” Rumple murmured, giving his former maid a kiss on the cheek before she left.

Regina hurried out of the door. She had a town to put back together, and no desire to watch that.

They sat in the bug after the crowd dispersed. Neal could tell that Emma needed some time away from people. Frankly, he did too. He made a mental note to thank Robin for steering Henry back to Granny’s. The kid would have had a million and one questions, and Neal didn’t have the faintest clue where to start. Neither, he suspected, did Emma. She sat in the driver’s seat, her elbow propped up on the window, head resting on her hand and being unusually quiet. They had all known that a blow-up was coming – that, in a lot of ways, it was inevitable – but to see it happen had still been a shock. They were damn lucky that it hadn’t been worse.

And all they could do right now was pray that Regina could sort things out at this ‘royal counsel’, whatever the hell that was supposed to be. Neal sighed. As a child, he’d always dreamt of becoming some big, fancy knight – now he was starting to realise how much bullshit came with a job like Regina’s.

“Dad would’ve known what to do,” Emma murmured after an age.

He turned to face her. She looked completely lost. Neal opened his mouth, only to realise he had no idea what to say.

“I miss him.”

“I know. Come here.” He stretched out his arm and let her lean against him, like they had done all the time thirteen years ago. “I meant to say thanks, by the way.”

Emma turned her head to face him. “For what?”
“For standing up for Pop. It just – it meant a lot that you did that.”

“Oh.” She shrugged, one hand holding his. “Well … I mean, I saw what Zelena tried to make him do. If there’s anybody in any world he’d never hurt, it’d be you.”

“I know,” he replied, brushing a strand of blonde curls out of her face. “Still meant a lot.”

She smiled, and for a moment Neal really felt like he was back in Portland, sleeping in borrowed motel rooms and stealing junk food from corner stores. It was a whole damn lifetime ago – in fact, it was Henry’s lifetime – but God, what Neal wouldn’t have given to be back there right now.

While the first Dark Curse had only brought over half a dozen royals, the second had dropped enough of them into the modern world to fill Regina’s office. Naturally, there was a competition for chairs – Regina noted with no lack of displeasure that Richard had stolen her armchair and that Ernest and Weselton had each claimed an end of the sofa. George was notably absent. Thomas stood beside his father; he was probably just there as extra muscle. A weedy-looking man that she recognised as Richard’s brother John stood behind the younger prince, visibly sweating and clearly wishing that he was anywhere else.

On the other side of the room, Midas was sharing a windowsill with Abigail. Or Kathryn, whatever she was calling herself these days. Josef had gained ownership of another chair, but he relinquished it to Aurora when the young queen arrived with her over-excited one-year-old in tow. Her prince – Regina wracked her brains but couldn’t think of his name – eventually grabbed the boy when he wouldn’t settle and they started playing with some trains on the floor. Rapunzel had come along too, situating herself next to the hydroponic bean plant. Simba and Nala had brought along a pair of deck chairs, which they assembled near to Regina’s desk.

A cousin of Regina’s, Lord Humperdinck van Dumpty, arrived slightly late with his apologies, realised there was no room to sit and settled on standing, wedged in between the bookshelf and the door frame. And last of all was Elsa, whom Regina completely missed on the first pass because the shy Arendelle queen had claimed a quiet corner in which to stand as far away from Weselton as possible.

“So everyone knows why we’re here,” Regina started, feeling awkward under everyone’s gazes. To her left, Snow tried to give her an encouraging smile while rocking Jesse in his carrier on the table. “We have a problem, and we need to work together to solve it.”

“There wouldn’t be a problem at all if you’d just undo what you did and sent us all home,” Richard snapped.

“As I’ve said on numerous occasions, that may not be possible.”

“You did it once. Do it again.”

“The circumstances were unique to the situation at the time—”

“Hogwash.”

“Alright!” Belle jumped in before Regina could snark back. “Look, the fact is that we are all stuck in an unfamiliar world with no way home – not one that anybody knows about. And the Witch is a threat to all of us, not just Regina. People are scared and they need leadership. You were their rulers back in the old world – they will look to you. And to survive here, we can’t insist on living
by old world prejudices. It just won’t work.”

There was a pause. A few people looked at each other.

“Who the hell are you?” Weselton demanded.

There was another pause before Belle answered.

“I’m Lady Belle of Avonlea.”

“Lord Maurice’s daughter,” added Richard. “Strangely friendly with outlaws for a noblewoman, aren’t we? Not to mention the Dark One’s who-woman.”

Belle grit her teeth, and Regina realised – in retrospect – that asking for her assistance may not have been as useful as she had hoped. Sometimes she forgot how others still saw Rumplestiltskin. “This from a man who steals friendly territory in which to build his own sovereign nation,” she shot back in Belle’s defence.

Richard shrugged. “My people are simply concerned about their safety.”

“Their safety, or your pride?” Regina suggested, crossing her arms. “Or were you looking for somebody weaker than me to squash under your boots?”

“I have no idea what you could be referring to.”

“Appropriation of protection money from local business owners,” Regina pretended to read off a piece of paper on her desk – which was actually an order for Geppetto to fix a leaky school roof. “Illegal acquisition of supplies. Armed assault on shopkeepers and customers. And the list goes on.”

“I am trying to ensure that my people’s basic requirements are met,” Richard returned, standing up and planting his fists on Regina’s desk, staring her down like a wolf stalking a weak deer. “Something that the authorities in this town are obviously incapable of doing!”

“I am trying to maintain proper order in a crisis!” Regina spat straight back.

“Oh, please!” Weselton stood to join in. “Why else would you let freaks like her roam the streets?” he barked, pointing a finger at Elsa.

“Alright, all of you, just stop!” Snow shouted, trying to appear intimidating while holding a squirming baby. “This isn’t helping anyone!”

“What, are you afraid someone will find another shepherd prince in your closet?” snapped Ernest.

A few people looked confused, including Richard. But he shrugged and snarled at Regina: “I think it should be obvious as to who is serving their own interests around here.”

“I know: I’m looking straight at it,” Regina retorted.

Richard was thunderous, but whatever he was about to say was buried under the avalanche of Simba climbing onto the desk and bellowing at the top of his lungs, “ENOUGH!”

It was like the world had come to a complete stop. For a good thirty seconds, there was no sound at all except for Jesse fussing. Everybody froze and stared at the Pridelander king, who – despite the jeans and Sons of Anarchy t-shirt – had never appeared more like an actual lion.
“Better.” Simba jumped to the ground, still giving off an air of authority that captivated everyone’s attention. That was understandable; even a blockhead like Richard faltered under six feet of solid Pridelander muscle. Only Nala was unfazed; she lounged in her chair, hands folded on her lap but still looked ready to join her husband at a second’s notice. “Regina is right about one thing. This town is going to pot and we’re the only ones who can keep it under control. Now, as – uh –” Simba paused, clicking his fingers at Belle. “Apologies, m’lady. What’d you say your name is?”

“Uh, Belle.”

“As Lady Belle pointed out, we are all stuck in a world we don’t understand with no way home. Whether we like it or not, squabbling like a flock of gulls is not going to get any of us anywhere. Now you three –” he jabbed a finger at Richard, Weselton and Ernest in turn. “Get those walls down before I come in there and tear them down. Got it?”

Ernest and Weselton both nodded, wide eyes fixated on Simba’s claw-like nails. Richard took a second longer, but gave in all the same.

“Right. And Regina? You’re working on getting the Witch under control, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.” Simba stuck his thumbs in his pockets and looked around the room. Nobody moved. “Well, get to it!”

One by one, the old world royals began to file out of the room. There were mutters, and sideways glances, but nobody put up an argument – not with Simba still simmering so that his hair actually stood on end. Even Richard had nothing to say as he left with Ernest and Weselton.

Once they were gone, Simba turned around to Regina. “Look, I think we need you. But if I were you, I’d get that witch under control and start work on a way to get us home as soon as possible.”

“You do understand that I’m telling the truth when I say it may not be possible?”

Simba scowled and looked to Snow. Then he sighed in defeat. “I do. But you’ll need tangible evidence to convince others, or this town is going to fall to pieces right under our noses.”

Neal, Emma and Robin were waiting in the lounge of Granny’s diner when Belle arrived, looking irritable and worn out. Regina and Snow had a few things to take care of, so Belle quickly filled them in on what had happened.

If Neal had been disillusioned about politics before, the last of his faith went spiralling down the drain now.

“It was seriously that bad?” said Robin, bringing over three cups of tea.

“You didn’t see what it was like in there,” Belle insisted, thanking him and carefully putting her saucer on the table. “It was a kindergarten classroom.”

“Oh, I’ve seen it. That’s why, in Agrabah, the kings’ tents all had to be pitched a minimum of twenty miles apart. Any less than that, we might as well have surrendered to the Sultan on the spot.”
“So where do we stand?” Neal asked, starting the serious conversation.

Snow cleared her throat to begin. “Well, it’s safe to say that Simba and Nala are on our side. Which means that the rest of the Pridelanders will be too. Josef and Aurora haven’t yet said as much, but I think we can count on them. Elsa and Midas are undecided.”

“But it’s doubtful that either of them will side with Richard,” added Regina.

“Why’s that?” Neal asked.

“Arendelle is not on good terms with the Southern Isles,” she explained. Neal turned to Emma to see if she knew what that meant – negative – so Regina quickly added, “Elsa and Weselton hate each other.”

“Oh.”

“And Midas has always been relatively independent. He has little reason to like any of us, but he also has no reason to ally with Richard. His daughter is married to Weselton’s nephew, but I don’t think that will matter. At absolute worst, I’d say that those two opt to remain neutral.”

“Or they could form their own parties and we end up fighting on two fronts instead of one,” Emma suggested pessimistically.

“Possible, but unlikely,” said Belle. “Neither of them strikes me as the type.”

“There also aren’t that many people from Arendelle or Hellas in town, so neither of them really has the support to do it,” Snow added.

“And there are some dissenters from Carolingia and Gaul who might switch over if given the right motivation,” said Regina. “Prince John is Richard’s younger brother. He’s a coward, but if we can guarantee him protection from his brother, then he might be persuaded to side with us. The same goes for Lord van Dumpty – he was a friend of my father’s.”

“And most of the lay folk should be willing to stand with us,” said Robin. “So long as the food, shelter and supplies hold out, then we have the advantage there. Nobody will be interested in an all-out war unless they truly believe that things will be better under a different government. Now, I don’t put it past Richard to try and bully people into line – that’s a different story – but he can’t feed people when there’s no food.”

“So we’re looking at slowly dismantling Richard, Weselton and George’s power bases until they’re standing there looking like fools?” Emma asked. Heads nodded around the room. “Why do I get the feeling that’s not likely?”

“We don’t actually have to make them stand down,” said Robin. “All we have to do is prove that we can run this town better than they can.”

“Food, fuel and warm clothing are still in short supply,” added Snow. “The fairies are working around the clock to keep the generators running, so at least that problem’s taken care of.”

“I’ve asked Blue to put some of them on maintenance crews.” Regina sighed and rubbed her nose. “Waste disposal is starting to become a problem.”
“I’m sure she was happy about that,” Neal observed dryly. Regina could only shrug and roll her eyes.

“But none of that is really gonna matter unless we can get Zelena back behind bars as soon as possible,” said Emma. “If people think we can’t protect them, they’ll run riot.”

“At least we can reassure people that we can protect them from Zelena if we have to,” said Belle.

“Richard is still gonna be milking that cow for all it’s worth, no matter what we do,” Robin grunted. “Like I said, he will try to bully people into taking his side.”

“But at least we know that we’ve got a few allies of our own,” said Snow.

“Yeah, for now,” said Emma. “I hate to say it, but one good attack from Zelena or her friend and allies are gonna be a pipe dream.”

“Belle, Rumple hasn’t had any luck tracing Zelena, has he?” asked Regina. Sadly, Belle shook her head.

“No. His best guess is that she’s found a way to block her signal. Or her friend did it for her.”

“Well, we’ll worry about finding her later. Right now, let’s focus on making sure any attack they do make doesn’t cause too much damage.” Regina fished a scrap of paper out of her purse and passed it to Emma. Over his fiancée’s shoulder, Neal read a long line of indecipherable scribbles.

“What’s this?” asked Emma.

“It’s a modified version of the protection spells I put around the loft, designed to cover a larger area,” Regina explained. She now had a small knife in her hand; Neal wasn’t sure if he should be frightened or not. “We can’t protect the whole town, but we can safeguard certain areas – Main Street, the town hall, the school, the marina. Any areas with a large population density. That should at least reduce collateral damage and provide safe places for people to run to in the event of an attack.”

“And the knife?”

“I need a drop of blood. Blood magic is near impermeable, but if I do it then it won’t have any effect on Zelena at all. You don’t have that problem.”

Emma warily took the knife, then – at Regina’s prompting – pricked her finger and allowed a red droplet to fall on the paper.

“It’s not going to stop them, though, is it? Richard and his lot?” asked Neal. Regina reclaimed the knife and rolled up the paper before answering.

“But the most hardened of them, no. But it should at least keep a revolt at bay for now.”

Yeah, for now, Neal thought, but kept it to himself. It was the best plan that they had, after all.

“Here.” Abigail passed Hans a small pile of clothes; a pair of trousers, a shirt and a soft jacket with a hood. “They’re Frederick’s. They’re a bit old, but they should do until you can get some things of your own.”
“Thanks, Abby,” said Hans, reaching out to give his sister-in-law a hug. He hardly minded. He’d worn hand-me-downs most of his life anyway – usually from Mikhail or Christian – despite being a prince from a well-off kingdom. Well, that was what being the thirteenth son got you.

“Just give us a yell if you need another blanket or anything.”

He chuckled. “I think I’ll be alright.”

She squeezed his arm once more before heading downstairs, leaving Hans alone with Frederick leaning on the doorframe of the spare bedroom. His brother had a piece of gauze taped over his left temple and the beginnings of a bruise under his eye. That had taken a lot of explaining to his wife. The brothers stood in awkward silence until Hans went to put his things in the closet.

“So when are you getting rid of the beard?” asked Frederick.

Hans laughed and stroked his hairy chin. Three years of living rough, shaving had never exactly been a priority.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Frederick continued, stepping inside. “I like it better than those stupid sideburns. Now you just look like a red-haired Father Christmas.”

“You weren’t doing so bad yourself before you left home,” Hans reminded him, shoving his boots into the bottom of the closet. “Was it Abigail who made you start shaving more reasonably?”

“No, Midas did. He said he liked me better when I didn’t look like a scruffy northerner.”

They both laughed. Hans continued to arrange and rearrange his meagre belongings on the shelf.

“Hans, about what I said–”

“Forget it,” he interrupted, waving aside Frederick’s apology. “I did a lot worse under the same curse.”

“Still,” his brother murmured. Frederick shuffled his feet and continued: “I’m sorry. I know we gave you a rough time when we were kids and I shouldn’t have brought it all back. And … for the record, Father never called you useless.”

“Oh, I know he didn’t. I’m pretty sure he never even remembered which son I was.”

“Hans.”

While Frederick glared, Hans shrugged. “You were never that bad. Certainly not the worst, by any means.” He stopped arranging things and looked his brother in the eye. “Really, it’s okay. I know how it feels.”

“Okay,” Frederick murmured. He paused. “Look, uh, I realise that this is probably none of my business. But, uh, have you spoken to Anna … at all, since it happened?”

“No,” Hans replied softly. “It doesn’t matter what I do. She’ll never forgive me. She shouldn’t.”

“Right.”

“Besides, she’s happy. That’s all I can really ask for.”

Frederick nodded solemnly. Neither of them seemed to know what to say.
“So, uh–” they both said after a minute of silence. Flustered, Frederick insisted Hans go first.

“What are we going to do about the trolls?”

Frederick sighed. “I don’t know. We don’t exactly have a shut-and-close case, as Abigail would say. Just a load of disconnected hearsay and a piece of glass.”

“How is that not enough?”

“Hey, I believe you,” his brother insisted, subconsciously rubbing his bruised eye. “But there won’t be many others. Besides, even if they did, what would we do? March up into the hills and imprison the lot of them? They’re called rock trolls for a reason.”

“People should still be prepared for what they might be up against.”

“I know.” Frederick sighed. He ran a hand over his head and then said, “We’ll go to the sheriff. Emma’s a good egg; she’ll hear you out. And they know a lot more about this magic stuff than we do. Heck, the Dark One might even already have a counter-spell.”

“You wanna trust the Dark One with this?” Hans asked, astonished that Frederick would even make that suggestion. “We’d be lucky to get out with our knucklebones intact.”

“That’s why we go to Emma first. She has the advantage of being engaged to his son.”

“What?”

“It’s a long story.”

Hans shook his head. “This town is weird.”

“You haven’t even seen the half of it.” Frederick grinned and thumped him on the back. “Alright, I’m going to bed. See you at breakfast.”

“No pig nuts, right?”

Frederick laughed. “Nah. Fresh out.”

Two nights after their first successful run-in with the bully boys, Ruby and Dorothy were parked out the front of Woffles’ Camping Shop. The place was run by a lovely older lady named Peg who used to trade radishes and cabbage for Granny’s eggs, and had doted on Ruby for as long as she could remember. And while Ruby didn’t have proof, she suspected that Peg had wolf blood too. So she had only been too happy to answer Peg’s call for help in the wake of their success at the Black Sheep.

Mulan hadn’t come along this time; it wouldn’t do to have the deputy sheriff routinely beating ex-knights into the dirt during her off hours, so Ruby had convinced her to have the night off. With the agreement to call her straight away if they needed back-up. Ruby did miss her. Maybe she should arrange a girl’s movie night or something? She knew Snow could definitely do with the break …

“They’re later this time,” Dorothy mused, watching the dashboard clock of Ruby’s Camaro click to a quarter past eight. On her lap, Toto whined in his sleep, his grey fur highlighted with silver by the moonlight. The old boy had made it to seven o’clock before conking out. He whined again, and
Ruby chuckled.

Dorothy frowned, confused. “What?”

“Your dog talks in his sleep.”

“He does?” She looked down and gently stroked Toto’s ear. “About what?”

“Chasing rabbits around your old farm, I think.”

They both laughed. Ruby was suddenly struck by how lovely Dorothy’s smile was … but then a light turned on in the apartment above the shop and chased the thought away. The light was Peg checking to see if anything had happened yet. Ruby gave her a thumbs-down through the window, and the light switched off again.

“Maybe they’re worried about attracting an audience …” she murmured, getting distracted halfway through the sentence.

What was that?

“Or they’re hoping we might get discouraged and leave – Ruby?”

The flick of the light had been just enough for Ruby to spot movement near the doorway of a barbershop two buildings down from Peg’s place – like a moth, the light had drawn it out and she had seen the briefest flash of a familiar face –

“Wolfy?” Dorothy called as Ruby got out of the car. There was another whine from Toto as Dorothy shifted him off her lap to grab her crossbow. Ruby stuck her hands in her pockets and tried to stay between a walk and a jog as she hurried to catch up with the man, following the smell of cloves and tarnished metal.

“Mr Gold?” she shouted after the pawnbroker, who either didn’t hear or ignored her and continued on his way along the sidewalk. What was he doing? “Rumplestiltskin!”

Still no response.

“Mr Gold!” she called again, making herself as clear as possible and reaching out to touch him on the arm. As soon as she did that, he jumped around – for a second, moonlight flooded his eyes and Ruby swore that they were black. Something raw and feral glared back at her. Then Rumplestiltskin shivered, his normal calm composure returned and his eyes were definitely brown; the same shady pawnbroker that Ruby had been terrified of for twenty-eight years.

“Miss Lucas?” He sounded surprised. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” she responded, thinking that was the far more important question. Did he even know where he was?

He opened his mouth to answer, but it took just a second too long for the words to come out. “I felt like going for a moonlight stroll. Hardly criminal, is it?”

“No,” she said, narrowing her eyes. He dodged her gaze, instead casting his eyes over the street around them.

“Good. I’ll, uh, leave you to your friend,” he said, nodding at something over Ruby’s shoulder. She turned to see that Dorothy had caught up, crossbow loaded and held in position to fire at the
slightest hint of danger. “Good night, Miss Lucas. Miss Gale.”

“‘Night, Mr Gold.”

He nodded politely – too politely – and strode off, humming a tune as he did. But it was in the opposite direction to the way he had been walking, and he checked the street sign when he got to the intersection.

“What was that?” Dorothy whispered as they both watched the pawnbroker’s retreating back. She had noticed his odd behaviour too.

Ruby shook her head. “I have no idea.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 8: That Lonely, Winding Road, in which Neal finds out about Rumple’s late-night wander, father and son renew a centuries-old deal, and Killian tries to figure out what to do with himself in an unfamiliar world
It was raining on Monday morning. Belle wandered downstairs, trying not to slip while in her socks (it was cold) at an hour that even a morning god would have surely cursed. Well, it was as good a use of her time as any. She wasn’t sure that she had slept at all, having tossed and turned the whole night, startled to wakefulness by every creak of the woodwork and whistle of the wind. And she had no idea where Rumple was. He hadn’t come to bed at all.

That question was answered when she made her way into the kitchen, following the smell of toast, and found him sitting at the counter with the newspaper open. A pot of tea was boiling on the stove and the toaster had seen recent activity. There was a pillow with a noticeable dent on the sofa, and crumpled blankets draped over the cushions.

Had he slept on the couch?

“Hey,” she announced herself. He looked up from the paper with a tired smile. “Why’d you sleep down here?”

It might have just been the lack of sleep, but she was pretty sure that it took him longer than usual to answer.

“Didn’t want to disturb you,” he said after a pause. “Sorry. I couldn’t sleep.”

“‘S okay.” She yawned. “I don’t think I slept either.”

The kettle hit boiling point, steam whistling out of its spout. Rumple went to take it off the stove while Belle grabbed an extra teacup. Then there was a crash.

“A, ya bawheid!”

He’d dropped the sugar. He knelt to clean it up, swearing at himself all the way.

“Rumple! Rumple, it’s okay,” Belle insisted, dropping down with him and grabbing his shoulders to force him to look at her. “It’s alright. It’s just a pot.”

She ran her fingers through his hair – that always worked to calm him down – and took several deep breaths until he copied the motions. Breathe in, breathe out. He shut his eyes. She laid her forehead against his. He wrapped his arms around her and buried his nose in her hair.

This isn’t about the sugar, is it?

“I’m sorry, sweetheart—”

“Hey. Shush, it’s alright. It’s not your fault.”

They rocked together on the floor. How long, Belle didn’t know. She started to drift off in his arms, lulled to sleep by the smell of his hair and the feel of his arms around her, gently moving back and forth –

“I have to go to the shop.”
“Oh.”

Rumple pulled away. She tried to ignore the jab in her chest, instead concentrating on his fingers, wrapped around her arms.

“What do you have to?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry. There are a couple of things that need taking care of. I can’t really leave them til tomorrow.” He brushed her hair out of her eyes, then cupped her cheek and laid a gentle kiss on her forehead. “You look like you could do with a few hours’ sleep anyway.”

That would be easier with you than without.

Belle sighed and kept the words to herself. If worst came to worst, she could always open the library early. She was nearly finished translating the first chapter of Rumple’s book; she might even have the second done by lunchtime.

“What?”

“Can I make it up to you?” he murmured. “Dinner tonight? I’ll make your favourite.”

“Hmm. With dessert?”

“Absolutely.” He chuckled lightly, then kissed her properly.

There was a brief moment in which they stayed there, almost locked together. His hands found their way to her waist and she tangled her fingers in his hair, contemplating how she could keep him distracted long enough to drag him upstairs – or even just to the living room –

But then he pulled away again, and she had to stop herself from groaning in complaint.

As much as she wanted to, they couldn’t hide away forever, Belle reminded herself sternly while she helped him to sweep up the sugar. She had sworn that she wasn’t going to let the Witch stop her from living. Now more than ever. So she let Rumple go with one last kiss, a hug, and a promise to be home by four o’clock, then ate her breakfast, and went to work.

“Henry! Come on, you’re going to be late for school!” Regina shouted up the stairs to her son, who was taking his sweet time getting ready. There was a reply; she wasn’t entirely certain what it was, just that it had probably been mumbled.

Pre-teens, she thought to herself with some degree of exasperation. This, after a morning spent wrangling Roland into eating his cereal. Robin was cleaning up the soggy mess; she was fairly sure she could see his eye-roll through the wall. Through the back of her head.

Five minutes later, her son trundled down the stairs, still yawning and rubbing his eyes. She fixed up his collar, and he stared at the keys in her hand.

“I’m driving.”

“Mom, I’m twelve. I can get myself to school.”

“Humour me.”
Henry frowned quizzically. “Zelena?”

“Just to be on the safe side,” Regina insisted, laying a hand on his arm. “At least for a little while.”

Her son just managed not to roll his eyes, but it came close. As they headed for the door, Roland barrelled out of the corridor and hugged Henry’s knees.

“Bye, Henry! Have fun at school!”

Robin appeared sheepishly behind his son, a damp washcloth over his shoulder and a half-cleaned bowl of cornflakes in his hands. Sorry ’bout that, he mouthed. “Roland! Come on; you’re going to make Henry late.”

“Oh, okay!”

And the six-year-old was gone, slipping and sliding down the hall in his one sock.

Regina grabbed her jacket off the rack. “You’re meeting Emma at Granny’s later, right?”

“Yeah. Then taking the lads up to the woods. Can’t hurt to have someone patrolling the tree line in case Zelena tries to turn anyone else into a monkey.”

They had talked about that the night before and, as her opinion on the matter had not changed, Regina tried to keep her face as blank as possible. Robin wasn’t fooled.

“Better she try to take the lot of us on than some poor, unsuspecting hiker.”

“I know, I know,” she said with a sigh, looking out of the door to where Henry was waiting by the car. “Just … promise me you’ll play it safe.”

“Only if you make me the same promise,” Robin replied, taking her hand and giving it a gentle squeeze. She laughed humourlessly. “Hey. I’ve escaped from worse than her.”

“With Belle’s help.”

“And thanks to this, I’ll always have yours.” He reached into his shirt to take out the dragon amulet, the ancient cedar carving that had been Maleficent’s before she gave it to Regina, who in turn gifted it to Robin as a way of escaping her castle should Zelena get the better of them. Regina smiled in reminiscence. It seemed like so long ago. “We’ll be fine.”

“Hmm. Alright,” she said finally, giving him a kiss that maybe lingered a touch longer than necessary. “See you later.”

“With any luck.”

She would have remarked on his bad joke if not for that fox-like grin that always seemed to leave her short on words, so she settled for a sharp glare and one last squeeze of his hand before leaving to take her son to school.

“One straight black and one hot cocoa with cinnamon?” asked the fresh-faced young waiter, Granny’s latest hire. Emma thought he looked vaguely familiar, but couldn’t quite place him.

“Thanks.”
On the other side of the booth, Neal attempted to say the same but got interrupted by a wide yawn.

“Sorry.”

Robin raised an eyebrow at them. Neal glared back.

“Don’t start.”

The outlaw grunted, but wisely said nothing. Jesse had been up and down for ten hours straight, to the point that Snow had literally kicked them out of the apartment at half past five. Granny had graciously opened the place early for them. Three hours, two coffees and a decent breakfast later, Emma was starting to feel semi-human.

“So, what’ve we got?”

Robin dropped two files on the table. Emma would have started if she wasn’t so tired.

“That’s all?”

“Well, ‘law enforcement officer’ wasn’t exactly a respected job back home,” Robin explained. “Corruption and brutality were always problems. But this feller’s one of the good ones. Jack Spratt. He’s from Rochedale – knows Alan from way back.”

“Yeah, I’ve met him,” Emma remembered as she flicked through Jack’s file. It clicked where she’d seen the waiter before – he was Jack’s son. Ben, if she recalled correctly. According to the file, Jack had been in Storybrooke for the first curse too, but unemployed. The file didn’t say why.

“Jack’s the decent type,” Robin continued. “Honest feller and a good sense of justice, but not above leniency when the situation calls for it. He’s the type who’ll let a petty thief go for trying to feed his kids. And he’s from Gaul.”

“Why is that important?”

“Because it might help to alleviate concerns that you’re playing favourites.”

“But I’m not!”

Robin gave her a look. “Emma, you stood up for the Dark One yesterday. Believe me when I say that hasn’t earned you any friends. No offence, Bae.”

“None taken,” Neal yawned. He tried to drain his coffee, only to find it was already empty. “I’m gonna get another coffee.”

“Okay.” Emma shifted aside so he could get out of the booth. “Aren’t you worried that Richard will use one of his former subjects to get a spy into the sheriff’s station?”

Maybe it was just Regina rubbing off on her, but it was one of the reasons why Emma had been so reluctant to go through the files. Robin shook his head.

“Jack’s not the type.”

“Allright.” She opened the other file. “What about this guy?”

“He’s more of a backup option, in case you ever need an extra pair of hands,” said Robin. “Dogberry is, uh … well, not exactly the sharpest arrow in the quiver.”
“Then why are you recommending him?”

“Because he’s a good officer, just lacking a little in the common sense department. But he’s good in a scrape and plenty enthusiastic. As long as somebody else is telling him what to do, he’s fine. Just don’t put him in charge of anything important.”

“Okay.”

“Also, you’ll want to have a dictionary around when you’re talking to him. He’s strangely fond of long words that he doesn’t know how to use properly.”

Emma frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see.”

Neal felt a hand grab his arm as he stood in line to order another coffee. It was Ruby.

“Hey,” said the waitress, casting wary glances all around. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

He nodded. “Sure, just a second–”

“No. Now.”

She tugged on his jacket and pointed to the hallway. Neal looked back at Emma and Robin. “One minute,” he mouthed, then followed Ruby.

“What’s the matter?”

She was pacing, which could not be good. “Is your dad okay?”

Papa? Neal shrugged. “As far as I know. Why?”

“Because I found him wandering around town last night.”

“What?”

Ruby took a breath. “You know how King Richard’s been extorting money from some of the business owners around town? Well, me and Dorothy have been staking out a few places, trying to disrupt the business. Last night, we were watching the camping shop on Hunt Street and I saw Mr Gold – your dad – walking down the road, alone. Not collecting the rent or anything. He said that he felt like going for a nighttime stroll, but I don’t think he knew what he was doing.”

She stopped to let a couple of people walk past them. Neal fidgeted until they were gone. “What do you mean?”

“It was like he was in a trance or something,” Ruby answered in a whisper. “I don’t think he even knew I was there.”

“What? Was he okay?”

“Yeah, he snapped right out of it when I talked to him. But–”

“Does Belle know?”
“No.” Ruby took another breath and bit her lip. “She’s got enough to deal with right now. I just thought I should tell you, at least.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” said Neal. He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly feeling a cold chill.

_Papa, what are you doing?_

It wasn’t just Ruby who had concerns about Rumplestiltskin’s late-night stroll.

As much as he had tried to brush aside the wolf girl’s questions, Rumplestiltskin had tossed and turned on the sofa all night until he’d given up and tinkered in the basement until dawn. He’d tried to escape to the shop before Belle woke – well, that hadn’t worked – and then nearly broken down completely right in front of her. She had noticed, of course. There was no way she wouldn’t. He _wanted_ to tell her what happened, but that would only lead to more questions – questions he couldn’t even answer for himself.

What the hell had happened? Sleep-walking was one option, but he didn’t do that. Well, as far as he knew. He sat in the back room, soundly ignored the faint creak his spinning wheel made in the slight breeze, and tried to remember what had happened the night before.

He had been in the shop at half-past five on Sunday afternoon. He knew that because Belle had called him to let him know she would be home late from the royals’ meeting. Apparently it had not gone well.

Then at a quarter past eight, he was wandering down Hunt Street with no memory of the previous three hours. Rumplestiltskin bit down on the ends of his fingers and tried to control his racing thoughts. Had anybody seen him apart from Miss Lucas? Had he _talked_ to anybody else? Had he _done_ anything aside from walk? What had he been doing beforehand?

He had been working on the Sorcerer’s Hat – he remembered that much – when Belle called, with no success. He’d made a note to mention a tenant’s leaky downpipes to Dove – the employee Regina’s first curse had given him turned out to be rather a good handyman for someone who used to be an _actual_ dove. Then he wandered into the front room and spoke to someone –

No, not someone. The voice.

_That_ voice, the one whose origins he had been trying to discern for over a week –

“No,” Rumplestiltskin growled.

The Dark Ones were sneaky – he knew that better than anyone. So why hadn’t he seen this coming?

“You were trying to trick me!”

Blind rage clouded his mind. At some point in the next few minutes, the table became overturned. Empty vials smashed on the floor and paper flew everywhere, but Rumplestiltskin didn’t care.

_You fool_, he told himself. _You damn, damn fool!_

By trying to discern the origins of the voice, he must have unwittingly allowed the Dark Ones access to his mind – and the control they needed to take over completely –
“No!” something deep inside him screamed. He faintly registered it as the unknown voice and beat it down. Pain blossomed at his temple, white-hot and burning. He would not be fooled twice –

“It wasn’t that! No! Rumplestiltskin, you don’t understand! The Hat–!”

“Go away!” Rumplestiltskin screamed, pacing the room and tearing his hear. “Just go away! Leave – me – ALONE!”

One. Two. Three ...

He felt a wall. A corner. He slid down, to the ground, bent his knees –

Four. Five ...

Why is there glass all over the floor?

Creak, creak ...

“That’s enough, doll. We have work to do.”

Thump, thump. Find the ground. The ground was safe. Arms around the knees. Be small. Invisible. Can’t be hurt ...

Six. Seven ...

“Go away. Please – just – go away …”

Eight ...

The thumping in Rumplestiltskin’s head began to cease. He registered the smashed display case, the overturned table, the snowfall of paper …

Nine ...

It was quiet inside his head. He let out a long breath. It was okay. Everything would be okay …

Ten.

He would not be fooled again.

“Hey, boys! Look!” Happy called from the far end of the mineshaft, waving Leroy and Dopey down. He’d set his lamp on the floor and flicked on his helmet lights, so Leroy did the same. With the light shining down the shaft, it was just possible to pick out the faint twinkling of diamonds through a crack in the wall that had caught Happy’s eye.

“Looks like we’ve found ourselves another vein,” Happy continued, showing them a sample he had pulled. Leroy took it off his brother and held it up to the light. The stone sparkled with a promising pinky-blue glow: there were some minor impurities, probably quartz and a touch of pyrite, but nothing they couldn’t sift out. “Rich one, too. We’re back in business!”

“Not if we can’t shore up this shaft first,” Leroy grunted, knocking his fist against the support beams. Technically, they shouldn’t have even been in this section of the mines. But with the main deposit currently being used to power the spell keeping Storybrooke hidden from the rest of the
world, the dwarves were forced to search deeper and deeper for an isolated vein. This section had no functional lights, the support beams needed some serious maintenance and Leroy could tell that ventilation was going to be a problem. It didn’t help that they could never have more than three or four hands on at a time – Doc was working around the clock at the hospital, Sneezy had to keep the pharmacy running, and the rest of them were all on rotation at the town hall.

“‘I know, I know,’ Happy insisted as they started climbing back up to the main cavern. ‘But if we can start manufacturing dust, just think how much easier it will for the fairies to keep everything going. Generators, repairs, medicine, the building site–’”

“Food shortages,” Leroy added. “I don’t know about you boys, but I’ll be happy if I never see another salmon in my life.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Oh, don’t start, Happy.”

“Not to mention we might be able to trap the Witch for good.”

Leroy growled. ‘Pissed off’ was putting it lightly for how he felt about Happy and Sleepy keeping that information from the rest of them; even more so at Regina and Emma, who should have known better. But he kept his mouth shut because he knew they had a serious problem that needed solving. He could yell at them later.

At least there was a pleasant surprise – for Leroy, anyway – when they got to the main cavern.

“Astrid!”

Leroy quickly shelved his axe and tried to quickly wipe the mine dust off his face – well, she’d seen him a lot worse – before running to greet his girlfriend. She kissed him on the cheek where it was a bit cleaner.

“What are you doing here?”

“Compliments of Granny,” Astrid said, hefting a sizeable picnic basket onto the rickety old card table. “Three curries, no beans. I told her to forget the fish.”

If he hadn’t been so dirty, he would have hugged her. “Hey, are you working tonight? If not, there’s a real nice place on Pentamerone Avenue – oh,” he stopped suddenly, seeing the look on her face.

“Sorry.” Astrid grimaced sadly in that adorable way she did. “Blue’s put me on kitchen duty on the site for the next week. I can’t get out of it.”

“That’s alright,” said Leroy, swallowing some choice words about the Blue Fairy. He knew how much Astrid looked up to her, much as he thought the senior fairy had her wand in a knot. Instead, he asked, “Can you stay for lunch?”

“Sure. But not long; I have to be back by one thirty.”

Leroy again swallowed his tongue and instead focused on the fact that they were getting any time together. He pulled out a chair for her.

“Uh-uh! Lovebirds eat in the corner!” shouted Happy.
On the other side of town, Killian left a peculiar little shop that was making a roaring trade selling small goods to the people working on the building site. He’d been able to find some decent clothes – shirt, jacket and jeans – and traded two of his rings to the proprietor for a cell phone. He shoved the little money he had left – about fifteen dollars – into his jacket pocket and tried to think of something to do.

Emma had finally let him out of the brig yesterday afternoon when the news about the Wicked Witch had reached the general population. Apparently, having a witch on the loose caused enough problems that the sheriff was no longer interested in having a devilishly handsome pirate around. Faced with spending a cold night on a park bench, Killian had tracked down William Smee and swallowed enough of his pride to kip on the little rat’s couch. He did not fancy another night sleeping on a louse-filled rag in the rubbish tip that man dared call a house, so that meant he needed a plan.

Which was not an easy thing to do when the source of his distress was walking down the street, arm-in-arm with the man she loved.

Killian jumped down the nearest alley before Emma or Baelfire spotted him. He couldn’t bear to see the smiles on their faces – it was hard enough that the sound of her laugh drove a harpoon of pure agony straight through his chest –

“Having a rough day, are we?”

Later on, Killian would edit out of his memory the loud cry that spilt from his mouth at the arrival of the Witch.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded, quickly judging his chances at driving his hook into the Witch’s heart (assuming that she had one) before she tore out his. Bringing in their worst enemy’s cold corpse would surely earn him at least a few points with the town heroes. Unfortunately, the Witch’s wrists were devoid of magic-inhibiting cuffs, which put his odds at roughly zero.

Zelena grinned. Killian fought the urge to cringe. Something in that smile communicated the fact that she knew exactly what he had been thinking.

“I’m here because you seem to have found yourself in dire straits, Captain.”

“Nothing I haven’t survived before.”

“In your world. This one, as we both know, does not obey the same rules.”

“True. If you have a point, would you please get to it?”

“All business. Good. I like that in a man.” Zelena leant casually against the wall of the dry-cleaners and scrubbed non-existent dirt off her hands. “How would you like a job?”

“A job?”

“A job. Paid employment, an occupation, hands-for-hire. Surely you’re familiar with the concept?”

Killian crossed his arms. “We’ve done this little dance before, if you remember?”

“I do. And you ended up doing exactly what I asked, if you remember.”
“That doesn’t mean I’ll do it twice.”

“I think you will.” Zelena stepped down from the wall, swishing her hips as she closed the distance between them. “Because you’re stuck in an unfamiliar world with no friends, no money, no home and no ship. And the so-called heroes of this town don’t seem to be interested in making that change.”

She jabbed a thumb at the alley entrance to emphasise her point. The sound of water dripping through a leak in a downpipe became muffled by Emma and Bae’s laughter, enjoying themselves as though there was nothing wrong in the world. Killian swallowed with difficulty. Zelena grinned again, this time in triumph.

“You’re alone here, Captain. But I can change that.” A piece of paper appeared in her hand – she offered it to Killian. “Pop by when you miss the action too much.”

“Or maybe I go to your sister with this,” Killian suggested, twirling the paper around his fingers. “She and Emma bring you to your knees once more, and they have me to thank.”

“You can try if you like,” Zelena said with a shrug. “But I don’t think you’ll be doing that.”

She turned on her heels and walked away.

“So what are you going to do for the rest of the day?”

Emma and Neal had gone to the park after breakfast, figuring it was probably wise to avoid the loft for a little while. In the middle of the school day, the park was practically empty, so they had claimed the swings and let the midday breeze push them around. Emma rested her head against the chain and tried not to fall asleep. She did have to go into the station sometime, after all.

Neal let out a long breath as he turned in a circle, twisting the chains. “I was thinking of hiding in the library for a while. I’ve still got that report to finish.”

“Yeah.”

The chains jangled as he lifted his feet off the ground and let the swing fly loose. Emma watched him, feeling a bit off. She didn’t know what Ruby had told him, just that he had been strangely quiet ever since they left the diner. But he’d clammed up when she asked. She decided to try again later, feeling too tired for a confrontation.

“These things do end eventually, don’t they?” he asked when the swing finally came to a stop.

“How would I know?”

Neal groaned and leant back, face to the sky. “I can’t remember Henry being this bad.”

“In your replacement memories or your real ones?”

He gave her a look; she grinned cheekily. Lack of sleep had worsened both of their senses of humour. “Sorry.”

“’S okay.” He sighed again. “Don’t suppose you’d wanna start looking at finding our own place?”
“Not just yet,” Emma murmured, half to herself. They had talked about this – Henry kept leaving ads from the Storybrooke Mirror on the kitchen counter. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just—”

“You’re not ready to leave your mom alone,” Neal finished for her, nodding. “I know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I get it,” he said with a tired smile. “Really. Just … really, really, really could use a decent night’s sleep.”

“I know.” Emma reached out to squeeze his hand, once again remembering how grateful she was to have worked things out with him. Neal wasn’t suave, or silver-tongued, or even the type of guy she had ever really imagined staying with – but he did have the biggest heart of any person she had ever known, and in the long run, that was probably for the best. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” He grinned again, then lost his balance on the swing and fell backwards onto the sand. Maybe it was just the lack of sleep, but it was the most hysterical thing Emma had seen in days.

It was not working.

Belle glared at the unlit candle in frustration, biting down on her left small finger as she tried to figure out what she was doing wrong. Given that it was a Monday, she didn’t expect much more activity in the library so she had finished up everything she needed to get done for the day – sorting, shelving, picking out a book for the third-graders’ visit tomorrow – and then shut herself in the office. Symphony No. 5 was playing at low volume on the gramophone and there was absolutely nothing around that could distract her.

So why couldn’t she make it light?

The book talked about clearing the mind, focusing entirely on the task at hand …

Belle breathed in, then breathed out, and reminded herself that she had only been at this for a day. Even Emma had taken longer than that to get a handle on magic and she had been born with it. Yes, Belle had done one spell – with the help of both Rumplestiltskin and the Blue Fairy, so she should not expect a breakthrough straight off the bat.

Still, it would have been nice …

Baby steps, sweetie, said her mother’s voice somewhere in the back of her mind. Baby steps.

Belle took another breath. “I am doing this to help protect the people I love,” she told herself sternly. And that was all. She was a pawn on a sorcerer’s chessboard, and she needed more to bring to the fight than a carving knife.

And with that, she got back to work.

The royals really were a stubborn bunch, weren’t they? Jonathan stood behind a stack of crates in the warehouse that Kings Richard and George had appropriated as their headquarters, watching the
kings’ and princes’ activity with a great deal of amusement. As if the ‘Closed for Public Health Safety’ sign on the warehouse doors would actually fool anyone. But even Jonathan had to admit that their set-up was effective, if not particularly creative.

Camp stretchers lined the warehouse floor like a barracks, with crates full of crude weaponry every eight beds where they could be accessed quickly – kitchen knives taped to broomstick handles, crowbars bent into more manageable shapes, hammers in assorted sizes, the modern world’s versions of hunting bows. There was a map of the town nailed to a wall between two windows that had been covered over with blankets, a training schedule, a stockpile of food, and even a crude forge that could only be run at night (in case people noticed the smoke coming out of the supposedly-derelict warehouse). The place could house at least two hundred people, easily, and the kings had plenty more where those had come from.

There was one advantage that Regina had over them, and that was an understanding of how the Land Without Magic actually worked. Something that Jonathan had in common with Richard and George, in fact. Something that they all needed to remedy, quickly.

With the unfortunate fact that Zelena could not show her face in town (and Jonathan didn’t doubt that the Dark One would eventually be able to pick up some trace of him from either the library or the house), he and his no-longer-estranged daughter were in desperate need of allies. An embittered pirate was one option – one that Zelena was currently off exploiting – but he was still only one man. An army of disenchanted humans, well, that was a different story.

“We’re not seriously going to let her keep dictating what we can and can’t do in this town, are we?” demanded the snowy-haired royal – Weselton, Jonathan remembered.

“Course we’re bloody not,” said Richard. He and George stood at opposite ends of the royals’ meeting table with their brothers, Weselton, and an archduke whose name Jonathan didn’t know, spaced between them. From what Jonathan could gather, they were standing over a map of the town, this one speckled with arrows and red dots – an attack plan.

“If the Pridelanders come marching in–”

“They won’t,” spat George. “Simba is playing it tough. But he’ll never be able to pull enough of them off the building site to make good on his threats.”

“And he knows we’ve got the manpower to face him,” added Richard. “And his wife.”

“But if we’re not capitulating,” said the young Prince Thomas, whom Jonathan had since worked out was more of a pretty figure in shining armour than any kind of master strategist, “then why are we opening up the barricades?”

“To buy time,” said Richard. He sounded as if they had been over this before. “We want to bring Regina to her knees, not get caught in an extended war. Giving them access to our side of the wall is just so they stop harping on about it. But we will have to be careful to keep our activities covert. On that subject – John?”

The sweaty man on Richard’s left jumped, stammered something, and then wiped his forehead. “Uh, Sir Guy is reporting that the wolf girl broke his lieutenant’s nose last night. The camping shop. There’s a possibility she may have inside information.”

Richard swore. “Then that’s a problem we’ll have to tackle next.”

“But how do we even know that Regina can take us home?” Thomas persisted, much to the
embarrassment of his father. “I mean, don’t you think she would have already done it if she could?”

“Why? What does she have waiting for her back home except for imprisonment and execution?” Richard exclaimed, spreading his arms wide for emphasis. Thomas shrank into his seat. “No. She knows she has the advantage here. We have to prove her wrong.”

Jonathan had heard enough. He lifted his glamour and stepped out of the shadows. “Well, that is ... fascinating,” he drawled as the royals all turned to him with a mixture of shock and confusion. “But bringing down an alliance of the Evil Queen, the Dark One and the Saviour with pointy sticks? No, no. You boys are out of your element.”

“Who the hell are you?” demanded George, drawing a short sword out of his belt. “How did you get in here?”

Jonathan clicked his fingers, and George dropped the red-hot sword with a yelp. The rest of them all drew their weapons. Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“There’s no need for any of that.” He held his palms out peacefully. “I’ve no allegiance to the mayor or to the sheriff. In fact, I’d rather like to help you.”

“Why?” asked Richard. No-one had lowered their weapons.

“Let’s just say that our interests are aligned,” said Jonathan. “I may have what you need to accomplish your goals. Bring Regina down. Force her to return us all to the Enchanted Forest. Maybe even destroy the Dark One in the process.”

That certainly got their attention. Richard was the first to drop his sword, motioning for the others to do the same. “What’s your name?”

“Jonathan.”

“Alright, Master Jonathan. What’s your plan?”

“All in good time. First, there’s a small task I need completed.”

“Oh, yeah?” said Richard, crossing his arms. “And what would that be?”

Jonathan grinned, showing teeth. “I need a place to keep a certain ice queen contained.”

__________________________

Neal really did have to get that report done – he had to fly back to New York for a meeting in a couple of weeks – but there was one thing he needed to do first. He headed to the pawnshop after Emma went to the station, his heart pounding against his ribcage and his feet like jelly in his shoes.

He and his father had made amends long ago. And things between them were the best that they had been in centuries. Neal had his father back, he had his son, he had the love of his life – and once again, it looked like the Dark One was rearing its ugly head to tear it all to pieces.

Rumplestiltskin was in the back room when Neal came calling. A big grin broke his face in half when he saw his son.

“Bae! What are you doing here?”
“Just, uh, wanted to see how you were,” he stammered, feeling foolish. He tapped his fingers on his leg while trying to think of how to carry the conversation. “I mean, we haven’t really, uh, spoken since Zelena broke out.”

“Oh.” His father shrugged and stuffed some files into a cabinet. “I’m alright, I suppose. It was a shock, I’ll admit, but I’m coping.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

Rumplestiltskin frowned. “Is there something else you wanted to ask me?”

“Uh, maybe.”

“Well …?”

“Um.” Neal shuffled his feet, uncomfortable under his father’s gaze. “Ruby … might’ve mentioned that she ran into you on Hunt Street last night.”

If he’d been hoping she was wrong, he was sadly disappointed. The Dark One may have been better at keeping secrets than Rumplestiltskin was, but Neal always knew when his father wasn’t saying something.

“She did?”

“Yeah. She said she didn’t tell anyone else, and I haven’t said anything to anyone either.”

“Oh,” Rumplestiltskin exclaimed, apparently at a loss for words. “Thank you.”

“Pop, what’s going on?”

“It’s nothing, Bae. Just a little lapse.”

Neal frowned. His father had gone on the defensive, and that was never good. “Papa?”

“Bae,” Rumplestiltskin insisted. “I’m fine.”

“Is that true?”

“Bae–”

“Is that true? And please don’t say it doesn’t concern me.”

“It’s under control–”

“What happened?”

There was a pause. Rumplestiltskin rapped his fingers on the counter, failing to meet Neal’s eyes. Neal stood stock still, afraid to move in case it made things worse. When nothing happened, he voiced his real fear.

“Nobody’s taken the dagger, have they?”

“No,” his father answered, casually enough that Neal was convinced it was true. He knew that the dagger was somewhere in the pink mansion, protected by some of the most powerful spells that his father knew, and – other than Rumplestiltskin – only Neal and Belle would be able to get to it.
Did he put that provision in because he trusts us? Neal asked himself, the thought suddenly popping to mind in light of the current situation. Or is he afraid of something?

Something worse than somebody stealing the dagger again?

“Pop, what happened?” he asked, practically ready to beg his father for some reassurance. “Please.”

Rumplestiltskin sighed. He bowed his head, seemed to think for a moment, and then relented.

“It seems that a side effect of my time in the Vault is that … when I was brought back, all of the Dark Ones came back,” he said, tapping the side of his head. “They’re still in here. While I was under Zelena’s command, they were fighting me for autonomy. It … seems that some of that resistance remains.”

“What?” Neal exclaimed. “What are you saying? That they can take you over at will?”

If that was true –

“No,” Rumplestiltskin stated simply. Again, he sounded confident … “No, they can’t do that. Not if I don’t allow it. I believe what happened last night is that I inadvertently allowed one of my predecessors too much access, and they seized the opportunity to take control.”

Neal bit his lip uncertainly. “Is – is that likely to happen again?”

“No. Now that I know how it happened, I can stop it.”

“You know that or you believe it?”

Rumplestiltskin chuckled lightly, a smile gracing his eyes. “Bae. I promise you that I can handle it.”

Neal nodded, not exactly convinced. “Okay. What about the dagger?”

“Perfectly safe. Zelena and her friend can’t come anywhere near it without me knowing.”

Rumplestiltskin chuckled again. “Are you worried?”

Neal huffed and shrugged. “I’m too exhausted to be worried. Catch me sometime next month.” He ran a hand through his hair. “It’s just that – I just got my family back together, you know? I don’t – I don’t wanna mess it up again.”

“That’s understandable,” said Rumplestiltskin.

“Yeah, but – but it’s still there,” Neal insisted, mimicking the imp’s hand wave. He sighed again. “And always will be.”

“What if it didn’t have to be?” his father suddenly offered. Neal cracked his neck from looking up so fast.

“What?”

“Well, you and I made a deal once that if either of us found a way for me to be free of the dagger, I would do it,” Rumplestiltskin reminded him, looking slightly pained. Neal could understand that – he still got the nightmares from time to time. “Would you be interested in renewing that deal?”

“You – you’d do that?” Neal asked, feeling a bit guilty with the surprise that had given him. He
knew his father was better – really, he did. It was just that the memory of the imp was hard to get rid of sometimes.

“If it would make you happy,” Rumplestiltskin added. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, Bae.”

Neal had to look at his feet for a second to compose himself. “Okay,” he agreed after a moment. “But I want to make one amendment – Belle and Henry get included too. If any of us find a way to get rid of the dagger without hurting you, then we do it.”

Rumplestiltskin smiled. “I can do that.”

“So–?” Neal shuffled his feet. “We have a deal?”

His father extended a hand. “We have a deal.”

“Just … try not to drop Henry down any portals to, like, Wonderland or something,” Neal said while still gripping his father’s hand. “I’m kinda fond of that kid.”

“Hmm. Agreed.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 9: All The Kings’ Horses, in which Pongo makes a friend, Ruby and Snow have a talk, and Mulan’s first day is sullied by someone’s extremely unfortunate accident

Also, just so you guys know, uni went back and I have two rather large projects to finish by week five so I may have to drop down to a one-and-a-half week or fortnightly updates depending :/ Thanks for sticking with me!
After putting Jesse down following a feed, Snow collapsed on her bed and was halfway to unconscious by the time she pulled a pillow over her head. So when somebody knocked on the door, she groaned and ignored them – until they knocked again. Muttering under her breath, she tip-toed to the door and cracked it open. It was Ruby with a bag full of groceries. *Oh, right. Forgot about that.*

“Hey.”

“Shh,” Snow warned, pressing a finger to her lips. “Jesse just went down.”

“Oh, okay.”

Ruby kicked off her shoes before following Snow inside and carefully placing the groceries on the kitchen counter. A cooking pot with the stains of last night’s spaghetti bolognaisse was scrubbing itself in the sink next to a pile of burping cloths that needed laundering. Ruby pushed aside a tower of mail that had been Snow’s half-hearted attempt at cleaning at four thirty that morning, and got started making two turkey sandwiches. Snow yawned and dropped onto the sofa.

“Do you want a coffee?”

“No, thanks,” Snow mumbled into the cushion. “I need to get some sleep.”

Ruby put their sandwiches on the table and sat on the sofa, lifting Snow’s legs onto her lap. “Do you want me to watch Jesse for a couple of hours?”

“No, no, it’s fine.” She yawned again and rolled over. Ruby glowered at her.

“Come on, you know that’s not true. We wanna help; will you please let us? Just let me and Granny take him for a couple of hours.”

“Ruby, I’m fine,” Snow insisted. It was *her* son; she could handle it. “Really.”

Her old friend did not look convinced in the slightest, especially when Snow yawned for a third time.

“Okay. How about this Friday?”

“What about this Friday?”

“Come out with me and the girls,” said Ruby, throwing her a look before Snow could start to shake her head. “Come on; you’ve been out of the house, what, five times in the last two weeks? This is not healthy. I don’t mean like the Rabbit Hole or anything like that – just a nice dinner at the Charthouse or something. Me and Dorothy, and Mulan if she’s not working. Plus Ella – Thomas has to work Valentine’s Day again.”

That made Snow start. “Valentine’s Day?”

“Yeah. This Friday.”
That can’t be right, Snow thought, rubbing her forehead as she tried to remember what the date was. Jesse was born on the thirty-first of January and was now almost two weeks old … twelve days … which would make today the twelfth of February, and Valentine’s Day on the fourteenth. Oh, gods.

“Ruby, I don’t think–”

“Please? It doesn’t have to be that long,” Ruby bargained, eyes wide and pleading. “Granny’s already said she’d be happy to watch Jesse for a couple of hours. It’d be good for you.”

Snow shook her head. “I can’t leave him,” she murmured, casting a glance at his cot. Her son slept on, oblivious. “I just – I just can’t.”

Not on Valentine’s Day. Not without his father. She just couldn’t do it. Even thinking about the day made Snow’s chest hurt.

He’s gone, she whimpered, her eyes moistening so she had to hide from Ruby. She couldn’t cry in front of her. He’s gone and he’s not coming back. How can I leave our son alone?

There was something to be said for play sword-fighting: it was certainly good exercise. Neal shucked his jacket after about five minutes and took a breather. He was definitely out of shape. Must’ve been all the New York pizza.

“You alright, Dad?” Henry asked with a cheeky grin, throwing his sword onto the picnic table before tearing into a juice box. Neal shot him a scowl.

“There’ll be no making fun of your old man, buddy,” he warned, though the effect was ruined by his need to puff every few syllables. Emphasis on ‘old man’, he thought to himself. Around two hundred and twenty-ish years old, actually, if one counted age in a linear fashion. Henry, wisely, made no comment, and sipped his juice until he was distracted by the sound of a dog barking.

“Pongo!” he exclaimed excitedly, running to meet Archie and the Dalmatian as they crossed the park towards Neal and Henry.

“Hi, Archie.” Neal waved half-heartedly, still feeling puffed. “What brings you by?”

“I had a free afternoon, so thought I’d take Pongo for a walk,” said Archie, pulling a tennis ball out of his pocket. The dog barked happily. “Here you go, Henry.”

“Thanks!”

Neal watched his kid – who never seemed to run out of energy, except when it came to his homework – throw the ball for Pongo and remembered that they had talked, briefly, about getting a dog. Once Jesse was sleeping better, maybe he’d mention it to Emma. But definitely only after Jesse started sleeping better.

“You look tired,” said Archie, sliding onto the empty bench. Neal responded with a groan. “Stating the obvious? How are things?”

“Better than it was,” said Neal. “Still kinda wish there was a magic formula for putting babies to sleep at night.”
Archie chuckled. “How’s Snow doing?”

“Oh—” Now that he thought of it, Neal hadn’t really noticed. They had all been too tired. “Okay, I guess. I’ve, uh, been hanging out at the library a lot the last coupla days. It’s just easier to get some work done.”

And to keep an eye on Belle, he didn’t add. His sort-of-stepmother seemed to be okay, but whether or not Rumplestiltskin had actually told her about his late-night walks, Neal didn’t know. He contemplated telling Archie, then thought better of it. There was no guarantee that psychology could help his father with that problem; not to mention, Neal had no idea how Rumplestiltskin would react to him going behind his back like that.

“What about you and Emma?” asked Archie. Neal wondered if he practised that nonchalant look in the mirror.

“Yeah, we’re okay. Tired, but okay.”

“That’s good. I just thought I’d ask – what with a baby in the house, and Emma has been working a lot—”

“Yeah, but we’re kinda used to that,” said Neal. “She worked some pretty long hours back in New York, too. So that bit’s not new. We made it work.”

“That’s excellent. I’m happy for you.” Archie grinned. “And Henry, too. I think this is the happiest I’ve seen him in a long time. He’s a good kid.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

The tennis ball flew past them, along with a streak of white fur that overshot the ball and kept running.

“Whoa!” Neal shouted, getting up when he saw where the dog was going. Archie ran too, leash in hand, as Pongo ran up to another Dalmatian being walked by a pretty red-haired lady and started barking his head off.

“Sorry!” Henry shouted behind them just as Archie shouted the same thing to the poor woman, who was just managing to keep hold of her dog’s leash.

“Sorry, sorry!” Archie called, grabbing Pongo’s collar and tying the lead on.

“Oh, that’s alright,” said the woman in what sounded like a clipped English accent. Now that the dogs had calmed down, they were contentedly sniffing each other’s ears; the woman bent down to give Pongo a scratch on the chin. “Who’s your new friend, Perdy?”

“This is Pongo. And I’m Doctor Hopper – uh, Archie. Sorry.”

“Anita. And this is Perdy.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” said Archie, shaking Anita’s hand. “So sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Dogs, that’s what they do, isn’t it?”

“I suppose, yes.”

Neal frowned. Was it just him, or were Archie’s cheeks turning red? He exchanged a glance with Henry, who was more interested in the dogs.
“I’m Neal,” he said, offering his hand as well. “This is my son, Henry.”

“Nice to meet you.” Anita shook his hand with a smile, and then looked down at Perdy. “Well, we should probably keep going.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Archie stammered, switching undecidedly between a handshake and a wave before settling on a wave. “Sorry, again.”

“See you around,” said Anita.

She had to tug a bit on Perdy’s leash to get the dog to follow her; and Pongo whined softly. While Henry gave him a pat, Neal watched Archie watch them go, and tried not to laugh when the psychiatrist turned around and jumped, having totally forgotten anybody else was there.

“Uh, well, I should – I should probably keep going too~”

“Yeah, all good,” said Neal, putting a hand on Henry’s shoulders. “Come on, buddy. You’ve got homework to do.”

“It’s only science, Dad.”

“Yeah, that’s still important. See you later, Doc.”

Archie jumped again. “Huh? Oh, yeah – see you later.”

Neal steered his son back to the table to grab their things, casting a glance back over his shoulder just in time to see Archie have to double back after turning down the wrong street. Henry noticed it too, and looked confused when Neal chuckled.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing,” Neal insisted, though the grin on his face told a different story.

About five minutes into the job induction, it became pretty clear that Emma had never done this before. Robin listened in, leaning against the prison cells – magically repaired by Regina after Zelena’s little jailbreak – while Emma filled in Mulan, Dogberry and Jack on the basics of their job. He hoped Emma wouldn’t be too put off by the state of Jack’s clothing – threadbare jacket and obviously stained tie – or Dogberry’s incessant chatter, and filed any important information away for himself. They hadn’t heard so much as a peep out of Richard since Sunday, but silence wasn’t always a good thing. The more good officers they had on hand, the better their chances of keeping the town going through winter.

“So that bit is my office,” Emma said, pointing to the partitioned section. “We’ll get another desk set up out here for you guys. All calls to the station can be received by either phone; if there’s no answer, it gets forwarded to my cell. Have you got cell phones?”

“Do you refer to the communicable advices distributed by Master Jefferson?” asked Dogberry. Robin fought the urge to laugh as Emma glanced his way out of the corner of her eye, and gave her a covert nod.

“Uh, yes?”

“I have acquired such an advice, yes,” said Dogberry, while Jack and Mulan nodded.
“Great. I’ll, uh, get your numbers off you in a minute. Uh … we’ll go through the office intranet system later … do you know how to use a computer?”

“Passably, according to my daughter,” said Jack. Mulan shifted uncertainly.

“I’m still learning,” she admitted.

“What is a ‘computer’?” asked Dogberry.

“I’ll give you a lesson later,” said Emma. “What about a handgun?”

While she took the key to the station’s lock-box out of her desk drawer, Jack asked: “My cursed persona sort of knew how to use one. How similar are they to flintlocks?”

“The principle is more or less the same,” said Robin, who wasn’t sure if Emma knew what a flintlock was, “but they don’t blow up in your face as much.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Jack, taking the offered weapon from Emma and turning it over in his hands. Dogberry looked on sceptically, then accepted one as well. Robin refused.

“I’ll stick to my bow, thanks.”

“And I think I’ll stay with my sword for now,” said Mulan.

Emma nodded. “That’s fine, if that’s what you’re comfortable with. Jack, Dogberry, you alright with those?”

“What is the mechanism, that is the route, by which this armament be sufficiently imbued with a contemptible material?”

“Beg pardon?”

Dogberry blinked, then looked at Jack, who said: “How do you load this?”

“Oh. Like this.”

Emma demonstrated, as well as showing them how to pull it apart for cleaning purposes and how to operate the safety system. *Unnecessarily complicated*, Robin thought, remembering why he could never be bothered with flintlocks. Jack, however, seemed satisfied and clipped the holster to his belt.

“Big improvement from a truncheon,” he commented.

“Just don’t shoot me with it,” said Robin.

“Don’t give me a reason to shoot you,” Jack replied dryly, raising an eyebrow at him. Robin chuckled, the memory of a particularly unsuccessful caravan robbery outside of Rochedale and a poorly-healed scar on Little John’s left calf springing to mind.

“All in the past, mate.”

“Okay,” said Emma, slipping her thumbs into her pockets. “I think that’s about everything you really need to know. Any questions? Okay, then. Well, if that’s all good, I’ll have you two – one second.”

She rummaged in her inbox for a second, having piled a considerable amount of paperwork in there
when the rest of them arrived so that the station would appear at least passably tidy, and came up with a green post-it note. “Got a call about an hour ago from the cannery foreman on Goethe Boulevard – that’s the one that runs around the docks. Apparently he spotted something strange he thought we should know about.”


“I don’t know. He wasn’t sure; he just spotted something unusual near the cannery and called it in. How do you two feel about checking it out?”

“You don’t want to see for yourself?” asked Jack.

“I’ve got a few things I need to do here. If it’s anything serious, or you don’t know what to do, just give me a call,” Emma told him, passing Mulan the post-it. “From what he said, I doubt it’s got anything to do with the Witch or anything like that.”

“And if we see a flying monkey?” Mulan asked.

“Shoot it, get under cover and call me,” said Emma. “Failing that, run like hell.”

Jack chuckled. “That sounds like my old captain’s approach to policing.”

Emma smiled. “Right. Dogberry, I want you to go on patrol. Around the building site, the outer suburbs. Robin will show you the routes.”

“Commendable, ma’am,” said Dogberry, giving a formal bow. “If you would exclude me for one moment, I shall return minutely.”

He ducked off to the bathroom, and Jack took Mulan out to the parking lot. Robin waited by the door, still trying not to laugh at the look on Emma’s face.

“Are you sure he can be trusted with high-powered weapons?” she asked after a second.

“Oh, believe me, that’s the one thing you can trust him with,” said Robin. “Dogberry is anti-violence to the extreme. What he’ll probably do is take out all the cartridges, carry it around locked on safety, and if intimidation doesn’t work, he’ll use it as a short-range club.”

“Really?”

“Well, he is good with those.” Robin rubbed the back of his head absent-mindedly and then chuckled. “Don’t worry. He’s not stupid; he’s just the type who needs a bit of patience and someone to tell him what to do. I’ll look after him.”

“Thanks,” said Emma. “I really appreciate this.”

“Anytime.”

Snow knew that her oldest friend was only looking out for her, which was why she continued to smile and nod while Ruby tried to rope her into weekend plans. But the mention of Valentine’s Day had stirred up unwelcome memories. The last time that day had come around, she had been a schoolteacher unwisely involved with a married man – and hadn’t that ended badly – but even that was preferable to her current situation.
For the fourth time in six days Snow drove out to the cemetery and sat next to David’s grave beneath the yew tree, cradling Jesse in her arms and gently rocking on a tree root. She had long since run out of things to say but kept coming to the site nonetheless, sometimes to tell her husband about what Henry had been up to, other times just to sit in silence.

Not once in her life had Snow ever imagined having to raise her baby all alone. As a child, she’d believed that love was a given that one only had to wait for, and then everything would be perfect. Her parents’ marriage hadn’t given her a single reason to believe otherwise. As a bandit, she had been too busy trying to stay alive and escape the Midlands to worry about it. And then she had met him, and for one blessed moment, everything had been perfect.

Now it was gone.

“I don’t know how to do this, David,” she murmured after a long silence. Jesse squirmed in his sleep, cracking open blue eyes that were steadily turning green with each passing day. “I just don’t know what to do.”

It wasn’t just the upcoming holiday. Even a sleepless baby couldn’t keep Snow distracted from the people around her. Emma and Neal … Regina and Robin … even Leroy and Astrid … True Love in abundance. Everyone except for her. Hers was gone.

Snow started to cry. It was just all too much …

“Snow?”

She looked up. There was Belle, standing on the side of the knoll with her hands in her coat pockets and hair blowing in the wind.

“What are you doing out here?” the younger woman asked, fidgeting as if she wanted to come closer but wasn’t sure she would be welcome. Snow stared, logic having temporarily failed her.

“What – what are you doing here?” she asked back, avoiding the question.

“I had to drop off some books for the Sunday school class,” said Belle. “I thought I’d say hello to my father while I was out and …”

She trailed off, gazing at the marble headstone.

“David’s?”

Snow nodded. Anything else was just too complicated.

“Do you–?” Belle started, then seemed to think better of whatever question she had. “I – I’m sorry. I should – I should just go.”

“No,” Snow somehow managed to say, shaking her head. “No. It’s – it’s okay.”

Her logical head reminded her that, not too long ago, Belle had been in her shoes. Losing the man she loved, faced with responsibilities that she just hadn’t wanted to face, and fighting a war she hadn’t wanted to fight. And Belle somehow hadn’t let grief destroy her. How?

*But she got Rumplestiltskin back—!* snapped the irrational part of her.

But she still lost him in the first place.

“How did you do it?” she murmured as Belle perched on a jutting tree root. “Hold yourself
together?”

“I didn’t,” Belle confessed in an equally hushed tone – it was as if they were afraid the wind would carry their voices away. “Not really. I just got good at hiding it.”

Well, it wasn’t what Snow had wanted to hear. But it was better than having somebody remind her that David would be remembered as a hero, as if she had forgotten. As if it would help.

Part of her was angry, too. Angry that there hadn’t been another way. Angry that she now had to endure the sorrowful, pitying looks. Angry that people were already starting to tell her how much Jesse looked like his father, that David would live on in him. But most of all, she was angry that she had to watch others be so damn happy when all she wanted to do was wallow in agony.

David was gone. He was never coming back. Never going to smile at her again, never going to laugh with his family or spar with Regina again … never going to so much as see his son or know his name …

*Rumplestiltskin came back*, a little voice insisted. Snow shut her eyes. It had been an isolated incident, a nefarious plot of Zelena’s, and it had come at a terrible price.

But it still happened.

Snow glanced at Belle, a thought, a faint beacon of hope, blossoming in her mind. Maybe it wasn’t impossible after all.

“We’ll take my car,” Jack offered on their way out of the station. He led Mulan through the parking lot to a beaten-looking car coloured like sun-dried saffron, and an off-centred cross symbol on the front. Mulan stood by the passenger side door with some hesitation – being driven around by Ruby for a week hadn’t quite mollified all of her concerns about these metallic monsters. They were awfully loud, for one thing, and cramped. Even if their common usage indicated some measure of safety, Mulan didn’t see whatever had been wrong with horses that necessitated the invention of these things.

Jack unlocked the car and then shifted some papers off the passenger seat so that Mulan could get in. “Sorry about the mess. My son’s been borrowing it. Teenagers, you know.”

“Actually, I don’t,” said Mulan. She kicked a pair of soft leather shoes under her chair, and Jack chucked an empty soda can onto the back seats, one of which had been fitted with an odd capsule-like thing. He must have noticed her interest, as he explained:

“It’s a car seat for little kids. Stick ‘em in there to be safer than the regular seat belt.”

There was an ominous growling from deep within the car as Jack started it.

“Must get that seen to,” he murmured, pulling the handle-stick (*Gearshift? Is that what Ruby called it?*) down before driving out of the parking lot. “Seventies classic, this thing. The Vega was a lot better than people gave it credit for, you know?”

“The what?”

“The car.”
Mulan shook her head. Jack shrugged.

“Let’s just say that it could do with some repairs,” he continued. “It is over thirty years old. And the way Ben drives, you might as well add another decade on to that.”

Mulan nodded, not really sure that she understood what Jack was talking about. But she figured that she was going to be working with this man – she may as well try to get to know him.

“Why haven’t you fixed it?” she asked in an attempt make conversation.

“Can’t really afford to. My, uh, cursed persona wasn’t sort of feller who held down a job well.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was a drunken bum,” Jack stated in a way that made Mulan laugh, then cover her mouth in shame. He didn’t seem to mind. “Go ahead, laugh. My wife thought it was the most amusing thing ever. You know, once she woke up and remembered who we actually were. It does mean we were struggling a bit once the curse broke, though, and the second one hasn’t left us any better off. And with five kids to feed –”

“Five?”

Mulan didn’t mean to sound so shocked, but she couldn’t imagine how somebody could live with so many children. She could barely manage little Philip on a good day – heavens only knew what it would be like once Aurora had the second one. Well, it certainly explained Jack’s seemingly interminable state of shabbiness. Jack just shrugged and grinned proudly.

“Yup. Well, strictly speaking only three are mine. Jem belongs to my wife and we share the youngest. It’s the second time around for both of us – Maddy’s first husband ran off when Jem was a baby, and my wife died about ten years ago.”

“In the Ogres’ War?” Mulan asked, remembering what little she knew of Gaul’s recent history. Jack shook his head.

“Bad health. In the words of this land, she had a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry.”

He shrugged again. “It’s alright. Like I said, it was ten years ago and I’ve remarried. It’s the kids not getting that much time with their mum that I feel worst about. You married?”

“No.”

“Got any family in Storybrooke?”

“I’m staying with a former travelling companion and his wife,” she said, then thought for a moment. “I am their son’s godmother, so I suppose they’re as good as family.”

“That’s good.”

They had reached the docks, so Jack’s conversation dried up due to his need to concentrate on driving. Mulan looked out the window, and wistfully wondered if she would ever talk about somebody the way that Jack talked about his family.
“So how did Emma go with our newest recruits?” Regina asked as she and Robin found an empty table. After showing Dogberry the road that looped around the outer suburbs, Robin had left him to it – Dogberry would be fine with a simple patrol, a task he would do quite happily for hours on end. He’d called Regina and they decided to visit little teashop around the corner from the town hall rather than Granny’s, figuring it would be quieter. Robin did have to duck and hide his face from the owner – whose horse he may have once ‘borrowed’ and been unable to return because it was later appropriated by Nottingham – but otherwise, trouble seemed to be staying away. For the time being, anyway.

“Uneasy, but I think she’ll get used to it,” he reported, spreading jam on a scone. “She’s not used to working with people, is she?”

“No.” Regina sighed, nibbling absent-mindedly on a piece of raisin toast. “What about this Jack Spratt fellow? You trust him?”

“More so than I do most people who’ve tried to shoot me.”

“You don’t think that Richard is trying to get a spy into the sheriff’s station?”

Robin had to chuckle. “You and Emma really are insanely similar, did you know? Of course Richard is trying to get his own man into the station, but it won’t be Jack. It was probably Nottingham – he’d try to arrest me on the spot.”

“Right,” said Regina with a scowl, “because the man who could shoot six arrows into the former sheriff before he could put a hand on his sword is so terrified of him!”

“My lady, you wound me!” Robin retorted, raising a hand to his chest. “It would be at least a dozen.”

They shared a laugh, the little corner of the teashop becoming their entire world in that moment, where nothing was wrong. Then bell above the door jingled and another couple walked in with a small child. They ordered before noticing Robin and Regina, at which point the man hastily specified his coffee was ‘to go’ and the woman pulled the child close.

“Ignore them,” Robin whispered, reaching across the table to put a hand over Regina’s. The pointed stares and avoidance hurt more than she would ever let on, but Regina had never been good at disguising her emotions. “What do they know?”

The couple left, careful not to make any sort of contact.

“How do you not see it?” Regina murmured as the jingle of the bell died away, squeezing Robin’s fingers tightly. “The darkness. When everybody else does?”

“Because I see you for who you are,” Robin replied, taking her hand in both of his. “I always have.”

He then laid a kiss on her hand, which made her chuckle.

“Besides, one could ask you the same question. Falling for the most notorious criminal in the Enchanted Forest; it’s a wonder more people don’t think I’m conning you out of your family jewels.”

“You’re welcome to them,” said Regina dryly. “I hate those gaudy old things.”

They had another laugh, during which he could almost see the tension melting off her shoulders.
Well, it was what he was here for.

The shutters in the antique shop had been drawn and a ‘Back in 10 Minutes’ sign put up against the window, so Snow waited on the sidewalk for Rumplestiltskin to return, pacing because her feet couldn’t seem to sit still. Jesse was also quieter when she kept moving. Ten minutes became fifteen, then twenty, until she was about ready to chuck it and go home. But then a familiar voice called her name.

“Snow White,” Rumplestiltskin greeted formally as he approached the shop entrance. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Um–”

_Don’t lose your nerve now!_

“I had something I wanted to ask you.”

Rumplestiltskin nodded, a flash of understanding in his eyes. Snow wondered if he had been expecting this. He usually did. He unlocked the shop door and held it open for her. “Why don’t you come in?”

The antique shop was still as cluttered as Snow remembered it. Guitars on the walls, paintings and old vinyl records in stacked boxes, cabinets full of dusty books in obscure languages, tarnished silver trinkets, jewellery, those frightening puppets that made you wonder what the carver had ever been thinking – the list went on. Snow knew that some people had come by to reclaim lost belongings – Robin’s bow, for instance, although she suspected that had been more out of deference to Regina (or maybe even Belle) than anything else. But how much of it even had a living owner to be claimed?

There was one thing that caught Snow’s eye, hanging over a table on the far side of the shop. In something of a trance, she reached out to touch the blue crystal unicorns, which began to dance under her fingers –

“You can have it back if you like.”

Snow stared at the old sorcerer, who stared back and shrugged. “On the house. I think your boy would like it.”

She was about to comment that _nothing_ ever came for free with Rumplestiltskin, then noticed the way he was watching Jesse. If she wasn’t mistaken, he almost seemed … protective? Nostalgic? Snow didn’t know what to make of it.

“You can have it back if you like.”

“Um, thank you,” she said after a pause. She could get Neal to pick it up later – frankly, Jesse didn’t seem to like much beyond sleep, cuddles and milk at the moment.

Rumplestiltskin nodded. “You said that you wished to ask me something? Would I be right in assuming that it concerns the recent passing of your husband?”

“Is it possible?” Snow blurted before her nerve could fail her. Yes, there would undoubtedly be a price attached – there always was – but she needed to know for sure.

“Is what possible?”
“Is it possible to – to bring someone back from the dead?”

“No.”

“What?” Snow blurted. “Just ‘no’? That’s it?”

“Sorcerers have tried to accomplish it for hundreds, if not thousands of years,” Rumplestiltskin continued. “As far as I know, none have succeeded. And many who tried lost themselves in the process. You can ask Doctor Whale – it was something of an obsession of his for a long time.”

“But that doesn’t mean it’s impossible,” Snow insisted.

“I suppose not,” he said, then sighed and gestured hopelessly, leaning against the counter. “You must understand, Snow, that pursuing such a feat could take dark magic of which even I may not be capable. It is simply not natural. The dead are not supposed to return to the land of the living.”

“You came back.”

“And a man lost his life.”

“You helped me once before.”

“When you asked me to erase the pain of your broken heart, yes. But I cannot bring a man back to life. And no, I am not willing to try.”

“What if Neal asked you to?”

“Then I would tell him exactly what I just told you, and request that you never use my son against me again,” Rumplestiltskin snapped, showing a dangerous amount of teeth. Snow’s heart plummeted in shame – she knew she had crossed a line. She looked at her feet and murmured an apology. He probably didn’t hear it.

“Think about your boy,” the old sorcerer continued, softer than before. At least the threatening growl was gone. “Is that the life you want for him? Zelena became what she is out of jealousy and a misplaced need for revenge. Regina’s inability to let go of her stable boy is what drove her to become the Evil Queen. Trust me when I say you would only make the same mistakes that she did. Are you willing to go down that road and risk never coming back?”

She was quiet. Her throat seemed to have grown another grapefruit, making speech impossible.

“At absolute best, your son would lose both of his parents. Doomed to grow up alone. Just like Emma did. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Snow murmured, choking back a sob. No. She had failed her daughter – she couldn’t do the same thing to her son. Nothing was worth that.

“Then let David rest in peace,” said Rumplestiltskin.

Out at the cannery, Mulan and Jack were met by an extremely harried man about Jack’s age who looked as though he was trying to pull out what remained of his hair. That set off the first warning bell in Mulan’s mind; she brought up Emma’s contact on her phone just in case.

“I’m sorry, I would’ve told you when I called if I’d seen it before,” the foreman, whose nametag
read ‘Solomon’, as he led them around the back of the cannery to a series of steps leading down to the wharf. “But it was only about ten minutes ago – Thomas found it on his break – thought it was just a fish or something, it happens – well, I’ll just show ya."

He continued to ramble, so much so that Mulan was tempted to grab him by the lapels and shake some sense out of him, but that was impractical on a ledge so close to the water. So she followed along as close as she could, with Jack right behind, keeping an eye out just in case. Mulan couldn’t sense any immediate danger, but there was something not quite right.

And when Solomon stopped at the foot of the sea wall and pointed to a row of large red tanks that smelt like kerosene, she understood why.

“Behind there,” said Solomon, still pointing to the containers. He seemed reluctant to go any further, so – after exchanging a glance with Jack – Mulan went first, her hand gripping the pommel of her sword. She let go when she saw what was behind the oil tanks.

“Well, that’s just lovely, ain’t it,” said Jack over her shoulder, with a grimace that Mulan understood too well. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the first time either of them had seen a dead body.

“Do you recognise him?” she asked, stepping over the corpse’s legs to get a better look at the scene. Male, greying red hair, about five feet and six inches tall, wearing what looked like formal dinner wear from Mulan’s limited knowledge of this world’s fashions. At first glance, he seemed to have fallen, possibly from the top of the wall, and landed face-down on the concrete. From at least twelve feet off the ground … well, at least it would have been quick.

“No,” said Jack. He pulled out his phone. “I’ll call Emma. Check his pockets – he might have a licence we can use to identify him.”

Mulan did – and found nothing immediately useful. There was a piece of paper that looked like an invite with an address and contact number that she held onto; about twenty dollars in loose bills that she left in his pocket; and some shards of glass around his hand that may have been an alcoholic beverage. She wondered how long he had been there – the smell of the alcohol was long gone, washed away by salty winds – and then spotted a sizeable bruise, crusted over with dried blood, on the back of his neck that made her cringe.

“Emma’s on her way. What is it?” Jack asked. She pointed out the injury. “Shit. He didn’t fall, did he?”

“No,” said Mulan, carefully massaging the damaged until she felt the tell-tale grating of broken bones. She had seen this sort of thing before. Size, shape, location – all consistent with a blunt blow to the back of the head.

Shit, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 10: … And All the King’s Men, in which the dead man is identified, Henry comes up with a plan, and Emma finds evidence that puts Rumplestiltskin in a tough position.
“His name is Lord Humperdinck van Dumpty.”

The last thing Emma wanted to be dealing with was a possible murder enquiry, but that was what she had. Yesterday had been sorting out all of the technical details – marking and photographing the scene, removal of the body, collecting all the necessary evidence. Today was the start of the official investigation. Emma knew Mulan was pretty confident that it wasn’t an accident, but she still held out hope. The guy could have hit his head on the way down, after all.

The trouble was, her gut was telling a very different story.

“He’s minor royalty from the Southern Isles,” Snow continued, grimacing as she looked through the photographs Emma had brought home from the station. “I think he’s Regina’s cousin, or second cousin, something like that.”

“Humperdinck van Dumpty?” Emma groaned. “Humpty Dumpty? I thought he was supposed to be an egg?”

“No idea. I just thought a common egg couldn’t have something like that.”

“Who’s supposed to be an egg?” asked Neal, bouncing Jesse on his shoulder as he came out of the kitchen.

“Humpty Dumpty.”

“As in ‘sit on a wall’?”

“As in ‘had a great fall’. He was found dead outside the cannery yesterday afternoon.” Emma showed him the pictures.

“Eugh.” Neal made a face and covered Jesse’s eyes. She didn’t blame him. There really was no way to make a twelve-foot fall look pretty.

“You said he was from the Southern Isles?” Emma asked Snow, who nodded.

“Yeah. If I remember correctly, he’s either Regina’s cousin, or he married one of them. Which also makes him Weselton’s nephew. I think.”

“Yeah, which one is he, again?”

“Weselton? Uh, short guy, white hair, big glasses …?”

Emma had a vague memory of such a person, who had reminded her a bit of a giant wingless moth at the time. “Oh, him.”

“Wasn’t Regina saying that Dumpty was one of the undecided ones who might’ve sided with us?” asked Neal.

“Uh-huh,” said Snow. Scepticism broke out on her face, a perfect mirror of how Emma felt. “You’re not suggesting …?”

He didn’t have to say so; Emma knew that was exactly what he was suggesting.
“Well, look – we still don’t know if somebody did kill him,” she cut in before Neal could respond. “For all we know, he got tipsy at a party and took an unfortunate header. Whale won’t have a full report until tomorrow at least. Maybe we’ll know then; maybe we won’t.”

She collected all of the photographs back into their envelope before grabbing her jacket and the last of the pancakes.

“You don’t think it was an accident, do you?” Neal asked, though it wasn’t a question. Emma sighed.

“No. But I really hope I’m wrong.”

The town was buzzing with the news of the cannery victim. For a small town, Storybrooke had never been short on headlines since Emma Swan’s first arrival – the earthquake at the mines, the sheriff’s election, Kathryn Nolan’s disappearance, the wraith, the giant, the Queen of Hearts, the Dark One’s son, Peter Pan. But it was the first time since the first curse broke that someone had been murdered with no known suspects. That, or the possibility that supernatural forces hadn’t been at work, and the murder had been done at human hands.

When Belle went to the diner for an early lunch, it was all anybody could talk about. Did the guy fall? Was he pushed? Was it foul play on Regina’s part? Rumplestiltskin’s? King Richard’s? The Wicked Witch’s?

“You obviously heard about what happened,” Granny observed after taking the order. Belle looked at her. “It’s written all over your face.”

“Is it?” she commented, trying not to look worried. Granny, of course, wasn’t having it.

“Have you been sleeping at all?” the older woman prodded, holding Belle’s sandwich hostage until she answered.


It didn’t help that Rumplestiltskin was also sleeping badly – fitful, restless and constantly interrupted by nightmares. Once again she was tempted to suggest that he talk to Archie. But she already knew how that conversation would go.

“Hardly surprising,” grunted Leroy, who had just walked in with Bashful. “What with that witch still loose, and now people’re getting killed. It’s a wonder we’re not all basket cases by now.”

“Leroy,” Granny warned in an undertone that Belle pretended to miss.

Do I really look that bad? she asked nobody in particular, self-consciously brushing her fringe out of her eyes.

“I should really get back to the library,” she announced, trying her best to sound confident, and reached for her sandwich. Granny reluctantly handed it over.

“Just … promise me that you’ll take care of yourself,” said the older woman, still with a firm grip on Belle’s lunch. “Properly.”

“I will.”
“And if you ever need anything, you know where to find us,” added Leroy, giving her shoulder a rub.

“Thanks,” Belle said, shooting them all a smile before leaving the diner.

Outside, the din was no better. Maybe it was paranoia, but she couldn’t seem to go anywhere without somebody mentioning the witch, or the case, or shooting her sympathetic looks – or even ones of uncertainty, like they didn’t really know what to make of the small woman who was living with the Dark One. That part Belle was rather used to, but it was a nuisance given recent circumstances. Oh, she wasn’t going to kid herself into thinking that anybody’s opinion of Rumplestiltskin would miraculously change any time soon. But it still would have been nice if people would realise that she was exactly where she wanted to be, and stopped treating her like a loaf of bread that they weren’t sure whether to throw away or not because that bit of speckling might be mould.

She didn’t really want to stay at the library either. Even the phonograph couldn’t disguise the crushing silence anymore.

Belle got as far as the returns counter, at which point she stopped and looked around. What little shelving there was could wait until tomorrow, and she didn’t have any more classes coming in; there really was no reason why she couldn’t finish early and go home …

So she did. She fetched the magic book out of her office, shoved it into a box with six other books that needed labelling, and locked up. The house was only ten minutes away, and Rumple said he would be at work until two o’clock. That gave her a good four hours with which to practise getting that bloody candle to light.

His days had almost become clockwork, Killian discovered when he rocked up to the town hall for the fourth day in a row and spent twenty minutes waiting in line for a bowl of lukewarm fish soup, tasteless bread roll and pancakes. Sometimes there were eggs if he got there early enough. The food he didn’t mind – he’d lived off far worse for centuries – but boredom was starting to get to him.

He sat down at an empty table, ignored the looks that people threw his way, and slowly started on the soup. The speed at which he ate was out of choice rather than brought on by his lack of an extra hand; the longer he took, the longer he was out of Smee’s rat hole.

Maybe Baelfire was right, and he should try to take advantage of the fresh start that Storybrooke offered. How hard could building houses be? He was fairly sure the job would be easier with two hands, but maybe he could figure out how to replace his hook with a hammer, or see if anyone had need of an extra pair of hands on their ship …

If he could just get Emma out of his head.

Killian dropped his spoon into the bowl and then held his head in his hand. Why was that so damn difficult? She was engaged, she was living her life, she was happy – why did his mind insistently fixate on her like this?

Because you still think you could make her happier, said a little intruder. You wouldn’t be a pathetic house-hopping parasite if you were with her.
He groaned. Emma was happy with Bae, he told himself firmly. And like it or not, he had to accept that.

So wrapped up was he that Killian didn’t notice somebody standing at his shoulder, trying to get his attention.

“Hey, buddy?”

“Huh?” he said dumbly, jerking his head up to look at the speaker. It was a man, dark-haired and dark-eyed and so heavy-set that he might have been a human bull, nudging Killian’s shoulder with his tray. Next to him was another man, his polar opposite; pale, greying, tall and wiry, with half-moon spectacles threatening to slide off his nose. Both were looking at Killian expectantly.

“Sorry,” said the human bull. “Are those seats taken? Everywhere else is full.”

“No, go ahead.”

The two men smiled gratefully and sat down. The wiry one opened a newspaper while his companion tucked into his bread roll, practically swallowing the whole thing in one bite. Killian left them to it, figuring that they probably didn’t want his company, and wondered whether he really wanted his soup after all.

“… it’s not much more than everybody’s been saying,” said the wiry man, his voice a million miles away to Killian’s ears. “Just says they’re still looking for witnesses and trying to identify the poor bugger—”

Killian frowned. “Trying to identify who?” he asked suddenly, which made the two men look at him with surprise.

“You didn’t hear?” said the big man, looking sideways at his friend. Killian shook his head; the wiry man turned the newspaper around so he could read it.

‘JOHN DOE FOUND DEAD BEHIND CANNERY’, read page two’s title. Below it was a black-and-white photograph of the aforementioned building and a call for any witnesses next to the sheriff’s contact number.

“Bloody hell.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” said the wiry man. “Nearly a month in this place and people are already getting killed.”

“Killed?” Killian repeated. “It didn’t say anything about a murder.”

“No idea, but the sheriff’s being awfully sketchy about the details,” said the big man. He pointed at the wiry man’s tray. “You gonna eat your roll?”

“No, but—”

“Don’t start about my waistline. It’s only bread, alright? I’m hungry.”

“What makes you think it was a murder?” Killian interrupted in a small voice. He needed more information. If Zelena had been involved—

“Cause nobody’s saying anything,” said the wiry man with a shrug. “The sheriff hasn’t even made a statement about what happened. Except to say that they found a body. As if that’s reassuring.”
“Do they know anything?” Killian asked.

“How would we know?” said the wiry man, pointing to himself and his companion.

“True. Sorry.”

The big man then burped loudly, attracting the attention of people at the other end of the hall. He looked down in embarrassment; his friend sighed exasperatedly.

“Do you have to do that? It’s embarrassing!”

“I’m sorry! It just comes out, alright! Would you rather I cleared the whole room when it comes out the other end?”

“Just be a little more discreet when we’re in public, won’t you?”

Killian got up and left unnoticed while the two men bickered, leaving his tray behind. So a man was dead, possibly murdered, and Emma wasn’t saying otherwise –

That didn’t mean Zelena had to be involved –

It also didn’t mean she wasn’t, and with the Crocodile on his best behaviour for the sake of his son and the pretty librarian, that had to put the Witch on top of the suspect list …

He’d thrown the piece of paper away days ago. Anything the Witch wanted him to do had to be nefarious, and if there was one thing Killian knew about his future, it was that he was not going back down the road of the villain. Dastardly rapscallion, maybe, but not the villain he had become after partnering up with Cora. No, he was done with that. But the address was burnt into his mind nonetheless – 81 Grimm’s Road, written in handwriting equivalent to chicken scrawl and sitting at the forefront of his memory, taunting and tantalising like a map to buried treasure –

Maybe there was something he could do after all.

Mulan stood up when Emma walked into the station, which seemed like pointlessly correct protocol to her; but she supposed that it was probably a leftover from Mulan’s military days.

“Morning,” Emma greeted. “Did you find anything?”

“Not a single person who works or lives near the cannery saw or heard anything unusual that morning or the day before,” Mulan reported. “No strangers wandering around, no crashing, no yelling and definitely no fighting. That doesn’t rule out anything that happened late at night; we just have no witnesses.”

“Great,” Emma groaned, hoping Robin might have better luck. She had asked him to try and trace Humpty’s trail from the top of the wall, but given that it was the main thoroughfare road in and out of the cannery, she wasn’t getting her hopes up. “Well, we got a name for our John Doe: Lord Humperdinck van Dumpty. I don’t suppose you know him?”

Mulan shook her head. “Never heard of him.”

“Pity. Alright. Can you start asking around town for any relatives, friends – anyone who might’ve known what he was doing out there?”
“Absolutely.”

“Thanks.”

The station door opened again, and Jack walked through with a pleased grin and a yellow hard-backed envelope. “I got something!” he announced, opening the envelope at the desk he and Mulan still had to share. “The invite in his pocket was for a dinner party at Prince Ernest’s house on the night of the ninth. Sort of a royal’s bash, or this world’s equivalent of it, anyway.”

“Okay,” said Emma. “Let’s just ignore the fact that my mom and Regina weren’t invited. So that was on Sunday?”

“Yup. And as luck would have it—” Jack slipped five black-and-white glossy eight-by-tens out of the envelope – “my wife was there, taking snaps for the paper.”

He started going through the pictures, laying them out on the table for Emma and Mulan to see. “That’s our man there,” he said, pointing to a tallish figure in the background of the first two photographs. Humpty and a bunch of other royalty that Emma vaguely recognised were sitting around little outdoor tables, all dressed up and formal-looking with champagne glasses and other tokens of wealth. In the third, Humpty was toasting with the people next to him while Prince Ernest made a speech.

“He does look drunk, doesn’t he?” commented Mulan.

The fourth photograph caught Emma’s attention. It was primarily of Ernest, who was smiling at the camera with Thomas and little Alexandra – odd that Ella wasn’t there – but behind them, Humpty seemed to be having an argument with none other than King George.

“That’s interesting,” Emma murmured, flipping the photo over to see if Jack’s wife had included anything in her caption – she hadn’t – and then looked at the fifth picture. Humpty was walking away from the table in the direction of Ernest’s house, while George scowled in the bottom left-hand corner.

“Add King George to the list of people we may need to question,” she told the others, pointing out the appropriate pictures. “Looks like those two got into a disagreement about something. Good work, Jack.”

“Thank Maddy. She’s the photographer.”

Emma started pinning the photographs to the pinboard on the wall. “Okay, I spoke to Doctor Whale. He’s not going to have a formal report for us until tomorrow at the earliest, but unofficially, he agrees with your assessment.”

“That Humpty was hit from behind?” asked Mulan.

“Yeah.”

“So it is a murder investigation now?”

“Not officially,” Emma said slowly. “But … it won’t hurt to start asking questions.”

They nodded and turned away to get started, and Emma pinned the last picture to the board. As she did, she noticed something in the bushes behind Humpty, and she took the picture down to make sure she’d seen what she thought she had.
“Emma?” Mulan called. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah …” Emma murmured, then shook when she realised she had been spoken to. “Oh, yeah. Just thought I saw something. It’s nothing.”

Mulan seemed satisfied, and Emma sighed in relief. She looked again at the picture before slipping it into her jacket when Mulan and Jack weren’t looking.

It was blurry, but she was sure Rumplestiltskin was in the background of that photograph.

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“Why ‘Jonathan’?”

The question came out while Zelena was helping her father mould sheet metal using a refined technique from the one she had used to construct Rumplestiltskin’s cage. They were still waiting for Captain Hook to break, and for that bumbling king to come through on his part of the deal, and Zelena was starting to get antsy. Jonathan didn’t seem to have that problem. She supposed eight hundred years did teach you a thing or two about patience. And the question was one she had been curious about for a while.

“What do you mean?” her father asked while sanding a mould. A couple of curious young trolls watched him, perhaps taking notes.

“It just doesn’t sound like a fae name,” said Zelena. She chucked a fireball into the furnace, rekindling the dying flame, and relished the feeling of having her full power back. “It sounds so …”

“So what?”

“Human.”

Jonathan stopped sanding and gazed into the fire, looking thoughtful. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve gone through a few names over the centuries. I’ve made plenty of enemies; it was a good way to stay hidden from them. Or to blend in when I was moving from place to place. Sometimes, I just wanted a change.”

“So what made you pick that one?”

He bit his lip, then chuckled. “Actually, ‘Jonathan’ is the one I used when I met your mother. I’m not sure why I picked it but … it stuck, I suppose.”

Out of sentimentality? For Cora, or … for me? Zelena wondered, watching her father go back to his sanding. He didn’t strike her as the sentimental type … but then she was still just getting to know him.

“What’s your real name?” she asked after a minute.

Once again, he stopped sanding and looked up at her. “Faílinis,” he said, with the air of one who hadn’t spoken the word in a long time. “My real name is Faílinis.”

“Faílinis?” she repeated, testing out the sound of the word in her mouth. She liked it.

He nodded. “It’s also the name of the fae’s ancient homeland. The place that my parents were banished from shortly before I was born. It’s called Eireland now.”
Zelena gave a small smile. He was sentimental.

“I think I like Faflinis better,” she said, which made him smile.

“Give me a hand?”

He hefted the sheet up – she helped him – and together they hauled the piece over to their nearly-finished box. Magic could have done the work for them, but Faflinis preferred using his own hands whenever he could. Honestly, Zelena found that she didn’t mind it all that much either. They fitted the plate into its slot, and Faflinis started to seal the gaps between it and the neighbouring plates.

“You’re sure this will hold her?” Zelena asked, stepping back to look at their handiwork. Three of the walls were covered with overlapping plates like dragon scales made of a completely iron-free alloy, and the fourth was almost finished. It looked crude, but as Faflinis had explained, the pattern allowed them to build layers of spells, imbued into the metal; far better than bars or a single sheet would accomplish.

“It should,” Faflinis grunted as he pushed the last seal into place. The new plate moulded perfectly to its neighbours; a solid wall of fae magic. “I won’t say that it would hold the Dark One or an older fairy for very long, but it’ll hold up against a human.”

He stepped back. The metal plates began to thrum, glowing with faint blue-green light.

“That’s good,” he announced with a grin.

“Now what?”

“Now we wait for your pirate friend to come around, move this into town, and get to work on the curse.”

“I still don’t understand why we need Hook,” said Zelena as they started ascending the tunnel towards daylight.

“Because he can get around town without arousing suspicion. More importantly, he can get close to the heroes. You or I would have a lot of trouble with that.” Faflinis popped the tunnel door open, made an ‘After you’ gesture and they emerged in the middle of the trolls’ hidden valley. “We can use Elsa to keep everyone contained, but getting the spell to spread requires a little personalisation. It doesn’t need much; a drop of blood, a lock of hair, a treasured possession.”

“We could just get the dagger.”

They had discussed this before, and Faflinis threw her the same look as he had then. “I told you, that’s too dangerous. Unless you know a way to get the dagger out of his house without attracting his attention–”

“We could use his maid,” Zelena suggested. “Or his son. He is strangely attached to them.”

Faflinis shook his head. “No. This is a better plan. I’m not going near the Dark One until I absolutely have to. You’d be wise to do the same.” He gave her another look. “I know that this is taking a while. Why don’t you find someone else to occupy your time? The Hatter’s not a bad-looking feller. Or even the outlaw. It would certainly upset your sister.”

“That’s not what I want him for,” Zelena protested.

“No?”
“No.”

Faílinis chuckled. “It’s still a bad idea to go near him. At least for now.”

He turned away, and Zelena scowled. Says you.

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*Just focus, and concentrate entirely on the candle.*

Belle had made a little niche for herself in the spare room, sitting on the floor with her legs crossed and the candle perched in the fireplace (just in case). She took a deep breath, and repeated the mantra over and over. *Focus on the candle.*

It wasn’t as simple a task to clear her mind as she would have liked. Unwelcome thoughts kept nagging at the borders of her consciousness. Thoughts about Rumple, then her mother, her father, the Ogres’ Wars, and finally Zelena, and the worry bubbled in her throat, simmering away, usually until she remembered the elevator, and the scarred man, and the Witch, and Rumple’s cage – *Stop it!*

“Okay, okay,” Belle muttered to the quiet room. She could do this; she just had to relax. Relax, and focus …

Something tugged inside of her, like someone had roped her kidneys, and she tasted tarnished silver at the back of her throat. She smelt smoke, and opened her eyes.

The wick was smoking.

Belle almost laughed. She’d done it! Well, a step on the way. She licked her lips and tried not to gag – that taste was horrible. Did all enchanters feel as if they had swallowed a rusty bolt when they did magic? Did Rumple?

*You could ask him,* said a voice. It sounded strangely like Archie.

Yes, she could ask …

Would he be happy that she wanted to learn magic? She saw no reason why he wouldn’t be; as the Dark One, Rumple lived and breathed magic. And, as she reminded herself over and over, she didn’t want to do serious magic – just enough that she could bring something more substantial than the sorcerer’s equivalent of mashed potatoes to the war she knew had to be coming …

And he could certainly speed the process along. Four days, and she hadn’t even got the bloody thing to light, just smoke a little bit –

“Soon,” Belle whispered. “I’ll tell him soon.”

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There was an old tree around the side of the school that Grandma Snow used to take them to do classes outside. Henry liked it because he could imagine the gnarled old oak (at least he was pretty sure it was an oak) standing somewhere in the Enchanted Forest like a sort of magical hub, glittering with magical white flowers, where fairies and elves and centaurs would meet. Like a scene out of Narnia. Maybe it was even from there, Henry wondered.
He, Grace and Eric had taken to eating lunch out by the old oak when it wasn’t so cold, sometimes joined by the Zimmer twins or Eric’s younger brothers and sisters (he had seven, four of which were at school). Today it was just the three of them, and they broke out a Uno deck to play. Henry wasn’t sure how Eric kept ending up with all the +4 cards, but he did.

“Seriously?” Henry groaned for the fifth time, reaching over to add his penalty to the sizeable collection already in his hand. Eric grinned evilly; he had three cards left, Grace had eight, and Henry had enough that he couldn’t see all of them at once. “Stop picking on me!”

While Henry tried to organise his cards, Eric nudged Grace with his elbow. “Hey. It’s your go.”

“Huh?” Grace started as if she were waking up from a trance. “Oh, sorry,” she then said, putting down a red nine. Henry groaned. He only had two red cards.

“What’s the matter?” he asked. Eric put down an eight; Henry swapped the colour to green, and then glanced over at what had caught Grace’s attention. Five kids, maybe a bit older than Henry, were walking across the oval. They hadn’t noticed the card-playing trio; they were just talking amongst themselves. Still, Grace didn’t seem to like the look of them. “Who’re they?”

“Some of them are new kids,” she said, playing a six on Henry’s eight. “I heard the girls talking in math class earlier. About how long it’s gonna be before King Richard forces your mom to step down as mayor. They’re hoping it’ll be before exams, so they don’t have to worry about passing algebra.”

Eric called them a word that made Grace tell him off, and Henry filed it away for later use. But not in front of his parents or grandparents.

“It’s not gonna happen,” Henry said confidently. His moms had taken down the Wicked Witch of the West; they could handle King Richard. However, Grace looked less convinced.

“I don’t know. Papa’s pretty worried,” she said before putting down a blue zero. Eric, who only had two cards left, scowled at her and picked up a new one from the deck. “He nearly got attacked the other day.”

“What? Where?”

“Near the old textiles factory. You know, the one on Minaret Drive that’s been closed since forever. I overheard him telling Victor about it.”

It was strange to hear her use Doctor Whale’s first name. Henry hadn’t realised he and Jefferson were buddies, and made a note to inquire about it later. “Is he okay?”

“Yeah. I think so.”

“That’s on the other side of the wall, isn’t it?” Henry asked and threw down a three. He knew from Regina that King Simba had forced Richard to reopen the roads, but the barricades had yet to be dismantled.

Grace nodded. “Yeah.”

“But why would they wanna attack him?” asked Eric, scowling thoughtfully. “That’s assault; Sheriff Emma could arrest them for that.”

She shifted, glancing at them both before answering: “Actually, he’s not sure. But he was telling Victor that he thought he heard people inside the old factory. Lots of them, and it sounded like they
were shifting stuff around."

“Maybe they’re gonna reopen?”

“No,” said Henry. Granted, he didn’t know much more about the goings-on in town than Grace or
Eric did despite being the mayor’s kid, but he did know that everyone was too focused on getting
the building project completed. Reopening failed businesses was way down the list of priorities.
But it did make him wonder …

“Hey, what are you guys doing after school?” he asked.

“Nothing,” said Grace.

“Probably have to go to baseball practice with Peter,” said Eric dejectedly.

“Can you get out of it? Would your parents let you, I don’t know, go to the arcade or something?”

“Maybe. Why?”

“Yeah, why do you wanna go to the arcade?” asked Grace.

Henry grinned, a plan starting to form in his head. “I don’t. I wanna know what they’re keeping in
that factory.”

“What?” Grace and Eric exclaimed together.

“Well, there’s gotta be something that they wanna keep secret in there,” Henry theorised, “or else
why would they want people to stay away from it?”

“So you wanna sneak in?” said Grace, looking at him as if he’d just grown an extra arm. “How do
you plan to do that? We’re just kids.”

“Exactly,” said Henry. “Who’s ever gonna think that we’re spying on them?”

When Neal had spoken to her on the phone, Emma sounded quite worried, so he sent a text to
Regina asking her to pick Henry up from school before heading out to the park.

She was sitting on the swings again, and Neal smiled to himself. That seemed to have somehow
become a habit of theirs, strange as it was. Maybe it was a throwback to their first date that neither
of them could kick. Although it was probably a good thing that this one involved less breaking-
and-entering.

“Hey,” he announced as he sat on the other swing, twisting around to face her. “What’s up? Any
luck with the case?”

“I don’t know if luck is how I’d put it,” she murmured, squirming uncomfortably. She glanced
around the park and then leant towards him, speaking in a whisper. “Um … you should see this.”

She reached into her jacket and pulled out a black-and-white glossy eight-by-ten to show him. Neal
didn’t recognise anyone in the picture. One guy was walking away from the camera, and another
one scowled in the bottom left-hand corner.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?”
Emma tapped a point on the picture just above the guy walking out of the frame, and Neal looked closely, finally seeing what was worrying her. A blurry figure stood half-hidden behind a tree. He had to squint, but it was definitely his father.

“When was this taken?”

“Sunday night. There was some big dinner party at Prince Ernest’s house for all the royals in town.”

“Except the ones you’re related to.”

“Yeah, except them. Any idea what your dad was doing there?”

Neal shook his head. “No, he didn’t mention it.”

*Sunday night …*

That was the night Ruby said she’d run into him on Hunt Street; the night he said he couldn’t remember anything –

“Oh, crap.”

“What?”

Too late, Neal realised that he’d said that out loud. Emma stared at him with wide eyes that were completely green; they did that only when she was really, really worried.

“Um …”

“Neal,” she growled, not letting him break eye contact. “What is it?”

He tried to think, and failed. “Uh … Ruby … kinda told me that she found my dad wandering around Hunt Street on Sunday night. And, uh …”

“What?”

“He didn’t know what he was doing there,” Neal blurted, feeling his gut clench at the way Emma went pale. “When I asked him about it, he said he couldn’t remember anything.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she cried, voice rising rapidly.

“I didn’t think it was relevant at the time.”

Emma huffed. “Your dad, the Dark One, is wandering around town with no idea what he’s doing, and you didn’t think it was relevant?”

“I know, I know,” Neal murmured, burying his face in his hands.

“Neal, this is bad.”

“I know.”

“If Whale’s report comes back and it says that he was attacked and your dad can’t provide an alibi—”

“They’ll lynch him,” Neal sighed. “I know.”
Emma bit her lower lip and stared at him. Neal had no idea what to say.

“Look, I’m not saying that he did have anything to do with it,” she said slowly.

“Thanks,” he murmured. He knew how quick anyone else would be to assume the worst if they knew.

“But we need to know for sure,” she continued.

He nodded. “Yeah. I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Uploading early because we’ve got a Cat 4 cyclone due tomorrow and chances are we’ll lose power for a couple of days. No need to worry, we get at least a couple of these every year in North Queensland! By the way, did you catch Timon and Pumbaa’s first appearance?

Next, Chapter 11: Gather ‘Round the Table, in which Emma and Neal confront Rumplestiltskin about his whereabouts on Sunday night (a conversation which Belle overhears), Anna and Hans have a terse reunion, and the family get some new neighbours
At a little before two o’clock, Rumplestiltskin parked the Cadillac outside of the old Victorian. He had to pick Belle up from the library at five, so that was plenty of time to shower and get dinner started. Eight steps up the walkway to the house, he heard somebody calling, and turned around to see that it was Baelfire, following him up the drive with Emma just behind.

“Hey. What are you doing here?” he asked, looking from one to the other and trying to figure out the unspoken messages passing between them. Bae couldn’t meet Rumplestiltskin’s eyes, and Emma looked shifty.

“We need to talk,” she said solemnly. “Can we come in?”

“Of course.”

Once the three of them were situated around the kitchen table – Bae still gazing fixedly at his feet – Emma produced a photograph from her jacket.

“What you were doing at Mitchell Herman’s house on Sunday night?” she asked, prodding the picture with her index finger. He had to look closely, but Rumplestiltskin definitely saw his own face in the picture.

“Um–” he mumbled, cursing the sudden onset of bewilderment. This was bad.

“I told her about your blackout, Papa,” said Bae guiltily. “The man in the picture is the same guy that was found dead outside the cannery yesterday.”

“Whale’s not sure, but he believes the body was there for a least a couple of days,” added Emma, “and so far, nobody we’ve talked to has seen him since Sunday evening.”

“You think I killed him?” Rumplestiltskin snapped, throwing on a façade while desperately thinking through everything he knew. True, he had no memory of about three hours on the evening in question – but that didn’t mean he had killed a man. Surely he would have known that?

Wouldn’t he?

“Look, I’m not accusing anybody of anything yet,” said Emma with a calmness that had most certainly not been inherited from her father. “We don’t even know for sure that he was murdered. But is there any chance at all that you might have done something like this during a blackout and not realised it? If you can’t remember–”

“You’ve been blacking out?”

Emma’s eyes went wide, and a hand clenched around Rumplestiltskin’s blackened heart at the sound of Belle’s voice, tiny and worried.

“Hey,” he murmured pathetically, ignoring the concerned looks on Emma and Bae’s faces and focused on Belle. “I, uh, didn’t realise you were home.”
“I came home early,” she said, hugging herself tightly as if trying to curl into her own body, like a
cat that didn’t want to be touched. “Rumple, what’s going on?”

“We should, uh–” Bae stammered, tugging Emma’s sleeve in the direction of the door.
Rumplestiltskin put up a hand to stop him.

“No, it’s alright.” Taking a deep breath, he turned back to Belle. He could do this. “I’m sorry. I
should’ve told you.”

“Told me what?”

How was it that such a small person could reduce his knees to jelly with nothing but a look? The
coward inside begged for him to stop, but Rumplestiltskin forced himself to focus on the words. “It
… seems that I picked up a few travelling companions while in the Dark One’s Vault. The, uh,
personalities that you saw emerge before … they’re in still in here,” he explained, pointing to his
temple. “And some of their ability to take control remains. I had a, uh, a lapse on Sunday evening.
About three hours or so. I think … I may have accidentally allowed the Dark One too much access
to my mind while researching something in the shop.”

Belle gasped. “And it took over you? Rumple–!”

“Well, whoa, whoa, wait a minute!” Emma interrupted, waving her hands for attention. “Are you saying
that there’s like a little guy inside your head who can make you do anything it wants?!” She turned
on Bae. “You didn’t tell me that!”

“Wait, you knew?!” Belle exclaimed at the same time. Bae cringed under Belle and Emma’s
combined gazes, striking a remarkable resemblance to a billy goat Rumplestiltskin had once owned
who got chased away from the feed trough by the nannies.

“It can’t take me over at will,” Rumplestiltskin cut in before the two of them really got started on
attacking his son. “It won’t happen again.”

“But can you be sure of that?” Belle pushed, stepping closer to him.

Rumplestiltskin opened his mouth to reply. The word ‘yes’ sat on the tip of his tongue, begging to
be said. It came out as a strained groan.

“No,” he admitted in a small voice, looking at the floor.

He could feel Bae, Emma and Belle’s eyes on him, and Belle’s soft hand slipped into his.

“Rumple?” she murmured. “Is there something we can do? Can Regina help? Or Doctor Whale–”

“No,” he said sharply, looking up again. Blackouts or not, he refused to become the doctor’s latest
guinea pig. Wide blue eyes stared at him, so he held her arms and gently pulled her close. “It’s
okay. I know how it happened; I can stop them from doing so again.”

Belle bit her lip, clearly not convinced. Off to the side, Emma cleared her throat.

“Okay. If you, uh … if you say so,” she said slowly, stepping back into view with the photograph
in her hand. “Look, I … can’t cover this up. I’m still not saying you did kill him – we don’t even
know if it was murder yet – but if I were you, I’d start trying to figure out what you were doing that
night. Preferably with a witness.”

“Thank you for the warning,” Rumplestiltskin murmured morosely, swallowing the urge to panic.
“Will you be okay?” asked Bae, joining his fiancée.

“Yeah,” said Rumplestiltskin at the same time that Belle said, “I think so.”

“Okay.” Bae cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably. “Well, uh, give me a call if there’s anything you need.”

“We will,” said Belle with a smile.

A few seconds later, the door shut, and she was still holding his hands tightly. “You’re not really okay, are you?” she asked with far too much insight.

“I – I will be,” he responded.

“Has this ever happened before?”

“No. I think it’s a residual effect of being brought out of the Vault. The Dark Ones are all still in there,” he said, pointing to his temple. “But they can’t control me anymore. Not if I don’t let them. Thanks to you.”

Belle let out a shaky breath, wiped an eye and then threw her arms around his neck. “You promise me you’ll tell me if it happens again?” she asked, voice muffled by his hair.

“I promise.”

“And you’ll let us help you if it does?”

“Of course,” he murmured, hugging her tighter. “Hey. It’s gonna be okay.”

She half-laughed, half-sobbed into his hair while he rubbed her back and shoulders. They stayed in that position for several minutes – or possibly entire days – until one of them mentioned something about dinner and they broke apart. Belle ducked off to the bathroom to wash her face and Rumplestiltskin went into the kitchen.

“You make that promise,” growled Zoso, unsilenced by the departure of his True Love. “But you know you can’t keep it.”

Rumplestiltskin ignored him.

“You know you can only ignore us for so long,” a female voice he recognised as Lilith’s joined in. Somebody else chuckled in the dark corners of his mind. “And she will be the first we target. Followed by the boy.”

Rumplestiltskin still ignored them.

A little while after talking to her father-in-law, Emma was back at the station. She’d let Mulan go early – she was on the night shift and wanted to get a few hours of shut-eye first – and Jack was still out asking questions, so she used the alone time to sort things out. Everything she knew in one pile, everything she needed to know in another, the bad feeling in the vicinity of her diaphragm temporarily shoved into the waste basket. But she got interrupted, first by a caller who thought his keys had been stolen only to realise that he’d left them in his car; and then by a lovely red-haired woman named Anna who talked like an otter on caffeine.
“So when did you see your sister last?” Emma asked.

Anna did some quick math on her fingers. “Well, we had breakfast with her this morning and Kristoff says he didn’t see her when he went down to the diner for lunch, so sometime between breakfast and lunch.”

“O-kay. And nobody around the diner saw or spoke to her? Did Granny–”

“No, not that I know of. Should I ask?”

“Please, just in case.”

“Okay. But Elsa did say that she would be back by eleven. Now it’s two thirty and I haven’t heard from her at all–”

“Anna–” Emma stood up and held her hands out to stop the woman mid-sentence. “Okay. Look, has Elsa ever done anything like this before? You know, run off without telling anyone?”

Anna thought about it. “Well, there was that time she freaked out and kinda froze our whole kingdom.”

“Wait, what?”

“Oh, she has this ice power-magic-thingy,” said Anna, making uncertain hand gestures. “She’s okay now, though. She’s got a handle on it.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Emma murmured, thinking of just how much damage an ice sorceress could do to Storybrooke in the middle of winter.

“But I don’t think that’s what happened this time,” Anna continued, biting her lip while she thought.

“We’ll find out.” Emma took a breath. “Okay, look – I can’t list somebody as missing until they’ve been gone for twenty-four hours. It’s protocol. So this is what I need you to do: go back to Granny’s, get a hot cocoa on me and wait to see if Elsa shows up. Don’t go out looking for her. If she’s still missing tomorrow morning, come back here and let me know. Okay?”

“Okay. Thank you,” said Anna, offering Emma her hand to shake. “I hope I don’t have to come back and tell you that Elsa’s still missing, not in that I don’t want to see you tomorrow in, like, a malicious way or something.”

“Yeah, I know.” Emma gave a small smile, which Anna reciprocated. “I hope I don’t see you tomorrow too.”

_A missing ice sorceress_, she thought as Anna made to leave. _Great. Just what I need!_

Somebody opened the door before Anna could, which led to an awkward _wow-the-door-opened-magically_ that Anna looked overjoyed about. Until she made eye contact with the other person. Even from five feet away, Emma could feel the tension pass between the two, and she felt the sudden urge to leave – like she was intruding on something private.

An age later, Anna cleared her throat. “Prince Hans,” she greeted formally with a small curtsy.

The man – presumably Hans – bowed his head. “Princess Anna,” he said equally as formally without meeting her eyes and moving out of the way of the door so that she could leave. Which she
did, all the while throwing Hans the coldest look that Emma had ever seen.

Obviously those two had history.

“Hi, Emma,” greeted Frederick Cole as he entered the station in the wake of Anna’s departure, followed by Hans. “This is my brother. Hans, this is Sheriff Emma Swan.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” Emma said, offering Hans a handshake. The guy still seemed unable to speak, so she addressed Frederick. “Sorry, but this isn’t really a great time, so if you could get to it—”

“Righto. We found something you need to see,” said Frederick, casting a glance sideways at his brother.

“Okay. What is it?”

“A troll nest,” Hans stated, which earned him a look from Frederick. Emma looked from one brother to the other.

“A troll nest?”

“Rock trolls, to be specific,” Hans elaborated. “There’s a clan of them that have set up shop in the hills just out of town – it’s about an hour away, tops.”

“Uh-huh,” said Emma. “Um, look, much as I would like to scout out a … troll nest, is there any chance we could do this tomorrow? I’ve just got a lot of stuff to do and—”

“What did your dad say?” Henry asked as Grace joined him and Eric at the base of the wall on Perrault Avenue. It was no longer guarded and free access granted to anyone, though Henry didn’t doubt that there would be sentries somewhere where they just couldn’t see. That was always how it worked in the stories.

“He said okay; I just have to be back before dark and pick up a bottle of milk on the way home,” said Grace. “What did your parents say, Eric?”

“They didn’t say anything. I told Mom I didn’t want to go to baseball practise and walked out the door,” Eric reported with a shrug.

Henry and Grace shared a look; they both knew Eric’s home life wasn’t the greatest and that his dad was a bit of a loser. Having seven younger siblings probably didn’t help. Neither of them had yet figured out what to say when he blurted out stuff like that.

“Okay,” Henry announced after he decided that moving on was the best course of action. “Let’s do this.”

On the other side of the wall, he cast a wary glance around. There was nobody around, at least that he could see. Still, it would be best to whisper. Better safe than sorry.

“Minaret Drive is down this way,” Grace said, pointing. She led the way through what was mostly an industrial area, so there were loads of people in hi-vis vests and safety helmets. Some of them
said hello, but most ignored the three kids. Steadily, the noise dissipated and the number of people reduced as Grace led them into an area full of buildings that had been built to be run-down and hazardous. Outside of an old paint factory, Grace pulled the boys behind a dumpster and consulted a map she’d drawn on her hand.

“That’s it down there,” she whispered, jabbing an elbow in the appropriate direction. “We’ll be seen if we go around the front, but there’s a street just through here that leads around the back. Should be pretty easy to get close.”

“Hang on,” said Eric. “Storybrooke isn’t on Google Maps or any other satellite imaging system. How do you know all of this?”

“Dad’s got a whole collection of maps in his study,” Grace explained. “He’s a bit of an amateur cartographer. I, uh, may have snuck a peek at one.”

Henry was impressed. “Junior spy at work.”

“Shut up. Like you’ve never borrowed anything from your parents without their permission.”

“Just a set of keys!” he protested. *And some matches. A bit of dynamite. Grandma Snow’s credit card. And Mom’s gun …*

Grace gave him a look. Henry relented.

“Okay. Point taken.”

She then led them down a side street where hedge bushes were growing wild around a wire fence with a ‘KEEP OUT’ sign hanging from it. The old factory was much closer from this side. The three of them stayed close to the bushes to avoid being seen. Henry listened closely – it was faint, but he could definitely hear people moving around in there.

“Sounds like your dad was right,” said Eric, who’d heard the same things. Grace nodded, and the three of them knelt down in the foliage. “So now what?”

Henry pushed a bit of the hedge aside until he could get his phone in there to take pictures. The windows of the ground floor had all been boarded up, but the upper levels hadn’t and it was just possible to make out some shadows moving around in there. “We see if we can find a place to get closer.”


“Well, we gotta find out what they’re doing in there,” said Henry. Eric didn’t look convinced.

“Do we? Do we really?”

“I’ve got wire cutters,” announced Grace, who had obviously thought of everything much to Eric’s displeasure. Henry just grinned.

“Brilliant!”

Then a large shadow fell over the three of them. “And just what would you three be doing here?” said a gravelly voice that sent chills down Henry’s spine, not unlike nails on a blackboard. He slowly looked up to meet the eyes of someone who reminded him of the Terminator, right down to the sunglasses.
“Uh …” he stammered stupidly, looking sideways at Grace. “We, uh–”

“We lost our sheep. Dog. Sir,” Eric said calmly and confidently, blue eyes wide and innocent. The Terminator guy glared at him. Henry felt his heart begin to race.

“You lost your sheepdog?”

“Yessir. He’s black and white and shaggy, about this high. Have you seen him?”

“No. I have not seen a dog.”

“Oh. Well, he answers to ‘Snowball’ if you do see him,” said Eric, so smoothly that Henry had to fight the urge to stare at him. “We’d better, uh, keep looking, eh?”

“Yes, you should.” The Terminator guy stepped back as the three of them got up, pointedly turning his body in a way that would force them to go back the way they had come. “Run along.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Eric. Henry echoed the sentiment – as did Grace, took one last picture of the guy before the three of them left as quickly as they could without running.

“‘Snowball’?” Grace asked once they were out of earshot. Eric let out a heavy sigh.

“Don’t ask; my sister named him. She thought it was cute or something.”

“Still, that’s pretty impressive lying,” said Henry, whose hands continued to shake even after the guy was gone.

Eric just shrugged. “I’m not scared of guys like that. They remind me of my dad’s pal Toby, and he’s a total moron.” He then turned to Henry. “Did you get anything?”

“I dunno; I’ll check.”

They huddled down behind the same dumpster as before and Henry started swiping through the pictures. Most of them were a little blurry – nothing that couldn’t be fixed with Photoshop – and showed some definite movement in the upper levels.

“Wait, go back,” said Grace. He did. “What’s that?”

She pointed to something near a line of faded red industrial bins on the ground outside of the factory; it was round and grey and looked to Henry like a perfectly normal boulder, except that when he swiped backwards another photo, it was gone. He swiped forwards – somehow the rock appeared out of nowhere, and then was at least three feet to the left in the next picture, and gone again in the fourth. A door near the bins was also partly open in the last picture.

“I have no idea,” said Henry. But whatever it was, he was going to find out.

Well, the only things Emma had seen so far were trees, mud, rocks and more mud. Lots and lots of mud. She cursed each time she came across an unexpected slick and slipped. Her jeans were going to need a serious clean. Ahead of her, Frederick and Hans seemed to be leaping expertly from dry patch to dry patch. How, she had no idea.

Four close shaves and a rise that Emma almost had to climb on all fours later, and the brothers came to a stop, kneeling on the available solid ground. Emma wondered why they had chosen this
lookout point when there were plenty of others, not as steep or slippery and with little grey rocks they could have used as seats. She decided not to question it; Frederick had said that this – whatever it was – was important, so the vantage point probably was too.

“Alright,” she muttered as she joined them at the crest, testing out a patch of dirt with her fist before settling down on it. “What did we climb all the way up here for?”

Hans handed her a pair of binoculars and pointed into the valley below them.

“See for yourself.”

Emma did. At first glance, it was trees and mud and rocks and more mud – and more rocks, and more mud – and more rocks …

The rocks were moving.

“What the hell?” she exclaimed as she watched one of the larger boulders wriggle in one spot so as to push itself down the hill. When it hit the bottom, out popped a head, arms and legs, and it started waddling away. To Emma, it looked like a dirty Smurf wearing leaves and rabbit skins. “What is that thing?”

“That would be a rock troll,” Hans murmured. On his left, Frederick pulled a camera out of his backpack and started taking pictures. “Believe it or not, they’re better looking than bridge trolls. Not to mention smell a hell of a lot better.”

Her mind still trying to comprehend the fact that it was looking at humanoid rocks, Emma tracked the stony creature’s path through the binoculars. It walked about fifty metres and then halted next to a gap between two hills that had been stopped up with solid ice. Emma was no expert, but she was pretty sure that the blue glow it gave off meant that the ice was magic. There, the troll pulled up a three-foot square of earth like a trapdoor and disappeared down the uncovered hole.

“Okay,” she said after a moment, setting the binoculars down. “Well, I did kill a dragon. I suppose there’s no reason why talking rocks can’t be real too. What are they doing in Storybrooke?”

Hans shrugged. “Got brought over with the Dark Curse, I imagine. The question is what they plan to do now that they’re here.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“You could say that,” said Hans with a tone that told Emma he was withholding a much less polite response. “They’re shifty, shady and prone to cursing humans to achieve their own ends. Oh, that reminds me: put these on.”

He reaching into Frederick’s bag and pulled out three pairs of safety goggles, giving one each to Frederick and Emma and keeping the last for himself.

“We had a little accident the last time we were up here,” Frederick explained with what might have been a guilty glance at his brother. Emma nodded sceptically, but put her glasses on all the same.

“I’m not really an expert on magic, but I have been chasing these things for three years,” Hans continued. “Trust me; they’re bad news. I don’t know exactly what they’re up to, but the last time they interfered in human affairs, they almost plunged a whole kingdom into an eternal winter.”

Emma stared at him. Hans gave a small shrug.
“And they tried to off the queen, too.”

“And they tried to off the queen, too.”

“Okay. So, we’ve got a bunch of rock trolls running around who wanna start a Narnian-style winter and kill some royals – whoa, what’s that?”

She grabbed the binoculars and focused the lenses on a spot just beneath the ice wall, where a swirl of green and reddish-grey smoke had appeared. It solidified into two human forms, both of which Emma recognised.

One of them was Zelena. Even from a mile away in rapidly diminishing light, there was no mistaking the witch who had imprisoned her son and shot her fiancé. The other was their mystery man – the guy who broke Zelena out of jail after attacking Belle and robbing Rumplestiltskin.

“Frederick?” she asked, thinking quickly. “Can you get some pictures of those two?”

“Why? Who are they?” asked Hans, looking at them both in confusion while Frederick clicked away.

“One of them is the Wicked Witch,” Emma explained. “The other is the guy who helped her escape.”

And they were talking to another rock troll, this one larger and wearing a grass headdress.

Frederick put his camera down and wiped his forehead. “Well, this complicates things.”


“Alright, people, here’s the story.”

The sheriff’s station was crammed full of all the people Emma had called or texted to meet there after she got back to town. Frederick had printed all of his photographs for her, now laid out across Mulan’s desk; the pictures of the royal bash were pinned to the corkboard; and Emma had found an old blackboard crammed behind a filing cabinet in her office. On that she had Blu-tacked a few more pictures and written down every relevant fact she could think of. It was only about half full.

Mulan and Jack had claimed their own chairs. Neal was perched on the windowsill behind Mulan, looking through some of the pictures with Henry, who had just come back from the arcade with some friends. Regina was on the sofa with Robin, who was trying to keep Roland occupied by some colouring sheets on the floor. Belle insistently relinquished a chair to Snow and then stood behind it. Rumplestiltskin, Archie, Ruby and Hans all opted to stand as well.

“Okay. I know this is a police matter, but frankly, this is all way out of my league,” Emma started. She picked one coloured glossy off the desk and held it up for everyone to see. “This is the guy we saw wandering around the rock trolls’ camp. Now, I can’t be sure, but –” she took another photo, this one black-and-white and blurry, and addressed Belle in particular– “It does look like the guy who attacked you and then helped Zelena break out.”

Belle looked at the coloured picture and nodded straight away. “That’s him.”

“Okay. So we’ve confirmed that this guy is definitely working with Zelena,” said Emma, pointing to the slightly hazy form of the Witch in the photo. “And, apparently, also with these rock trolls.
Archie, Jack, I’d like you to float these pictures around town. See if anybody recognises him – that’s assuming you don’t?” she asked, directing the question at Rumplestiltskin.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Okay,” Emma said, nodding. After all, if Rumplestiltskin did know who he was – given what the guy had done or tried to do to Belle – he would be dead already. “Archie, Jack, anything you can come up with. Name, address, species, robot production code, I don’t care. We need to find out who this guy is.”

“Can do,” said Archie, picking out the best photo of the guy’s face to photocopy.

“Can you help them?” Emma asked Rumplestiltskin. “Try to identify this guy magically, or something?”

“I can give it a try.”

“At least we know where Zelena is now,” Robin offered.

“Not necessarily,” said Emma. “We saw them appear using the same teleportation trick that you two do –” she pointed at Regina and Rumplestiltskin –“and frankly, Zelena doesn’t strike me as the camping type.”

“No,” said Regina, Rumplestiltskin and Belle all at once. They glossed over it.

“Anyway, it much more likely that they’re holed up somewhere in town. I’ve got the dwarves staking out the farmhouse, but so far there’s been nothing.”

“No, that would be far too obvious,” Regina muttered.

“Agreed. Ruby – can you help Mulan do some snooping around the parts of town that are on the other side of Richard’s wall? Don’t go beating anybody up, just ask questions and see if you can smell anything … out of the ordinary.”

“Sure.”

“Thanks.”

“But we still know that they’re working with these – what are they called, rock trolls?” asked Robin. “The lads and I can scout out the area, maybe even set up an ambush.”

“That wouldn’t be a good idea,” said Hans. “There are hundreds of trolls all over the hillside – I’m willing to bet that they already know we’ve been up there. You’d be walking straight into a trap.”

“Wait a second,” said Emma, confused. “Hundreds? I only saw eight.”

Hans frowned, then shook his head. “No, no. See those boulders?” He pointed to the photographs showing a woody hillside dotted with strangely round grey rocks. “Every single one of those things is a rock troll.”

There was a pause as everyone absorbed that information. Regina was the one to break the silence.

“How did you become such an expert on rock trolls?”

“I’ve spent three years tracking these things in the mountains around Arendelle,” Hans explained. “Let’s just say it’s a fascination of mine.”
“More like an obsession,” muttered Regina.

“And besides, we still have no idea who or what her friend is or what he could do to you,” Emma reminded Robin, brushing past that comment. “Which brings me to my next point. Belle – can you do research on these trolls? What they are, what they want, how to beat them, stuff like that? Oh, and something called the, uh, ‘Spell of Shattered Sight’, too.”

“The ‘Spell of Shattered Sight’?” echoed Neal. He looked to his father. “What the hell is that?”

To everybody’s surprise, Rumplestiltskin gave a small shrug. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of it.”

“Really?” said Emma, sounding more astonished than she intended. Hans and Frederick had told her about the spell on the way back down the mountain, but they hadn’t known too much either. She’d thought Rumplestiltskin knew everything about magic.

“It strips away the best parts of a person and turns them into their worst selves,” explained Hans. “You can act on your darkest impulses and most selfish dreams, even to the point of doing something – or hurting someone you’d never otherwise hurt.”

A mixture of curious and suspicious eyes turned on him.

“I, uh, might be speaking from experience.”

“Huh,” Emma murmured, as did some of the others. That explained a few things. “So what are they planning to do with it?”

“Well, I don’t know for sure, but I think they might be trying to cast the curse on a large scale,” said Hans, making an arc with his hands. “The entire town kind of large scale.”

“To accomplish what, though?” asked Mulan.

“That’s, uh, the part I’m not sure about.”

“Well, whatever it is, it can’t be good, not if Zelena and her friend are onboard,” said Emma. “So – Belle?”

“I’ll see what I can come up with, but no promises,” she said. “Trolls are like the fairies. They’re pretty secretive.”

“Here, take these,” Hans offered suddenly, handing her a stack of moleskin journals. “That’s three years’ worth of research; everything I know about them. It’s not much, but it’ll get you started at least.”

“Hey, Hans,” said Henry, digging his phone out of his pocket and pressing a button. “These rock trolls … would they look anything like this?”

Emma leant over to get a look at the picture. Hans nodded.

“Yep, that’s a troll. So they’ve moved into town, have they?”

“Henry …” Emma said slowly, narrowing her eyes at her son. “What were you doing outside the old textiles factory?”

Henry’s cheeks flushed. It got Regina and Neal’s attention too; both of them stood up. “Um … me, Grace and Eric may have done some snooping.”
“When?”

“Uh, this afternoon after school.”

“*Henry Daniel Mills*–!” Regina thundered, staring down at their shared son with her arms crossed.

“Mom, we were fine!” Henry defended. “Nobody was gonna pay attention to a couple of kids!”

“Alright, look –” Emma started, redirecting Henry’s attention back to her. “This is not endorsing what you did and you are definitely still grounded, but – why were you snooping around the textile factory?”

“Because Grace said that somebody had a go at her dad when he was walking past the other day,” Henry explained. “Jefferson thought he heard people moving around in there, so I thought it might be worth checking out. And it was.”

“Did you actually see anybody?”

“No, but I’m sure I heard them. A lot of them.”

Emma looked to Regina, who was still fuming. They exchanged a silent agreement that Regina would talk to Henry after this was over, and then Emma let out a sigh. “So Zelena’s working with King Richard now?”

“Well, let’s not jump to conclusions here,” said Archie. “We don’t know that for sure.”

“Who else is going to turning a derelict factory into an army barracks?” argued Regina, a sentiment that Robin and Jack both seemed to share. “Zelena shows up at the trolls’ camp, and then a troll shows up on Richard’s doorstep? Doesn’t seem like a coincidence to me.”

“Either way, we need to know: who this guy is, why he’s working with Zelena, and what they wanna do with this curse,” said Emma, counting off each point on her fingers. “In the meantime, keep the town running as smoothly as possible, or all hell’s gonna break loose. Everybody got their assignments?” Heads nodded around the room. “Right. Let’s get to it.”

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Killian plodded along the now-familiar route to the sheriff’s station, thinking over and over what he planned to say. Where the Witch was hiding out, of course – probably leaving out the little detail where she had made him a job offer – and his services in tracking her down and locking her up again.

But would that be enough?

The better question was; did he have it in him to face Emma?

No, surely she couldn’t be disappointed. He hadn’t done anything wrong, per se – maybe he could have told them about the Witch a bit sooner but he had hardly known that she would kill somebody–

He stopped in front of the station’s front door and took a breath. This was easy; hardly comparable to handling Pan or fighting the Crocodile or any other dastardly act he had gotten up to as a pirate–

But then his hand was wrenched away from the handle by a large man who shoved him against the wall. A sweaty, hairy arm pinned him there, and his attacker leered at him with gappy teeth.
“Remember us, slick?” growled the man, giving Killian a perfect view of identical hairy nostrils and watery eyes. Behind him, another feller – this one shorter, thinner and with spiky auburn hair – smacked his hand on a baseball bat as if to give a preview of the sound it would make on Killian’s skull. Yes, Killian recognised them. Unfortunate as that was.

“Foulfellow,” he snarled, sizing himself up as much as was possible when one had a log of pork crushing one’s chest. “Good to see you well.”

“Cut the crap. Where’s my money?”

“If I knew, it would be in my hand already. Now, if you’ll excuse me–”

Foulfellow slammed his other hand into the wall beside Killian’s head. His unspeaking companion smirked.

“Not so fast, pretty boy,” Foulfellow drawled. “You cheated me. And now it’s gonna cost you. Hold him.”

Killian was flung from Foulfellow’s grasp into the arms of his companion, who – though small – held on with an iron grip. He waited until Foulfellow was within swinging distance, and then kicked upwards, twisting his whole body away from the other man simultaneously. A hand the size of a small cask grabbed hold of his leg and pulled him to the ground, whereupon Killian found himself trapped beneath Foulfellow’s giant silhouette and the streetlamp glaring in his eyes–

“ALRIGHT, THAT’S ENOUGH!” shouted a female voice.

A moment later, another silhouette had joined Foulfellow’s and was forcibly pulling him away. Killian jumped to his feet at the first opportunity, hook at the ready and wishing he’d held onto cutlass–

But there was no need. Foulfellow had been pinned against the wall by the combined strength of Robin Hood and the Eastern warrior woman, the latter forcing a pair of handcuffs onto Foulfellow’s wrists. His companion foolishly swung a baseball bat at Regina, was gracelessly contorted into a position similar to what he may have looked like if he had been run through a diamond grinder, and then frozen in place by the mayor. Emma tossed her a pair of handcuffs before addressing Killian.

“Are you alright?”

“Fine,” he snapped, flinching away from her touch. He didn’t need help.

“Fine, eh? You filthy parrot-loving worm!” Foulfellow screamed while fighting against his restraints.

“Shut up!” Emma snapped at the con man, then turned back to Killian. “What the hell did you do?”

“What the hell did I do?” Killian spat back, unable to believe what he had just heard. “The bastard attacked me!”

“Because he’s a lying, card-changing worm! Damned pirate! Should hang the lot of ’em!” shouted Foulfellow a second before he was shoved inside the sheriff’s station by Robin and the foreign woman. Even inside, Killian could still hear the con man yelling and screaming, presumably things that shouldn’t be repeated in polite company. Nevertheless, he hardly cared.

“Killian?” said Emma, crossing her arms in front of her. “What happened?”
“Nothing you need to be concerned about,” Killian grunted. He didn’t need her help. Not that she had really offered, or even defended him against any of Foulfellow’s comments …

She stood up for the Crocodile and didn’t stand up for me.

“No, because three supposedly grown men brawling in broad daylight isn’t any concern of the sheriff’s at all!” Emma exclaimed, moving her hands to her hips. “Now, what the hell happened?”

“I told you: it’s nothing you need to be concerned about,” Killian repeated, rubbing his jaw where it was starting to hurt. “Don’t you have a witch to catch or something?”

He stormed away after that, not waiting to hear her response or even the intake of her breath. No, he couldn’t take that. He was too angry.

She stood up for Rumplestiltskin but not me, he fumed, turning around the first corner he found. For the damned Crocodile.

Killian rammed his fist into the first wall that presented itself. His knuckles bled. He hardly noticed; if he had, he would not have cared. Emma had defended the Crocodile at the town hall, but she hadn’t extended the same courtesy to him.

Well, now he knew for certain what the heroes really thought of him.

It took the combined force of Neal, Emma, Hans, Robin and Mulan to get Foulfellow and his friend locked up in the station. Even then, the two of them had only quietened when Regina threatened to rip out both of their tongues after Foulfellow swung a fist at Robin. Killian had disappeared in a huff, so Neal left a frustrated Emma to deal with the con men and picked up the ingredients for beef tacos on his way home.

“Heard it all the way down the street,” he called back from the door. “You want some?”

“Well, we appreciate it,” Snow called back. “I’ll make sure to thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m back now,” Neal replied as he walked back down the hall. “I’ll be back.”

“Heard it all the way down the street,” he called again as he went down the stairs and into his apartment. “You want some?”

“She heard it all the way down the street,” Snow called back. “I’ll make sure to thank you.”

Neal turned and walked back down the hall, stopping at the door. “I’ll be back,” he said. “She heard it all the way down the street.”

He walked back down the stairs, stopping at the door. “You sure you want to do that?”

“Not really.”

The neighbours were in the next building, so Neal had to go all the way downstairs, behind the sewing shop and up another flight of stairs. He could still hear crashing by the time he got to the neighbours’ front door and stood there for a minute after knocking, clenching and unclenching his
fists, wondering if he should have brought his sword. Or a gun.

A florid-looking woman in a flower-pattern dress and daffodil-covered apron answered the door. She had several bruises on her face, a crooked nose that had probably been broken once or twice, and one arm in a sling. Unblinking brown eyes stared at him, as if she thought he looked strange. Her appearance brought back the faint memory of a pantomime show Neal had seen in San Diego shortly after arriving in the Land Without Magic, and he groaned inwardly.

“Judy Punch …?” he asked hesitantly, hoping against hope that he was wrong.

No such luck.

“Yes? What the bloody hell do you want?” screeched Judy, scowling at Neal as though he were something you might tread on at the park.

“Hi. I’m Neal Cassidy. I live next door.”

“Well, if it’s about the bleeding newspaper, you can bloody well sod off!”

“Uh, I don’t know anything about the paper, I just wanted to ask if you could keep it down–”

“No such luck.

“No such luck. What the bloody hell do you want?” screeched Judy, scowling at Neal as though he were something you might tread on at the park.

“Hi. I’m Neal Cassidy. I live next door.”

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“Uh, I don’t know anything about the paper, I just wanted to ask if you could keep it down–”

“No such luck.

“Nuts to that!” she screamed, several pieces of saliva exploding from her mouth with such force that Neal had to step aside to let them pass. “Husband! OI! Get down here, you lazy son-of-a-djinn!” she shouted over her shoulder into the house. She waited with extreme patience for perhaps half a second for him to appear. When he didn’t show up, she screamed again.

“HUS-BAAAANNND!”

Neal felt his ears pop and the flower pot on the windowsill cracked. A second later, and with slow, reptilian movements, Mr Punch appeared behind his wife dressed in a red bathrobe. His features were even more exaggerated than his wife’s. He had a large hooked nose that curved down almost to touch his upwardly hooked chin, and his thin mouth was curled upwards in a permanent leer. He too bore a number of bruises on his face and one eye was blackened and puffy. A sleeping infant was clasped to his chest and Punch rocked it back and forth aggressively. Neal stood and stared at Punch and Judy, trying to figure out which one was least frightening. It was a tricky contest.

“What the fucking hell do you want?” Punch screeched in an annoyingly high-pitched voice, revealing two rows of perfectly varnished teeth.

“I’m, uh, your neighbour,” said Neal slowly, while attempting to covertly back away from the door. “I was just coming by to ask if you could keep it down–”

“No such luck.

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“No such luck. What the bloody hell do you want?” screeched Judy, scowling at Neal as though he were something you might tread on at the park.

“Hi. I’m Neal Cassid
“I’ll get your bloody dinner when I bloody well feel like it!” Judy screamed, and trod on his hand as she stepped over him.

Though his better judgement was screaming at him to run, Neal knelt next to Punch and gently touched his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Great! Never better!” Punch gasped, grinning like a madman as he sat up. “Terrific lass, my wife. Very spirited.”

“I can see that,” commented Neal, thinking that if Judy hadn’t ducked the baseball bat she would be unconscious, or worse. He couldn’t make up his mind whether to run or not.

Punch let out a long breath and ran a hand through his receding hair. “I’m getting too old for this endless fighting crap,” he said mournfully, his knees cracking to make Neal wince as he pulled himself to his feet. “Listen, do you want to come in for a beer? I’ve probably got something around the place.”

“Uh, thanks, but we’ve got dinner going too. Maybe next time?” Neal suggested, trying to make sense of the situation.

“Sure, no problem,” Punch said like a perfectly reasonable man who had not just been screaming at his wife and swearing at his neighbour.

“Honey, look what I’ve found!” Judy returned to the door, smiling broadly, with a broken dinner plate. “It’s the first piece of crockery I ever threw at you! Look, I wrote the date on the back and everything!”

“Aww.” said Punch. He and his wife smiled at each other and then hugged, each gingerly avoiding the bruised areas on each other’s bodies.

“Fish pie, sweetheart?” asked Judy.

Punch kissed her on the top of her head. “That sounds wonderful, love.”

It was like watching a rom-com outtake in the middle of a horror movie to Neal, who still had no idea what to make of it. “So, uh, I guess I’ll catch you around?” he said nervously, wondering what would break this spell of civility. “And … would you mind just keeping it down a little? It’s just that we’ve got a baby next door and all …?”

“Oh, certainly,” said Judy with a little wave of her wrist. “Sorry to bother you!”

“That – that’s okay.”

Punch extended a hand, which Neal shook hesitantly. “It was nice to meet you, Mr Cassidy.”

“You too.”

They were still smiling and waving as Neal descended the stairs. But by the time he got back to the loft, the shouting and smashing had restarted, along with a loud scream from Judy that transformed mid-wail into a lascivious giggle.

“So, how are they?” Snow asked, still on the sofa with Jesse and a burping cloth draped over her shoulder.

Neal tried to think of a way to put it. The best he came up with was one word: “Weird.”
Next, Chapter 12: The Feast of Saint Valentine, in which Neal babysits, Robin and Regina do some snooping, Rumplestiltskin teaches and Snow visits David’s grave once more.

The cyclone went south and didn’t hit us, so … bittersweet about that. In other news, I’ve had a fantastic writing week. Unfortunately, that happens to be synonymous with ‘have two assignments due on Friday’ so … yeah. I hate my muse sometimes.

Although, if you’re interested, check out ‘Intervention’, an in-progress rewrite of season 6!
“And this is his blue teddy bear. That one is only for after his naps, not before his naps or he won’t sleep—”

“Snow, we’ve been through this,” Neal told her firmly while bouncing Jesse in his arms. The baby was smiling. Although that was probably just gas. “We will be fine.”

“I know, I know,” the anxious mother muttered. Snow put the bear down in Jesse’s cot, bobbing from one foot to the other, then wrung her hands so hard that Neal worried she would pull them off. “Did I put enough diapers in the bag?”

“Yes.”

“And a burping cloth?”

“Yes.”

“And his change mat?”

“Ye-es.”

Neal put on a cheeky grin when Snow glared. She then went to fuss some more over her packing, spread out over her bed along with an outfit for later in the evening.

“For future reference, this is what fretting looks like. And it is usually good to be well out of the way when it happens,” he murmured to Jesse. As expected, the baby just blinked at him.

Snow let out a heavy sigh and sat down on her bed. “I still don’t think this is a good idea. What if something happens and he needs me—”

“Snow, it’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but you’ll have Henry and Roland there too—”

“Yes, and they are old enough to look after themselves if need be,” Neal stated, putting on a serious face. “Really, we’ll be okay. You just go out, have some fun, and do something for yourself for a couple hours. If anything happens, I promise you that I’ll call.”

Snow gave a small smile of gratitude. She watched her son rub his face on Neal’s shirt for a moment, then got up to kiss Jesse on the forehead and resumed packing.

“Hey,” Emma called as she came down the stairs, still putting her shirt on. She stopped when she noticed the diaper bag and the dress laid out on Snow’s bed. “Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, out to dinner with Ruby and Ella,” said Snow, folding up more burping cloths and shoving them in the bag. “I told you, remember?”

“I thought that wasn’t until Friday?”

“Yeah. Today is Friday.”
Neal watched, amused, while Emma looked at her mother and then him. “Wait, *today* is Friday?” she asked, counting off the days on her fingers. “Oh, crap! Neal, I am so sorry—”

“It’s alright,” Neal said quickly and made a stop sign as best he could while balancing a baby on his forearm. “I’ve got it all planned out – I’m taking the boys to Regina’s, cheesy pepperoni pizza’s already been ordered, gonna try to beat Level 28 with Henry, and after that, we might introduce Roland to *Super Mario Brothers*. Really, it’s all good.”

He had figured that Emma would forget what day it was when she had spent all of yesterday engrossed in Humpty’s murder case, so he offered to watch Jesse when Snow brought up the fact that Ruby wanted to take her out to dinner. Well, *offered* was maybe the wrong way to put it. Threatened to lock her out of the loft was slightly more accurate. Even with the two boys, Neal didn’t think it would be so difficult; it wasn’t a school night, so Henry would be playing video games until late (his grounded period didn’t start until Saturday) and Roland practically followed Henry around anyway.

Emma raised an eyebrow sceptically. “You’re going to spend Valentine’s Day playing video games?”

“Well, you’re working,” Neal said with a shrug, and then leant over to put Jesse in his carrier. “Snow needs to get out, Robin and Regina want to have a date, and somebody has to watch the kids.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Really, it’s okay,” he reiterated for the fourth time, starting to get a bit annoyed because he’d just finished winning the argument with her mother.

Emma grimaced guiltily. “You’re sure?” she asked, sidling up and wrapping her arms around him. He nodded pointedly. “I’m sorry. Can I make it up to you?”

“You don’t have to make it up—”

She gave him a look that made Neal’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline.

“Oh. Well, you know if you do have to work late, I wanna be supportive of that—”

She chuckled and kissed him sweetly, at which point Snow cleared her throat loudly.

“Hey! Not in front of the baby!”

Given that said baby was currently alternating between staring at his sister and his brother-in-law, Neal saw her point. He reluctantly let Emma go, gave Snow a slightly embarrassed grin and started collecting his things for the night. Next door, something crashed into the wall and somebody screeched.

Emma groaned. “Are they at it again?”

“No, Andy Dufresne is trying to tunnel out of jail and into the loft,” said Neal, earning a scolding look from both his fiancée and his mother-in-law. While Jesse started to grumble and something heavy crashed into the apartment floor, Emma sighed.

“Alright, I’m going over there and I’m going to get them to keep it down.”

Neal raised an eyebrow, remembering his own unpleasant encounter with the Punches. “Good luck.
They’re just going to tell you to sod off."

“Well, I’ll be forceful,” said Emma, and clipped her sheriff’s badge to her belt.

Emma had to knock for ten minutes straight as Punch and Judy were having a fight and couldn’t hear for all the screams, swearing and breaking of furniture. Marco must get a lot of business from them, Emma thought. When the door finally opened, it was Judy, who had a split lip and a bloody nose.

“Yes?” she said, holding a handkerchief to her nose and clearly annoyed at having her leisure time disturbed.

“If Mr Punch did that to you, I can have him arrested for assault,” Emma offered, wondering if Judy wasn’t quite the willing partner she claimed to be.

“Sod off,” Judy snapped, and slammed the door. There were more sounds of breaking while Emma knocked on the door again. It took another ten minutes before the door opened again; this time it was Punch, who held an ice pack over his blackened eye.

“What?” he asked irritably.

“Look, I am the sheriff and if you and your wife continue to—”

“Sod off,” Punch snapped.

And then he slammed the door in her face.

“So how’d it go?” asked Snow when Emma got back.

“I had an interesting exchange of views with both of them,” she replied, grabbing her jacket off the rack, “and I’m sure we can come to some sort of amicable solution to the whole sorry business.”

“They told you to sod off, didn’t they?” said Neal with a grin.

“Yeah.” Emma shrugged her jacket on. “Okay, I gotta get to the station. Just, uh, keep an eye out, and if you do hear them threatening to throw the baby down the stairs—”

“You’ll be my first call,” said Snow.

She was so close to making it work; she was certain. Belle stretched out her back – she’d abandoned her office chair to sit cross-legged across the room from the slightly smoking candle – and shut her eyes.

_Just focus on the candle. All thoughts are on the candle._

Breathe and focus, she recited over and over. It was working. The hairs on her arm stood on edge as something akin to electricity began to bubble in her veins. The nearest comparison she could make was that it was like being plugged into a generator. The foul taste of tarnished metal filled the back of her throat.
“Belle?”

“AHH!”

A wave of heat burst through the library office as the candle exploded. Both Rumple and Belle jumped from the shock. Rumple was the first to recover. He grabbed the fire extinguisher Belle had placed by the door just in case things got out of hand, and quickly quenched the fire before it burnt a hole in the floor.

“Sorry,” Belle said while she got to her feet with her face burning in embarrassment, and brushed a light smattering of ash off her skirt. “I didn’t mean to make it explode.”

“You made it explode?” Rumple asked, looking at her as if she had grown an extra arm. Belle started, realising what she had just said.

“Uh –”

“Is that my book?” He pointed to the opened volume on the desk. She stammered some more. Rumple put the fire extinguisher down and then turned to face her. She couldn’t quite bring herself to meet his eyes. “Belle, are you – are you trying to do magic?”

“Yes,” she admitted shyly, forcing herself to look up. Rumple looked flummoxed.

“What – why – why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, wrapping her arms around her and rubbing her upper arms. “I’m sorry, I should have. It’s just that – after getting attacked again, and then Zelena breaking out, I’ve just been feeling so damn helpless and I had to do something –”

“Hey.” Rumple gently grabbed both of her arms. “It’s okay. You don’t have to explain. I just wanted to know why you didn’t tell me.”

Again, Belle couldn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t know,” she murmured after an age. There were a lot of reasons – she hadn’t wanted to ask him for fear of being told that she couldn’t learn, or she had worried that he would become smothering and overly enthusiastic about the whole process –

“I – I guess I felt like I needed to prove something,” she admitted. “That I could do it on my own.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m tired of needing someone to protect me! There, I said it!” she cried, stepping away from him and untangling her arms. “Ever since we met, it’s been one thing after another! First it was Cruella, then it was Regina. The wraith, the mines, Hook, Zelena. When that man attacked me, the only thing I could do was run into the elevator and cry and I am sick of it! Okay? I feel like a pawn on a sorcerer’s chessboard, just waiting to get slaughtered. I’m bloody useless!”

She turned to face the wall, unable to let herself cry in front of him. That had been happening far too often lately.

“Belle?” he murmured, and she felt him move closer so that his front was gently pressed against her back. “Please look at me.”

She wiped her eyes before she did. His warm brown eyes were gentle and full of a love Belle did
not feel she deserved.

“Sweetheart, the last thing you will ever be is useless,” Rumple told her, calmly and firmly. “It was you who figured out a way to save your home from the ogres. You who found Hook’s ship and freed Doctor Hopper. And it was you who figured out the key to unlocking the Vault. You kept me from losing my mind. So whatever the consequences were, you’re the reason that I’m alive.”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Belle murmured weakly.

“And if you still want to learn magic,” he continued, now with a grin, “I would be delighted to teach you.”

She bit her lip, thinking. “You really think that I can learn?”

“Well –” he cleared his throat and looked behind him – “I think that should answer the question quite nicely.”

They both laughed, the burnt patch of floor still smoking profusely. Looking at it, Belle recalled the rush of power that had caused the explosion, and had a thought. One that she really should have considered before.

“If I do learn, it wouldn’t be all or nothing, would it?” she asked slowly. “Like, if I thought things were … getting out of hand … could I stop?”

“Of course you could.” Rumple let out a little chuckle. “I can teach you the skills, but what you decide to do with that power is your choice alone to make.”

“Good. Light magic only.”

“Darling, no offence intended, but I think dark magic might be the one thing on this Earth at which you would be useless,” he said with a cheeky grin. “I don’t know a lot of dark sorcerers who would nurse a rabbit back to health purely out of the goodness of their hearts.”

She laughed again, then let herself fall into his arms and snuggled into his chest.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“It’s okay. I’m sorry that I kept things from you, too,” he replied, holding her just a little tighter.

With his head pounding like a rowboat drummer in a rainstorm, Killian had to bite back a groan as he knocked on the door of the Grimm’s Road address. He couldn’t remember much of the night before, but guessed what had happened from the look of Smee’s flat in the morning. He would have told himself ‘never again’, but the use of that phrase was usually followed by a similar night of heavy drinking.

There was no response, so he knocked again – cursing the inventor of the sun as he did – until something invisible tugged in the vicinity of his naval, all of the air was squashed out of his lungs, and he landed with a thud on a carpeted floor, looking at a pair of high-heeled black boots.

“You could have just opened the door.”

“Do you really think I’d be so stupid as to give you the actual address of this place?” Zelena spat, walking past him to sit on a lumpy old sofa. Killian squinted, not sure if he was seeing the place
properly. Either there was a sickly orange pillow moving on the couch, or Zelena had acquired an extremely ugly tabby cat. “Number 81 is down the road, in full view of the front window. For security purposes.”

“Understood.” Killian groaned and got off his knees. He only got as far as sitting on the carpet, but that seemed to be far enough. “Alright. Let’s hear it.”

“Not quite yet.”

“Excuse me?” he asked, rubbing his eyes. “‘Not quite yet’? What did you drag me in here for, then?”

“Well, pardon me for not unloading all of my secrets to the first bilge rat that shows up in my living room,” Zelena said with a sneer, looking down her nose at him from on top of the sofa. He had seen her farmhouse; why had she chosen a run-down loft that stank of old grandmothers to hide in? “How do I know you’re not here for information to get back into my sister’s good graces?”

“The phrase ‘get back’ implies that I was ever there in the first place,” Killian replied. He ground his teeth, remembering the events of the previous evening – Emma’s pitiful stare compared to the fiery sheriff who had defended the Dark One against King Richard. Well, Killian was done with her now. At least he had found out where her true loyalties lay before he wasted any more time pining over her. “Recent events have … proven to me that you were right. I have no friends in Storybrooke. The heroes don’t give a damn about me when I’m not of use to them, and yet they let the Crocodile walk around free. I’ve decided it’s time to choose a side.”

Zelena grinned like a mermaid that had caught a sailor in her song. “Good to hear it.”

“Thank you. Now can I know what you’re up to?”

“No. First, I need you to meet someone.”

“Oh? And whose acquaintance shall I be honoured to make?”

Zelena waved her hand. A glass of something that smelt like peaches appeared in her hand, and a similar glass on the floor next to Killian. He picked it up and sniffed it hesitantly, then gave it a try. Too sweet. He put it back down. Over the rim of her glass, Zelena was watching him. She took a sip and finally answered:

“You’ll see.”

The smell of formaldehyde hit Emma at the top of the stairs leading to Storybrooke’s morgue – located, for obvious reasons, in the hospital basement – and rose in a pungent crescendo until reaching near toxic levels at the lab door. She knocked; Whale called for her to come in. A harsh white light generated by a multitude of strip lights completed the ensemble, and Emma fought the urge to run out of the room. Or vomit. Or both.

“Not a fan of morgues, eh?” Whale asked, completely at ease.

“I don’t mind morgues,” said Emma. “It’s the dead bodies in them that bother me.”

Whale chuckled and put down whatever he had been cleaning into a tray full of scalpels, saws and various other instruments the use of which Emma was perfectly happy not to know. A large glazed
dissecting table was laid out in the middle of the room, with Humpty’s body on top of it. Thankfully, Whale had had the decency to cover the poor man with a sheet.

“I see you’ve managed to do what all the kings’ men couldn’t.”

“Hmm,” Whale replied to her lame joke. He stripped off his gloves and then beckoned her over to the lab computer. “After this, you’ll no longer say that dead men can’t talk.”

“Pretty sure I’ve never said that in my life,” Emma replied, and pulled out a rolling chair to sit next to Whale in front of the computer. He pulled up a screen. “What is that?”

“X-rays of Mr Dumpty’s c-spine and occipital region,” said Whale. “The cause of death is fairly obvious, so to speed things up I decided to focus on the unusual injury on the back of his neck.”

“Thanks,” said Emma. She could have gotten better results by sending the body down to Boston for analysis, but then she would have had to explain to the Massachusetts State Police that the deceased’s name was *Humpty Dumpty*. “So what’ve you got?”

“Well, I’m still guessing for the most part, but I’d be happy to bet that whatever caused this –” Whale pointed to a clear fracture on Humpty’s occipital bone– “wasn’t the fall. He landed face-down.”

“So he was hit from behind.”

“He was hit from behind.”

Emma groaned. So Mulan had been right, and now it was officially a murder investigation. “Great. Do you know what with?”

“Some sort of heavy object with a sharp edge,” said Whale. “Maybe a brick or a rock, or a blunt axe. You can see here that there’s a centralised point of impact surrounded by a larger area of damage. So whoever hit him knew where to do it.”

“What are you saying?” Emma asked, pretty sure that she already knew the answer.

“He would’ve been killed whether he fell or not,” said Whale. “The blow shattered his C-1 and C-2 vertebrae, and his spinal cord is shot to hell. Not to mention cerebral haemorrhages here and here. He was dead before he hit the ground.”

“So why would somebody chuck him off a wall?”

“Hey, you’re the cop. You tell me.”

Emma thought for a moment. “Could you have confirmed the blow to his head *without* modern technology?”

Whale shrugged. “Confirmed? Probably not. I mean, there are a lot of people who know what a club to the back of the head looks like, but coupled with a fall from twelve feet it’d be impossible to know for sure without X-rays.”

“Okay. So someone wanted to off him, and then cover up the evidence?”

“How would I know?” said Whale. “All I do is cut up the bodies.”

“Yeah. What about his BAC?”
“Again, can’t be sure because of how long it took us to find him, but he was definitely drunk.”

Emma filed the information away for later use, and thanked Whale before leaving the lab. She had gotten used to the smell of formaldehyde, and the streets of Storybrooke had never smelt sweeter.

Robin was starting to get used to the quiet of Storybrooke at night. Without the roar of car engines, the bustle of businesses in trading hours, and the slightly frightening appearance of large white birds in the sky - called airplanes, according to Henry – he could shut his eyes and pretend he was back in Locksley. Just with fewer sheep, and a prevalent stench of oil instead of manure.

“So, explain this ‘Saint Valentine’s Day’ again?” he asked as he and Regina walked arm-in-arm past the Dark Star Market. The windows had been stocked full of cards, gifts and other memorabilia coloured in various shades of red and dark pink. “What do gift-giving, romance and chocolates have to do with the observation of the feast day of a saint brutally murdered hundreds of years ago?”

“Simple: it’s called commercialism,” said Regina. “Hallmark holidays designed to make people feel badly about themselves and throw money at large corporations in exchange for gaudy knick-knacks no sober person would purchase.”

“Huh. So it’s similar to what happens when the Travellers are in town.”

“Somewhat, I suppose.” Regina chuckled. “I think I only saw a Traveller show once, after I married. They never went as far north as the Southern Isles. Not that my mother would have let me see them if they had.”

“I never liked them much,” said Robin. “The freaks flavoured their beer with juniper, for goodness’ sakes! Who does that?”

As they rounded the corner onto Tenth Street, a lone driver raced past. Robin instinctively jumped closer to the buildings – okay, so he was still getting used to the metallic monsters – and hastily mumbled an apology, but was cut off by Regina pulling him into an alley.

“What –”

She kissed him, which answered the question well enough. Robin responded in kind, pushed her against the wall and threaded a hand through her hair. There was probably some neighbourhood code of ethics that frowned upon snogging in public, but it wasn’t like either of them had ever paid much attention to things like that. Besides, it was dark. Nobody would see them.

They would have stayed there for longer, but just as she started to playfully undo the buttons of his jacket, something crashed nearby – metallic, like suits of armour falling over in a castle. Both Robin and Regina jumped and looked around.

“Probably just a cat knocking over a dustbin,” said Regina.

Robin wasn’t so sure. He shut his eyes so he could hear better; no, there was definitely a voice. Somebody – a man – called someone else a fool and then there was a clatter, possibly a dustbin lid falling to the ground.

“Shh,” he said, creeping carefully to the alley entrance and peeking out. It took a second for his eyes to adjust to the light, but he found the movement straight away – two men, about twenty yards
down the road, hurrying in Robin’s direction with the distinct wall-hugging style of two people who did not want to be seen.

“Do you recognise them?” Regina whispered.

“The one on the left is my cousin,” said Robin. “Guy of Gisborne. Git. The other is … Sir Reinhardt.”

“Richard’s cronies?”

“Through and through.”

Gisborne and Reinhardt disappeared around the side of the post office. Robin had an idea.

“Fancy a little snooping?” he suggested, pulling up the hood of his jumper.

They followed Gisborne and Reinhardt past the barricades and out to the old industrial area, along the exact route that Henry had described the day before. Though Regina was hardly going to endorse her son’s behaviour – and had made that perfectly clear to him – she did have to admit that the information was useful. So the kings’ alliance, unsuccessful in their direct assault on Regina’s power, was now opting for a covert revolt, based out of a derelict textiles factory. Well, nobody had ever said Richard wasn’t stubborn.

As they got closer to the factory and began to lose the cover of the shadows, Regina concealed herself with a glamour charm. It wouldn’t fool anybody who looked too closely, but a sleepy guard on the night shift would simply think she was a trick of the light. Robin, with his soft-soled boots and dark grey jacket, blended in just as well, if not better. A portion of the fence was covered by the undergrowth; Regina made a passage through the solid barriers using a modified version of a spell normally used to walk through walls, and the two of them quickly darted across the open ground to take cover behind the industrial bins.

“I can’t see a bloody thing,” Robin whispered, standing on his toes to peer through the windows. “They’ve got all of the windows blacked out. Gina, can you –”

“Shh.” Regina tugged on his sleeve, and then pointed around the corner where she could hear somebody speaking.

“… gave us the slip a few miles out of town,” said a male voice that she didn’t recognise. “We chased her as far as the troll’s fortress. Don’t worry, I’ll take extra men out there when it gets light.”

“Don’t bother, you’ve already proven yourselves incompetent,” snapped another man, this one without the Gaulish accent. “I’ll take care of this. You two return to work on getting the werewolf out of the way.”

“Watch who you’re calling incompetent, Jonathan!” the first man barked. There was a grunt, possibly somebody else agreeing with him. “You do not give the orders around here!”

“Well, somebody has to, and better than you two blockheads …”

“Jonathan?” Robin mouthed with a puzzled expression. Regina shook her head at him. As the two men continued to bicker, she had a thought. She fished around in her purse for a compact, found it
and then angled the mirror so that she and Robin could peer around the corner.

Gisborne and his accomplice were standing in the entryway of the complex, the doors wide open but with no normal factory noises resounding from it. In fact, if Regina angled the mirror just so, she was fairly sure she could see a stretcher and somebody’s personal belongings stored beneath it. She re-angled the mirror to get a look at the other man, who seemed familiar … and then it clicked. He was the guy from the security camera footage of Zelena’s breakout. Jonathan. Regina didn’t recognise the name, and made a note to ask Rumplestiltskin if he did.

Then she felt a tingle on her skin. It might have been the cold – and anyone else would have thought so – but Regina knew instantly it was magic; they had been spotted. She grabbed Robin and whisked the two of them back to her kitchen before the man could block them.

Robin swirled upon landing, his face pale and looking as if he may throw up. “Whoa,” he groaned after a second. “Bit of warning next time, ay?”

“Sorry,” said Regina, chucking her purse onto the table. She heard noise coming from the living room – obviously Henry and Neal were having fun. Robin sat down on a chair, held his head for a minute or two and looked considerably better when he looked up again.

“So. Finally got a name for our mystery man,” he said, grabbing an apple out of the bowl. “Do you recognise it?”

“No,” Regina replied, pulling out a chair for herself. “Let’s hope Rumplestiltskin does.”

Girl’s night at the Charthouse Restaurant (a far more domestic setting than the Rabbit Hole, and with better food) hadn’t been all that bad. In fact, it had been great. Snow couldn’t remember the last time she had laughed so much; she and Ruby had spent hours swapping stories with Dorothy and Mulan. They spoke about the time they lived on the run together, Dorothy talked about her adventures in Oz and Mulan told them about the Eastern Kingdoms. Ella had joined them late, relishing the time she had away from a temperamental two-year-old, perhaps overdoing it just a touch. Just like old times. A little too much like old times.

As the night wore on and alcohol started to take effect, little things cropped up in Snow’s memory. The lamplights the restaurant had put out for Valentine’s Day were eerily similar to last time … Ella moping about how Thomas had to work again, just like last time … Ruby getting a little inappropriate after a glass of red … and Snow couldn’t miss the little glances that Dorothy kept throwing in the direction of her oldest friend …

At eight o’clock, Snow politely excused herself. She paid for her part of the night, found her jacket and left, making a note to thank Ruby in the morning. Outside was cold but not intolerable, and a walk suddenly seemed like a good idea. Neal wasn’t expecting her to pick up Jesse for another hour …

While walking down Main Street, she was again struck by how quiet Storybrooke got at night. There were sounds of good times coming out of Granny’s and some nearby drinking establishments, but it was still early so the streets were near deserted. Snow had the whole sidewalk to herself. Ten blocks down from the Charthouse, she passed the Dark Star Market and decided she should pick up some bread while she was out.

“Hey, Sneezy,” she called to the dwarf. Aptly, he sneezed when she walked in.
“Hey, Snow. What were you after?”

“Just some bread. I’ll be alright.”

He sneezed again. Snow smiled and brought the bread over for him to ring up.

“Dollar fifty,” said Sneezy, though she almost didn’t hear him. “Snow?”

There was a card stand on the counter; typical cheesy last-minute Valentines, but one near the top caught her eye. A prince and princess, standing on either side of a castle …

“How was girl’s night?”

She spun around on her heels, but there was nobody there. He wasn’t there. It had been on this corner that he had surprised her with that sneaky grin, admitted to checking up on her and then given her the wrong card … now it was nothing but a distant memory …

Heart thudding in her throat, Snow turned back in the direction she had come. She didn’t know where she was going. She just knew that she had to go.

It was … unusual experiencing a rush of light magic coursing through his veins while Rumplestiltskin sat on the floor of his living room, his back against the sofa and Belle cross-legged on the carpet in front of him. A new candle sat in their fireplace and an extinguisher was close at hand, just in case they had a repeat of the accident in the library. Though Belle had only been practising for less than a week, she already had an impressive amount of power at her disposal, if the explosion was anything to go by. That power needed teaching, refining and controlling. In fact, he was rather surprised that an exploding candle was the worst that had happened. Untrained magicians had been known to level small towns in the Enchanted Forest. He put his hands on her shoulders and gently squeezed, massaging the taut muscles in her neck until he heard her sigh softly.

“It’s still not working,” Belle huffed, tensing up again. He could hear her teeth grinding. “I made it work before!”

Rumplestiltskin smiled to himself. She was so brilliant, so used to being able to succeed at whatever task she set herself on the first try. Intelligence and study had always worked for her; that was why she had insisted on teaching herself out of a book first. Magic, however, had an additional emotional component, as Rumplestiltskin knew well, and Belle was growing frustrated.

“You’re thinking too much,” he murmured against her ear. “You’re thinking too much. Stop thinking about how and why it will happen, and just will it.”

“That’s not how you work!” she protested loudly, and Rumplestiltskin felt a small burst of energy thrum through her shoulders. “I’m sorry. But I’ve seen how you study, and how you construct
“Not in the beginning stages,” he murmured, massaging her shoulders again. “The beginning is about emotion, not intellect. You need to be able to feel the magic before you can expect to control it.”

“Okay. So what am I doing wrong?” she asked like the scholar she was.

He stopped to think. With others, he had taught them to use memories – memories of intense pain, and anger, and humiliation; moments where the darkest of monsters emerged to wreak havoc. But Belle wasn’t the type to think that way – Rumplestiltskin wondered if she even had any memories like that.

“Think of something that makes you happy,” he said after a moment, nuzzling her ear playfully. “A memory. One that made you so happy you thought you might burst; so overwhelmed with joy that you might have floated away from the lightness of your heart.”

“I can think of a few –”

“Just one,” he interrupted gently before she got carried away. “You only need one.”

The Dark One’s power was not simply confined to dark magic; Rumplestiltskin had studied light magic in depth to create the loophole that would allow the Dark Curse to break, and had a decent understanding of how it worked. His ability to use it was limited for obvious reasons. Belle, however, was practically glowing with that power. Rumplestiltskin bit back a smile. She was a natural. He could have kicked himself for not thinking of teaching her sooner.

It was true that he’d never thought that she would want to learn. Belle had seemed content with theoretical study, from her books and from questioning him until the early light of dawn. As for what had changed, he understood her feelings of helplessness all too well. But Belle was a far better, a far lighter soul than he, and Rumplestiltskin couldn’t imagine that she would ever fall down the dark road that he had. She just needed a bit of guidance.

“Do you have it?”

“I think so,” she replied.

“Then hold it in your mind. Visualise it. Allow it to fill you up. To encompass every fibre of your being. Think of the emotions, not the specifics of the memory. Then close your eyes.”

As she took in a deep breath, Rumplestiltskin watched an amber glow radiate from her, swirling in the air as magic settled upon its caller. Magic tasted like tarnished silver or rust – Rumplestiltskin wasn’t sure why – but individuals always had a particular, personal trace. Regina smelt like apples with a touch of spice. For some reason, Zelena’s was olives, and he had noticed that Emma was, of late, often surrounded by the sharp tang of cinnamon. To his delight, Belle’s was the smell of well-loved books, with a touch of an exotic flower.

“Do you feel that?” he whispered in her ear.

“Mm-hmm.”

“Now direct it towards the candle.”

“How –?”
“Just will it,” he cut her off gently so as not to break her concentration. “Just will the candle to light.”

The yellow swirls continued to dance like dryads in summer while Rumplestiltskin watched; then he felt a tug on the world, the swirls disappeared, and a flame sprang into existence over the wick of the candle. It flickered, growing larger and larger – almost too large – until Rumplestiltskin gave Belle a gentle squeeze and it calmed back down, reverting to normal size almost instantly. Belle popped her eyes opened to look, and let out a squeal of excitement.

“I did it!”

“Yes, you did,” Rumplestiltskin replied, a ridiculous grin growing on his face.

“Now what?” Belle bounced eagerly in his lap. Rumplestiltskin bit his cheek to maintain concentration. He had to admit that he found the image of her doing magic one of the sexiest things he could imagine, and more intoxicating than a full bottle of scotch. If this was going to continue, he would probably have to use a few spells of his own in order to keep a clear head.

“Well, you may want to put the candle out.”

“Oh, right.” And, much to his annoyance, she left his embrace and crawled to blow the candle out.

“I – I did mean that you put it out magically,” he said.

Her cheeks flushed. “Whoops. Sorry.”

“Never mind.” He chuckled, and pulled her back to himself. “You’ll need to do this for a while longer anyway. Starting with something simple allows you to learn what emotions to reach for, and how to find them without thinking. It needs to become an instinct, a second nature.”

“Alright. So shall I light the candle again?”

“Mm-hmm.”

His memory may have been failing him, but Rumplestiltskin was sure that teaching had never felt this good before. Whether it was because of how Belle’s presence silenced the chaos raging inside him, or because of how much he loved her, or because light magic was somehow contagious, or a combination of all three, he didn’t know. All he knew was that he was happier than he had been in centuries, and it was in no small part because of the woman in his arms.

And she was certainly a fast learner. The candlelight popped back into existence, and she squealed in delight again. He would never tire of hearing that noise.

“I did it!”

“Of course you did. I’ve never known you to need an instruction more than once.”

“Hmm,” she murmured, twisting around to bop him on the nose with her finger. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

“No?” he mused playfully, his heart rate rapidly rising. Damn this woman, she knew exactly what he was feeling.

Although she was in his lap, so there probably wasn’t much doubt.

“So how do I put the candle out?” she asked with a cheeky grin and a sparkle in her eye. “Just will
“Mm-hmm,” he agreed, and slipped his arms around her waist. It was astonishing how quickly Belle was coming in to her abilities. He doubted she would ever attain a level of power akin to Zelena or Emma, but if she continued this course, she could possibly be giving Regina a run for her money inside of a month.

And she would be able to protect herself if I ever lose control again …

Rumplestiltskin shoved the thought aside. It wasn’t going to happen again; he would make sure of it. First by ensuring that the Dark Ones never had the opportunity to take control again, and then by ensuring that no-one could ever bend him to their will as Zelena had –

“Is everything okay?”

“Hmm?”

Belle tilted her head, a look of concern, when Rumplestiltskin started. He had been staring at the candle, now unlit again, and not realised that his mind had drifted off. Not a lapse, as before – he could distinctly remember watching the candle flicker out and Belle’s following delight, he just hadn’t registered them.

“Sorry.”

“The candle’s out,” she announced proudly.

“Indeed it is,” he murmured, a sudden rush of guilt overtaking him. He hadn’t yet told her about the Sorcerer’s Hat. True, he’d wanted to keep it a secret until he was sure that it was a viable option … but now, without a dozen other minds clouding his thoughts, Rumplestiltskin realised what a foolish notion that was. Belle was intelligent, studious, and brilliant. If anybody could figure out Merlin’s last existing possession, it was her. And she had been honest with him when she confessed her reasons for wanting to learn magic – why couldn’t he be honest with her?

“I need to show you something.”

He helped her to her feet and then led her by the hand into the sunroom. It had been recently vacated of antiques and outfitted with a pair of squashy armchairs for reading in, and Rumplestiltskin had hidden the Hat, in its disguised form, in a box on the bookshelf.

“Do you remember how we talked about the possibility of severing my connection to the Kris dagger?” he asked while retrieving the deceptive-looking scrap of cowhide.

“Of course,” Belle replied. “You said you didn’t think you had the power to do it.”

“And I don’t. But … I think I may have found a solution.”

He carefully propped the Hat on the end table and lifted the glamour spell. In an instant, the aged leather melted away to reveal the dark blue cloth. Belle watched, clearly fascinated.

“What is it?” she asked, kneeling down to get a closer look at the patterns.


“And … how does this help break your bond to the dagger?”
“I’m not quite sure yet,” he admitted, “but legend has it that this hat has the ability to absorb magic. See, ancient sorcerers – ones considerably more powerful than Regina or her sister – used to enchant valued items to carry latent magical power that they could call on later when they, uh, needed a boost, so to speak. It’s possible that I may be able to use it to absorb the dagger’s power. And, in effect, remove its ability to control me.”

“Is that possible?” Belle asked, looking as if she was about to jump in excitement.

“Like I said, I’m not sure. But–” he took hold of her hands over the table and gave them a gentle squeeze– “between the two of us, I see no reason why we couldn’t work it out.”

“You’d be free,” she murmured, a smile breaking out on her face.

“So? Will you help me?”

She stepped closer, sliding her arms around his neck. “Of course, you silly man,” she whispered, blue eyes full of love gazing at him through heavy eyelids. She stood on her toes to plant a kiss on him. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” he said, and kissed her back. That turned into a second kiss, then a third, and they smiled against each other’s lips before the fourth.

“We’re not getting anything else done tonight, are we?” she murmured, though it was clear that she was not bothered by that idea.

“Oh, gods, no,” he agreed, and kissed her again before whisking them both upstairs.

After a long day of making suspect lists and hideout spots with Dogberry – she was getting the hang of his speech, but it was slow going – Emma had been about ready to fall into bed with a cup of hot cocoa and a pair of noise-cancelling headphones. That plan was short-lived, as a phone call made at half past eight caused her to drive out to the convent, and then to the graveyard beyond. Ruby’s suspicions proved correct when Emma pulled off the side of the road, cast her gaze over the cemetery ground, and found a lone figure sitting at the top of a grassy knoll under a yew tree. Emma locked her car and instinctively pulled up the hood of her coat; the night was the warmest it had been in months and the woods kept the worst of the Atlantic chill at bay, but the winter wind still bit deep into her exposed skin. She called out Snow’s name; there was no response. So Emma started up the hill. The yew tree creaked in the wind, a distant owl hooted, and a headstone sat beneath the tree like a lamp surrounded by a sea of shadowy hillside. Emma let out a small gasp.

“Dad.”

It was indeed David’s grave. Emma knelt next to a unresponsive Snow (whom she now realised was crying) to get a better look at the inscription. It was exactly as Ruby had described – she’d found it on a run and told Emma that she’d spotted Snow coming up here alone. Emma had been meaning to visit, but between the Witch’s breakout and Humpty’s murder, there just hadn’t been time.

“Mom?” she asked a little louder, gently shaking Snow’s shoulder. Finally, Snow responded, jerking around as if waking up from a bad dream. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she hastily wiped her cheeks while Emma sat on the ground.
“Hey,” Snow murmured after an age, still rubbing her face. “How – how did you know I was here?”

“Ruby called me. She got worried when you left without saying goodbye. And when I called Neal, he said you hadn’t picked up Jesse.”

“Oh.”

Emma put an arm around her mother’s shoulders, noticing for the first time how cold Snow was. How long had she been out here by herself? She would have asked, but that was when Snow started sobbing, like a dam wall had burst in her heart and the river poured onto Emma’s coat.

“I can’t do this, Emma, I can’t,” Snow murmured between sobs, curling into Emma’s side. Emma let her, and hugged her tighter. “I can’t. I just – I just miss him. So much.”

A wave of guilt hit Emma squarely in the chest. How many times had her mother come here without anybody knowing? And Emma hadn’t visited her father’s grave once. So maybe she hadn’t known him as well as others had, and known David Nolan for much longer than Prince Charming … but he was still her father.

“I know,” Emma sniffled after an age, tears of her own starting to form. “I miss him too.”

From the window of her office in the convent, Blue watched as Emma Swan conjured a blanket and wrapped it around both her and Snow. She was obviously taking great strides in her tutelage under the Evil Queen, Blue thought with displeasure. Mother and daughter huddled together under the tree that shaded Mr Nolan’s grave, and a twinge passed through Blue’s chest, an emotion she couldn’t quite identify.

She had done the right thing, Blue reminded herself for the thousandth time. Yes, Snow had been hurt. It was regrettable, but necessary. There had been other ways to get to the Land Without Magic – her sister’s wand sitting in her office cabinet was a constant reminder of that – but what was done was done. Mr Nolan was gone, and unable to stand against Blue regarding his offspring’s magic. Humans were a stubborn lot, and idealistic and proud; Mr Nolan had been one of the worst. He would have raised his son to be the same. But Snow, she would listen to Blue. Without his father, the boy was vulnerable, susceptible to outside influences. And if Miss Swan – who had not grown up in a land of magic – could master her inborn abilities so quickly, then what awaited young Master Nolan when he came of age?

No, it was better this way. The boy was simply too dangerous. Blue would finish doing what had to be done, and then everyone – including Snow – would be better off for it.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 13: The Beautiful Light of Dawn, in which Emma interviews her first suspect, Regina and Tink talk about Zelena, and Blue confronts Faílinis

Just out of curiosity, do people prefer that I call him ‘Jonathan’ or ‘Faílinis’? I have my preference, but I’d like to know what you guys think.
Snow let out a groan as sunlight burnt her eyes. She rolled onto her side and shaded her eyes. Her back hurt, like she had been sleeping on the ground …

Wait a second. Where was she?

She sat up and almost bumped her head on the roof of the car. From what she could see, the car looked like Emma’s bug, and it was parked on the road that ran parallel to the cemetery. Snow was lying across the back seat, rolled up like a hotdog in a lumpy knitted blanket. Strangely, it wasn’t as cold as she would have thought. Though how she had gotten there, she couldn’t figure for the life of her.

Gradually, the memory of the previous night returned. She remembered eating at the Charthouse with the girls, remembered leaving early, going for a walk and then driving out to the cemetery –

*Oh*, she realised. Emma had found her out there. She must have fallen asleep after crying her eyes out on her daughter’s shoulder.

A sleepy mumble alerted her to said daughter’s presence, totally oblivious to the world in the driver’s seat with her cheek squashed against the window. Snow had to keep herself from laughing and settled for poking Emma until she woke with a start.

“What the – *ow!*” Emma complained, wincing while she massaged the back of her neck. Snow couldn’t imagine that sleeping upright in a car seat was particularly comfortable. “Oh. Morning.”

“Morning,” replied Snow. She yawned and stretched out her back, noticing an odd ripple across the window as she did.

“Warming spell,” Emma explained. Snow nodded; that made sense. “How do you feel?”

“Okay. A little embarrassed,” Snow said with a grimace. Her cheeks flushed with the memory of the complete and utter collapse she’d demonstrated the night before. “I’m sorry.”

Emma gave a small smile and reached through the gap to hug her. “’S okay. Probably the best night’s sleep I’ve had in a while, actually.”

Snow chuckled in agreement. It might have only been two weeks, but it felt like forever since she had not had to wake in the middle of the night to settle a screaming baby, or change a diaper, or clean up vomit –

*Wait a second.*

“Oh, my God!” she suddenly exclaimed, pulling out of Emma’s embrace to fall back into the seat with her hands over her face. In spite of herself, she started laughing; Emma looked worried.

“What?”

Snow lowered her hands, still giggling. “We left Neal alone with Jesse all night.”
It was fair to say that neither of them had gotten much sleep last night, but due to far more pleasant disturbances than the nightmares that had plagued them both as of late. Rumplestiltskin tucked a stray lock behind Belle’s ear, leaving her sleepy blue eyes unobstructed, while she traced patterns on his collarbones with her finger. She looked so relaxed, so beautifully peaceful …

Gods, he loved her.

After everything they had been through, he still couldn’t believe she was really right there. Even after confessing to the newest tricks the former Dark Ones were playing on his mind, she hadn’t left. He couldn’t imagine that many others would have done the same. Terror followed the darkness wherever it went; he had learnt that lesson the hard way. And it didn’t help that his insecurities, which had been overwhelming when he was human, were amplified a hundredfold under his curse. Abandonment was a difficult habit to shake. His mother had died giving birth to him. His father had never wanted him. Milah had walked away because he couldn’t give her what she truly desired. Rumplestiltskin was just used to those he loved leaving him. But Belle was different. She had always been different, and he should have realised it long ago. Light and love ruled her soul just as much as darkness ruled his. By magic that Rumplestiltskin couldn’t begin to comprehend, Belle saw goodness in everyone; even those – perhaps especially those – who couldn’t see it in themselves. Even him. Only the gods knew how.

“I don’t deserve you,” he murmured so softly, as if the whole damn world didn’t already know that and sought to remind him on a daily basis. Belle just held his hand in hers and smiled tiredly.

“It’s not about deserving,” she whispered sleepily, lifting her head to look him in the eye. “I’m right where I wanna be.”

It wasn’t the words themselves that shot an arrow straight into Rumplestiltskin’s heart – under any other context, any other circumstance, he would have shrugged it straight off – but the love and warmth that shone out of her eyes, glowed out of every pore, and almost pleaded with him to believe it. And maybe it was just the way that his heart skipped a beat, but he could believe it was true.

The kiss that followed was certainly convincing.

“I will never understand why you continue to stand by me,” he admitted between kisses. “After everything I’ve been … everything I’ve done … everything I still am …”

“Because I love you,” she murmured against his lips, gently rolling them so he was on his back. “And you don’t get to tell me that I don’t.”

He would have said something, if his brain had been working at all. She just giggled and nuzzled his ear.

“You don’t have to go into the shop early, do you?”

“Gods, no,” he gasped before capturing her lips again, brushing her hair out of the way. Well, he had been half asleep until a few moments ago. “I love you too.”

But she still deserved better, his pessimistic side reminded him. He was hardly one to bother with trivial things like propriety, but somewhere in the back of his mind, a little voice – not the Dark One, just Rumplestiltskin’s self-allocated internal tormentor – reminded him that he and Belle were not yet married. She had mentioned – after some needling – how Richard had practically called her
a whore (stopping short of actually using the slur), and Rumplestiltskin still burned. Oh, he wouldn’t go after the self-righteous bastard – because Belle had asked him not to – but it was a painful reminder of how others perceived their relationship. Quite frankly, Rumplestiltskin didn’t give the black fleck in the stalk of a maggoty turnip what the former royalty thought of him … but Belle deserved better than that.

He had been on the verge of asking after returning from Neverland. Of course, that had been soundly waylaid by his impromptu self-sacrifice … but there was no reason why he couldn’t ask her now. Well, no reason for anyone with an ounce of self-worth.

How hard was it, really? It was four small words, five little syllables. Will you marry me? Simple, really.

So why couldn’t he just ask the damned question?

“Belle, I – I …”

“What?”

As she gazed down at him, a little annoyed at being interrupted, Rumplestiltskin struggled to make his brain work. It wasn’t a difficult question, and the worst she could say was no.

Well, there was a lot worse that she could say –

But if he was going to ask, he wanted to ask properly. In a way that was worthy of the woman who held what remained of his soul in the palm of her hand, which was not going to happen while they were lying in bed with other activities demanding immediate attention.

“Later,” he growled, flipping them over so that he was on top. Belle let out a giggle, which made him groan and soundly chased all other thoughts away. “Much later.”

Sleep deprivation did strange things to people. Sometime around two o’clock in the morning, Neal spoke to his father for a good ten minutes before realising that he was alone and ‘Rumplestiltskin’ was actually just Neal’s coat hanging on the wall. A little while later, he’d mixed up Jesse’s formula with the instant coffee and wondered why it tasted like cantaloupe juice (later on, he’d just thanked the gods that he hadn’t accidentally given coffee to the baby). And if that wasn’t bad enough, the Punches seemed to be trying to break the Guinness World Record for ‘worst neighbours in the world’. Since they woke up at five, Neal had figured out that they fought on a schedule; fifty minutes of smashing and crashing followed by half an hour of rest, regular as clockwork. Hopefully, Regina or his dad could put a noise-cancelling spell around the loft; otherwise, they were going to be in for some pretty long nights.

He had all sorts of witty remarks lined up for when Snow finally got back – if she ever did – but when the door opened just after half past seven, as Neal was trying to make coffee one-handed with Jesse precariously asleep on his shoulder, only one sentence came out of his mouth:

“You so owe me.”

“Oh, my God, Neal, I am so sorry,” Snow blurted as she took the baby off of him. Neal handed him over without complaint. “I’m really – so, so sorry.”

“Mm-hmm,” he muttered, and stretched out the cramps forming in his shoulder. Missing his
mother had meant Jesse started screaming every time Neal tried to put him down, to the point that what little shut-eye he’d got had been done standing up with his eyes open.

“Are you alright?” Emma asked from the other side of the counter, smirking with just a little too much amusement when Neal yawned.

“Catch me sometime tomorrow.”

He yawned again, and she snuck a glance at Snow. “Okay. Well, I gotta get to work. See ya later?”

“Sure.”

“Here, I’ll take him out for a while,” said Snow, grabbing a few semi-clean cloths off the counter. “You get some sleep.”

That was the best thing Neal had heard in sixteen hours. “Thank you,” he said, surprising his mother-in-law with a grateful hug. He was fairly sure he heard the two of them snigger as he abandoned his coffee and trudged upstairs, collapsing on his and Emma’s bed as the door clicked shut behind his fiancée and her mom. Once they had left, he dug his iPod and a set of headphones out of the bedside table. True to form, exactly four minutes later, something made of china smashed into the partition wall, and Punch screamed in pain.

“Right on time,” Neal muttered, rolling onto his side and throwing a pillow over his head.

After making a promise to herself that she would make it up to Neal later, Emma met Jack outside number 431 Randolph Street. She had to ring the doorbell for a few minutes before Thomas answered.

“Hi, Emma.”

“Hi, Thomas. Is your dad home?”

“Yeah.” He shouted inside the house, “Dad!”

A moment later, Prince Ernest came out of the living room. “Sheriff Swan. Deputy Spratt. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We need to talk to your brother,” said Emma directly. “Can we come in, or do I have to get a warrant?”

Ernest scowled, but stepped aside nonetheless. “George! The sheriff would like a word with you.”

Given that George’s previous property had been seized by the town after his arrest, Emma had guessed that he was staying with his brother. It was that or camping out on a factory floor, and she figured that a man like him would probably take living in comfort even if it meant swallowing his pride for a few months. Her hunch proved right when George trudged down the stairs, disdain painted on his face like clown makeup.

“Ah, the shepherd’s daughter,” he said with the barest hint of a sneer. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“We need to ask you some questions regarding the murder of Mr van Dumpty,” Emma replied. She gestured to the kitchen table. “May we sit down?”
“Go ahead,” said Ernest, though his tone suggested that he thought the action was far from desire. Emma took a seat anyway, with Jack claiming the one on her left and George sitting opposite.

“If you want to accuse me of killing a man, Miss Swan, do have the guts to come out and say so,” said George, pouring himself a glass of whisky.

She ignored the use of the incorrect title and continued: “I’m not accusing anybody of anything. I’d just like to get my facts straight.”

“Alright.”

Emma nodded, and got to it. “You had an argument with Mr van Dumpty at the party that took place here last Sunday evening, is that correct?”

“We had a disagreement, yes,” said George.

“What about?”

“A private matter, Miss Swan.”

Jack cleared his throat for attention. “Do you know where Mr van Dumpty went after the party; what he did, or if he spoke to anyone else who might know?”

George shrugged. “No. He was intoxicated, I’ll tell you that. It wouldn’t surprise me if he walked off that wall in an alcohol-induced stupor. Smarter people have done worse.”

“He was bashed in the back of the head with a blunt instrument,” said Emma. She watched carefully, gauging George’s reaction to that information. A single eyebrow rose; she wasn’t sure if that meant he was surprised or not. “We have medical evidence to prove it. In fact, he may well have been killed and then thrown off the wall to disguise the injury.”

The man was stony-faced. “Well, that is interesting,” he remarked as if they were speaking on something as conventional as the weather. “But I don’t know anything about it. I was here all evening; my brother and his son can both provide reliable testimony to that fact.”

Emma screened him for any signs of guilt, but her superpower kept coming back negative. He was telling the truth. “Would you be willing to have that on formal record?” she asked.

“I would.”

“Alright.” She rose and stretched out a hand that George shook after looking at it as if he were worried about catching a deadly disease. “Thank you for your time. We’ll be in touch.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

“Well, that went about as well as could be expected,” said Jack after they had been cordially shown the door. “Did you get the bug in place?”

“I did,” Emma replied with a grin. She didn’t know how many meetings the royals were having in Ernest’s house, but with any luck, they might just pick up something useful.

The Crocodile had walked his girlfriend to work; wasn’t that sweet? Killian fought the urge to hit something – especially the post office’s brick wall, appealing as the thought may be – as he
watched the couple through his spyglass. He was holding her hand, smiling as though there was nothing at all wrong with the world –

Well, there was something bloody wrong with the world. The Crocodile had his house, his livelihood, his woman – everything Killian had thrown away to save every miserable soul in this town, and how was he rewarded for it? By being shoved aside the minute he wasn’t useful anymore.

They clearly thought no-one could see them. After a quick glance around, Belle had laid a kiss on him that the Crocodile returned gleefully. That did it, as far as Killian was concerned. He wasn’t going to spend a minute longer than necessary in a town that refused to make the Dark One answer for his crimes. He shoved his spyglass in his jacket and strode off in the direction of Grimm’s Road.

Zelena had herself a partner.

Belle actually started humming while she shelved books that morning. She hadn’t felt so light in … oh, heavens only knew how long. After a while, she had to kick off her heels due to the urge to skip along the aisles. The burden of guilt had been weighing her down for days, and to finally have it lifted off –! Plus, knowing that Rumple trusted her and had opened up to her, and now they possibly had a plan to remove any chance of anyone taking control of him again, and he wanted her help to do it –! Belle was fairly sure that if anyone had seen her right then, they would have tossed her back in the asylum for fear that she had gone mad.

While she shelved and made sure all of the books were back in the right places, she compartmentalised everything that she absolutely had to get done today, and everything that could wait until Monday. If she could finish up soon, she could pick up lunch on the way to the shop. She wanted to get started on unlocking the Sorcerer’s Hat as soon as possible – the sooner they got rid of that blasted knife, the better – and maybe fit in a little magic practise if they had time. Although Belle suspected that they would have to put some boundaries in place if Rumple had a similar reaction to the one he’d had last night; not that she was really complaining, but they couldn’t spend the rest of their lives in their bedroom. As tempting as that was.

“Wow. I think the last time I saw a smile like that was when my brother got high on poppy dust,” said a voice.

Belle jumped – she was getting better, she really was – and found the speaker standing by the returns counter; a tall redheaded man of about twenty-five or – six in a lumpy green sweater. He looked familiar but it took a moment for her to place him.

“Oh, hey, Hans,” she greeted, wheeling the trolley behind the desk and piling more books on top of it. “You got rid of the beard.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, and rubbed his smooth chin self-consciously. “Someone pointed out that I probably shouldn’t walk around town looking like a lost yeti. Might scare the little kiddies.”

Belle chuckled. “Well, it looks good either way.”

“Thanks.”

“What brings you by?”
“Not much. Just wanted to see if you’d made any progress on the whole troll business.”

“Oh,” she replied, glancing down guiltily. In truth, she hadn’t actually started, except to ask Rumple if he knew anything about the rock trolls – which he didn’t. Hans’ journals were still sitting in her office. She had meant to have a look yesterday, but got a little side-tracked. “Uh, not really. Rumple said he doesn’t know too much about them, so I’m kind of starting from scratch. It’ll probably be slow-going.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” said Hans, then he seemed to have a thought. “Rumple?”

“Rumplestiltskin.”

His eyebrows shot up. “The Dark One?”

“Yeah, I kind of … live with him,” Belle said hesitantly, trying to gauge Hans’ reaction. He seemed shocked, but then a lot of people usually were. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“Huh,” Hans exclaimed, rubbing the side of his nose thoughtfully. “Fred was right; this town is weird.”

“Don’t even get me started.” She dumped the last of the shelving onto the trolley and wheeled it out. “Aren’t you going to run while you can?”

“Hey, if Queen Snow can have a daughter her own age, I suppose the Dark One can have a girlfriend,” said Hans, following her into the non-fiction aisles. “He’s not going to show up in my room in the middle of the night and turn me into a bat or something, is he?”

“Ha. No.”

“Fair enough.” He picked a book off the trolley and thumbed through it idly. Belle watched him, now curious. There was something about him that reminded her of somebody, but for the life of her, she couldn’t think who.

“What about you?” she asked after a moment, stretching up to put a book on the second shelf from the top. “How are you finding Storybrooke?”

“Like I said, a bit weird,” he replied. “Luckily, my brother and his wife were here the first time around. I’m staying with them for now.”

“That’s great. What about a job? Any prospects?”

“Except for the building project, not really,” he said with a shrug. “I’m not really the manual labour type. I’ve spent the last three years chasing down a bunch of talking rocks. Now I’m not so sure what to do with myself.”

He chuckled and tapped his fingers on the trolley, a shy air surrounding him. Belle still couldn’t get a good reading; he was trustworthy, she could tell that much, but there was a lot more to the young prince than the troll-chaser he presented, and it had piqued her curiosity.

“Well, what if I offered you a job here?” she asked, which made him look up in surprise.

“What, ‘here’ as in the library?”

“Can you read?”

“Of course.”
“Do you like books?”

“Sure.”

“Then why not?” she said, twirling around to sort some books on the shelf. “I mean, it wouldn’t be much. But it would be enough to get you on your feet, and you could help me research the trolls.”

Hans seemed to think, biting the inside of his cheek as he did. “Really?”

It was then that the connections clicked inside Belle’s mind, and she realised who Hans reminded her of. Baelfire. He had the same inner gentleness that Rumple’s son did; and inside, something darker lurked, something he wasn’t letting surface. Regret, maybe?

What was it that had made him go after the trolls in the first place?

“Just think about it,” she said, giving his arm a squeeze, all the while planning how she might wring the story out of him.

Blue bypassed the meagre security around the textiles factory with ease and strode straight upstairs to the office areas. Nobody tried to stop her; ex-soldiers hefted their kits and stood aside, some even pushing their camp mats out of the way. Magic thrummed from what had been the director’s office, so Blue headed there. Voices echoed out of the room, but that was unimportant. She let herself in. Inside were Faílinis, Oskar Weselton and two others, all of whom stared at the sudden intrusion. Faílinis, of course, was the quickest to recover.

“Leave us,” he said to the three men, who did so, each of them avoiding Blue’s gaze as they left. Sprawled across the desk was a map of Storybrooke with certain areas highlighted in red; Blue caught sight of the school and the mayor’s office before Faílinis made the map roll into a tight scroll. “What do you want, Rheul?”

“What do you think you’re doing with that?” she demanded, pointing to the structure behind him. It was the source of the magic, simmering out of metal plates layered like dragon scales in a box that was just large enough to hold a large animal – or a human being. “What are you going to use that poor girl for?”

“You already know the answer to that,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“This is insanity! You know as well as I do what the curse will do!”

“Absolutely.”

Blue slammed her hands on the desk. “You are talking about the deaths of hundreds of people!”

“That would be the general idea, yes,” Faílinis returned, glowering at her with cold blue eyes that reminded her far too much of his grandfather. Frigid, unforgiving – so different from the crying eyes of the faeling boy whose parents had begged Blue to send him into exile with them. She was no Seer, but had she known then what would become of him –

“What do you care?” Faílinis continued, snapping her out of old memories. “They’re humans.”

“That doesn’t matter!” she insisted. “I cannot stand by and allow you to do this! There are ways to deal with the problem without ending the lives of innocent people!”
“Oh, really?” he chortled, planting his fists on the desk. “So ending the life of one dumb prince is a small price to pay, but a few hundred – no, no, no!”

“I did not kill him.”

“By omission, you did.”

She ground her teeth, swallowing a spark of emotion. “I will stop you.”

“No. I don’t think so,” he sneered, showing teeth. “You want the outcome just as much as I do. The only difference is, you want someone else to do the dirty work for you. Someone else’s heart to blacken.”

“Don’t you –”

But Faílinis wasn’t stopping. “I may have done some horrible things in my time, Rheul, but at least I own it. You, you prance around in your pressed collar and clean blue frock, preaching about fairness and equality while you dictate people’s entire lives behind their backs? And then have the audacity to claim that they’re better off?! Ha! You make me sick!”

“You are going to kill hundreds of people!”

“And they have killed thousands of us!”

They stared at each other across the table; Blue forced herself to breathe evenly. Getting angry wouldn’t solve anything. She had to be calm and rational.

“This is not the way,” she said after a moment, careful to keep her voice level.

“You think yours is better?” said Faílinis in an equally flat tone. “Don’t think I don’t know about your plan. Using the powers of the greatest of light and dark to undo Fionn MacCumhail’s dying declaration? It won’t work.”

“You don’t know –”

“It – won’t – work,” he stated, emphasising each syllable. “You’re a fool to think it will. Now, if you don’t mind, I have a job to do. You can thank me when I’m done.”

He showed her the door, the conversation ended in no uncertain terms. Weselton and another man were listening at the keyhole; the two of them bolted the moment Blue exited the room. She took a breath, readying herself to leave, but there was one last thing she needed to know.

“What happened to you, Faílinis?” she asked quietly. He had his back to her, standing hunched over the desk, but she knew he had heard. “What happened to the boy I knew?”

After a moment, he replied: “He learned from your sister’s mistakes.”

“You think listening to me was a mistake?”

He huffed. “Well, it didn’t save your brother, did it?”

Blue gazed at the wall in silence. No; it hadn’t saved Ruadh at all.
Rumplestiltskin hadn’t made any progress with the Hat, and he was becoming frustrated. Belle was coming by the shop after she’d done what she needed to do at the library and they were going to work on it some more. He was glad that he’d told her, but it didn’t mean he was any closer to unlocking Merlin’s power.

There had to be a key, or a passcode of some sort. No sorcerer with an ounce of self-respect left things like this just lying around where any sticky-fingered fool could get their hands on it. It could have been blood magic, he supposed, but blood magic didn’t endure past the death of the caster and Merlin was – well, *rumoured* to be long dead at least.

The Hat stayed on his desk, a stubborn lump of unchanged cowhide. Rumplestiltskin thumped his fists on the counter. This was getting nowhere. Maybe he had something in the safe –

Tuttleroot. That wouldn’t work.

Dragon knucklebones. That wouldn’t work either.

He rummaged through his collection, finding nothing useful, until a small woven bag caught his eye. He took it out, feeling the old wool between his fingers carefully before tipping out the contents. He hadn’t looked at this in decades.

There weren’t many things that he had kept from his life before becoming the Dark One, and most of them had been Baelfire’s belongings. Aside from his spinning wheel and his old walking stick, there was this bag, woven by one of his aunts. Intended as a money bag, Rumplestiltskin used it to keep the one thing he had of his mother’s.

The spinners who’d raised him had told him a little about his mother; he knew her name was Evanna, that the spinners were her aunts, and that she had died when Rumplestiltskin was born. The ring had apparently been in her father’s family for generations. It was a simple rose-gold band moulded into the shape of two conjoined hands – a fede ring. One side was a little dented, and the band wore a few scratches from centuries of ownership. Whether his mother had ever worn it, or just kept it as a memento of her parents, he didn’t know. Rumplestiltskin wasn’t even sure why he had held onto it for so long, but now he thought he’d like to give it to Belle.

The coward in him was screaming at him to forget about it, to run away as quickly as possible. What woman would ever wish to shackle herself to the Dark One for good? Of course she would say no. She deserved better than a cowardly spinner who had nothing of true value to offer her; better than a monster that everybody feared, who couldn’t protect her from the darkness raging inside of him. For as much as Rumplestiltskin claimed that he could control it, *believed* that he could control it, history was not exactly on his side –

But this was Belle he was talking about. He knew (intellectually, at least) that if she wanted to walk out, she would have done it long ago – and if she said *yes* –

Well, he’d never know if he didn’t ask.

As the shop’s bell jingled, indicating he had a visitor, Rumplestiltskin slipped the ring back into its bag and put that in his pocket. He could hear Bae’s voice in his head, telling him to get over himself and just *ask* the damn question, and focused on that rather than the echoes of the former Dark Ones insisting that this was a horrible idea.

Do the brave thing –

“Hello, doll.”
Rumplestiltskin froze in the doorway between the shop front and the office, heart pounding in his throat and panic threatening to choke off his airway. Was this Lilith’s latest trick, or Cronus’, making him see things that weren’t there? Because Zelena could not be in his shop right now – she just couldn’t be –

“ Aren’t you glad to see me?” the witch crooned, taking a step forward. He fought his instinct to retreat, despite the fact that her wrists were free of the magic-inhibiting cuffs –

“Lei may not ‘ave the dagger, but can still control signor,” said the Gingerbreadman in a sing-song voice. “Patetico.”

“You are not welcome here,” Rumplestiltskin finally managed to rasp, trying to hide his shaking hands and stand his ground. He was free; she couldn’t hurt him. “Leave.”

A hand was at his throat, steadily gripping tighter and tighter until a wheeze was all that escaped –

You know that she’ll never stop. She’ll never stop until she gets what she wants.

His mind kept trying to go back to the cage, to her hands touching him, to her voice screaming at Belle, hurting her, threatening her, and he couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it –

“No, I don’t think I’ll be doing that,” said Zelena, flashing him a sickening smile. She was now less than an arm’s length away, so close, close enough that she could reach out and touch him –

“YOU HAVE MAGIC, YOU FOOL!”

What happened next, Rumplestiltskin wasn’t sure how to describe. He remembered both of his arms rising to chest height though it had not been him who commanded them to do so, and raw power surging through his torso and into his fingertips. He could see Zelena’s eyes widen and smelt olives as she tried to teleport away. Something stopped her, and the power tore out of him and slammed her into the front wall. A bookcase collapsed and crushed her leg. He remembered her screaming in pain but after that –

It was if he had become a spectator inside his own head. Though he wanted to stop, tried desperately to control himself, his body would not do what he wanted it to do and everything that it did do was not by his command. He felt pain break out like a starburst, both everywhere and nowhere at the same time, as he watched. There were two opposing forces inside of his body competing for control, but neither of them was him – it was like he was sitting in the stands at a rodeo, watching a clown attempt to wrangle a raging bull –

The pain reached unbearable levels and he blacked out. When he came to, he was slumped against the doorframe, staring at his hands. His fingers wiggled when he directed them to, but the damage was done. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed. Half of his shop was a wreck; everything that had been on the wall to his left was now on the floor, glass broken, papers everywhere, bits of old silverware scattered all over the shop. Zelena was gone, though he couldn’t remember her leaving. He couldn’t even remember wrecking the shop.

But the memory of what it had felt like to be controlled was fresh in his mind, and it was snowballing. The memories kept coming, faster and faster; instinctively, he scrambled into the back room, underneath a table, and tried to make himself as small as possible, knees drawn up to his chest and his back against the cold bricks. He rocked back and forth on the spot and tore at his hair, hoping that the pain would force the memories away –
Meanwhile, Mulan and Dogberry revisited the cannery. The area where Humpty’s body was discovered had been cordoned off with yellow police tape even though forensics had finished their survey days ago. Still, Mulan wanted to take another look.

“Presently what would is it that we are searching for?” Dogberry asked as they scoured the seaboard once again. Her colleague kicked aside a swath of seashells, clearly bored, while Mulan looked out to the sea in frustration.

“I don’t know. Something. Anything.”

Her gut was telling her that they had overlooked something. The unresolved murder weighed heavily on Mulan; a man was being denied justice, and his killer remained at large, potentially targeting others even as she spoke. That wasn’t right, and she couldn’t rest until she had done something.

“If we could find some tangible evidence, like a witness, or a murder weapon, then all of this would be so much easier—”

“Hello,” Dogberry exclaimed suddenly, catching Mulan’s attention. She turned around to see him kneeling in the ocean debris, brushing sand off something shiny with his gloved hand. “Speak of the devil, and shall his hinds appear.”

“What is that?” she asked as he pulled the thing out of the sand. It was curved like the handle of a wealthy man’s walking stick, with ridges where the fingers would grasp it. In fact, Mulan would say that it was a walking stick if the wooden cane hadn’t been broken off. It was soaked through, as well. Thrown into the water and then washed up with the tide, perhaps?

“You wished for a murder weapon,” said Dogberry.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 14: Enemies Do Not Take Holidays, in which Faílinis talks some sense into his daughter, Emma interviews her father-in-law and Rumplestiltskin starts to have some serious doubts about his sanity
“Regina!” Tink’s voice called down the street. “Hey! Wait up!”

The fairy had a duffle bag, not a very full one, slung across her back. It rattled as Tink hurriedly caught up to Regina outside the ice-cream shop.

“Hey. How are you?” Regina asked, resuming her previous pace. There was a council meeting in half an hour to discuss a few things to do with the building project and town management plans, but nothing horribly urgent.

“Oh, you know, getting by,” said Tink huffily, adjusting the strap of the bag. “Camping in the woods has been a bit rough, but at least it’s not Neverland.”

“Do you need somewhere to stay? I’ve got room –”

“Thanks, but I’m okay. The dwarves offered to let me bunk with them for a little while.”

“Okay. But the offer’s still there if it doesn’t work out.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Tink shot her a wry smile, then asked, “So what are we doing about the Witch?”

They stopped at the crosswalk. Three cars passed before Regina answered.

“Honestly, it’s been downgraded from my list of priorities,” she admitted as the stoplight turned green. “We’ve heard nothing from her at all. No disappearances, no flying monkeys seen around the edge of town, and she hasn’t tried to kill me lately. Which, you know, is nice.”

“Still weird,” Tink mused. “Any idea what she’s up to?”

“Plenty, actually. She’s probably holed up somewhere in town with a guy named Jonathan – does that name sound familiar to you?”

“Well, I knew a Lost Boy named Jonathan.”

“About mid-forties, brown hair, scar across one cheek?”

“No, twelve and blonde.”

“Pity. Anyway, they seem to be working with a bunch of rock trolls who’ve taken up lodgings in the hills –”

“Wait, rock trolls?” Tink stopped in her tracks, eyes going wide. “They’re in Storybrooke?”

“You know them?” Regina asked, feeling silly for not thinking of mentioning it to Tink earlier. As a fairy, of course she would know.

“I know of them. I’ve never met one.”

“Are they dangerous?”
Tink shrugged. “‘Dangerous isn’t really the word I’d use. They’re … I guess ‘tricksters’ is the best way to put it.”

“What do you mean?”

They resumed walking as a few people caught up to them. Tink let them pass before she answered: “Hiding under beds in the middle of the night. Leaving baby gargoyles in barns to spook cattle. Turning tea leaves into toad-spawn. That sort of thing.”

“Sounds wonderful,” said Regina, making a mental note to ask if any farmers had noticed odd sounds coming out of their attics lately.

“Well, they’re trouble, certainly, but they’re not dangerous –”

“Hi, Gina!”

Roland appeared, a messy head of dark curls that hovered around the height of Regina’s navel. Tink staggered back, taken off guard, as he gave Regina a high-five, but her eyes widened knowingly when she spotted Robin just behind his son.

Not now! Regina snapped with a glare. That just made Tink smile in amusement.

“Hey,” Robin greeted, quickly swallowing a bite of his sandwich before offering Tink a little wave. “What happened to the council meeting?”

“I’m heading there now. Just got caught up talking to an old friend,” Regina said. “Robin, this is Tinkerbell. Tink, this is Robin Hood and Roland.”

“Hi!” Roland shouted louder than necessary.

“Hi to you too,” said Tink, shaking Robin’s proffered hand. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to meet you.”

“Huh?”

“The, uh –” Tink tapped the inside of her right wrist. Realisation dawned on him.

“Oh, that was you.”

“Yes, that was her,” said Regina sheepishly, feeling warm as the two of them chuckled at her expense. “Anyway –”

“Anyway,” Tink echoed, still looking far too knowledgeable. “I should get going. It was nice to meet you. Regina, you know where to find me if you need anything.”

“Thank you.”

She left, still grinning. Robin looked equally as amused by how flustered Regina felt; fortunately Roland had become fascinated by a stick caught in the gutter.

“I’m going to be late,” she said, gesturing in the direction of the town hall.

“Okay,” Robin cheeked. “See you later.”

“See you.”
“Hey,” Emma called to Mulan, who was sitting at her desk thumbing through some paperwork. “Did you have any luck down at the docks?”

“You could say that.”

As Emma hung her jacket on the coat rack, Mulan took a ziplock bag out of her desk drawer. “Dogberry found this buried in the silt.”

It was the top of a gold-handled cane. The stand had been broken off, but Emma recognised it instantly. It was Rumplestiltskin’s.

“Damn,” she whispered under her breath. This was getting worse by the minute.

“It was waterlogged, so I’m guessing it was thrown into the sea and it’s only washed up on shore recently. That would explain why forensics didn’t find it,” said Mulan, having not heard what Emma said. “There’s no way to tell if that’s the murder weapon. I couldn’t find any blood on the handle – but then, if it had been thrown into the water, there wouldn’t be.”

“No,” Emma agreed, setting the bag down.

Mulan threw her a suspicious look. “You know whose cane that is, don’t you?”

“Sadly; yeah, I do.”

“Come to the shop as soon as possible.”

Belle had dropped everything the second Dove called her and somehow managed not to run all the way to the pawnshop. The place was a mess – books and various knickknacks scattered all over the floor, the remains of a bookshelf piled in one corner, and a dark stain on the floorboards that looked suspiciously like blood. The big man was sweeping up broken glass in the front room, and he jabbed a thumb at the office when she came through the door.

“He’s in there,” said Dove in his surprisingly gentle voice. She left him to his sweeping and barged into the back room, which turned out to be a mistake.

Rumple was underneath a bench, curled up so small that Belle would have missed him if not for the audible whimper he made when she shoved the curtain aside. He was shaking, knees drawn up to his chest and both hands clamped over his head to block out sound and light. He didn’t react when she knelt down next to him but flinched when she gently laid a hand on his knee.

“Rumple?” she murmured softly, hoping he could hear her. He looked up. Her heart clenched in her throat. Tear marks streaked his face, and his eyes were full of self-loathing. She gingerly leant forwards to hug him, and he melted into her embrace.

“Hey. It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear while gently stroking his hair. “I’m here.”

“I’m sorry,” he gasped after a moment. “I’ll be – I’ll be alright.”

“What happened?”

There were precious few people in the world who would stand up to the Dark One, and Belle
couldn’t think of a single one who could do this –

On second thoughts, yes; she could.

“Was she here?”

“Yeah.”

Of course it was her. As if that awful witch hadn’t done enough to him already. Belle was half-tempted to march out to the hills and confront the witch herself, rock trolls or no rock trolls. If Rumple hadn’t needed her right now, she may well have done so.

“Belle,” he eventually managed to gulp. “I’m so sorry. I’m weak and pathetic and a –”

“Don’t you dare call yourself a coward,” she cut him off. “She hurt you, and you have every right to be shaken. And you won.”

“No,” he whimpered.

“No?” she echoed, pulling back so she could look at him. “Then what happened?”

He looked down at his shaking hands, flexing his fingers experimentally like he wasn’t sure what they were supposed to do. Belle tried to make sense of it – if Zelena had won, then Rumple would be back in a cage right now. Or worse.

“Rumple?”

“I’m not sure,” he murmured, clenching and unclenching his hands. “I’m afraid, Belle. I don’t like being afraid.”

“There’s no courage unless you’re scared,” she replied, deciding to get the full story out of him later. It was clear that he wasn’t up to recounting the story anytime soon. The contrast between the man who had been so keen to start teaching her magic last night and the one she held in her arms was startling, but she didn’t love him any less. “I love you,” she reminded him gently.

He let out a sob and raised his face, eyes shining with love while still shadowed with the shame of appearing so weak. “I love you too.”

Zelena heard her father in the hallway before he announced himself. She had discovered, in the short time they’d lived under the same roof, that he had some odd routines. One was that he would always kick his shoes off the moment he was inside and place them neatly in a line next to the door. He also had a compulsive need to sort things – for one, it had been him who’d arranged all the jam jars on the kitchen counter, not the little old lady who’d lived there first. The landscapes on the wall were now hung according to dimensions, followed by subject, and he’d even gone to the trouble of piling the sofa cushions according to size. She had wrecked that last one when she kicked them all off to lay her injured leg on the couch.

“Zelena! I’m back!” he called from the front room, while she grimaced from her painful position on the sofa.

She wasn’t sure exactly what had happened to Rumplestiltskin in his shop – she only knew that it had been a display of power unlike any she’d seen before. Never had she known her old mentor to
be anything but completely composed, entirely in control, except when he’d been under the influence of the previous Dark Ones. She’d been certain that the little bookworm’s kiss had given him back control, but maybe that hadn’t been as permanent as it looked.

Either way, it threw a wrench into her plans for getting the dagger back.

“What happened?” Faílinis asked from the kitchen doorway, taking in her mangled leg. There wasn’t a patch of skin left without a bruise from her mid-thigh to her heel, she had a bandage wrapped around her calf to stop the bleeding from a sizeable cut, and she was pretty sure she had at least one broken bone. Her knee had swollen to the size of a cantaloupe and her foot was sticking out at an odd angle. It was surprising how much damage a falling bookcase could do, and Zelena was blatantly aware that she had been lucky to get out alive.

“Nothing,” she snapped, not looking at him, and biting down a gasp of pain as she tried to shift into a more comfortable position. It was healing; just slowly, and painfully.

Faílinis did not look convinced. “Nothing? You mean to tell me that your leg imploded of its own accord?”

“Of course not.”

“Didn’t think so. What did you do?”

She stayed quiet. He would guess, of course; he was a smart man, there was no way he wouldn’t.

“You tried to get the dagger, didn’t you?”

“Father –”

“I distinctly remember telling you that was a bad idea.”

“I know, but –”

“You could have been killed!” he exclaimed, making the cat jump out from behind the end table. “What were you thinking?”

She risked a shy glance upwards. He saw through it instantly.

“Oh, Zelena –”

“Don’t,” she said as firmly as she could muster with half of her concentration focused on her leg. “You don’t understand.”

“Then help me to.” He sat down on the ottoman, drawing it closer to the sofa so that they were at eye level. “Why are you so insistently fixated on the Dark One when there are a hundred other eligible companions in this town? Why can’t you pick one of them, one that doesn’t have the power to kill us both?”

“Because he humiliated me,” Zelena snarled between gritted teeth. “He chose Regina. Even though he knew that I was the better student!”

“And the one with less sense. Ah!” Faílinis held up a rigid index finger, cutting off her retort. “I’m still talking. Don’t you understand? Whoever the Dark One chose to cast that curse had to sacrifice the heart of the thing that they love most in the world. Do you really think Snow White would have killed her own True Love had there been any other way? Rumplestiltskin needed that curse to find
his son – a task which would have been impossible with his own heart rendered to a pile of ash on the ground!”

“You don’t know that!”

“Such a statement proves that I do, actually,” he said with the manner of one who would not take any further arguments. Zelena bit back a sneer and tossed herself dramatically against the sofa.

Okay, so she understood the practical aspects of it – yes, there hadn’t been much in her life that she’d loved before Rumplestiltskin entered her life, but she hadn’t loved him. Intrigued maybe, but then who wouldn’t be? Who was to say that she wouldn’t have found somebody else –?

But would you have been willing to give them up to enact Rumple’s curse? the practical aspect of her, the part that was starting to sound curiously like her father, responded. For once, Zelena stopped to think about that question.

If she had found her father before then – if Faílinis had been in the picture –

No. No, she would not have been willing to give him up. Not unless there had been something more substantial to gain by casting the curse. And Zelena was starting to think that maybe Rumple’s approval was not that valuable.

“I suppose you might be right,” she admitted finally, to which he gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

“Well, it’s a start,” he said, and then pointed to her leg. “Now, if I fix that, will you promise to end this inane obsession?”

Pain won out, and Zelena nodded. Faílinis laid a hand on her swollen knee, making her gasp as a gentle flow of power flooded the damaged area; the worst part was her bones re-aligning and the sickening, audible *pop* of her ankle returning to its normal position. The rest felt like taking a hit of poppy dust – the pain ebbed away, the swelling went down, the bruises faded and eventually she was looking at her own leg again.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Faílinis sat up straight on the ottoman and sighed. Healing magic took a lot out of a person, even a fae; that was part of the reason self-healing always took so long. “This is entirely out of curiosity, but what happened?”

“I was thrown into a wall,” Zelena explained. “A bookcase fell on my leg, trapping me.”

“He caught you off guard?”

“No, he –” She scratched her nose, thinking of the best way to describe it. “I’m not actually sure. We were talking; the next second, it was like he had lost all control. I tried to get out of there, but something grabbed hold of me – that’s how I ended up with that. And then he started –”

“Shaking,” Faílinis finished for her, looking as if a shadow had crossed over his face. “Like he was having a fit.”

Zelena frowned at him. “How did you know?”

“Did his eyes change colour?”

Actually, now that he mentioned it –
“Black. They turned black.” She stared at him; he was blank-faced, his mind clearly wrestling with itself at the moment. “Do you -? Have you seen this before?”

“Well, as a matter of fact –”

But he was interrupted by the sound of someone knocking on the door.

When his first knock got no response, Killian tried knocking again. The third time, he had just enough forewarning to brace himself before he was yanked out of the physical world by his kidneys, compressed into a swirling green vortex, and dumped unceremoniously on the living room floor. At least this time he managed to stay on his feet.

“How did you figure out the real address?” Zelena demanded from her semi-reclined position on the sofa.

“I’m a pirate. My livelihood depends on my ability to tell directions,” he said, but that answer was apparently not satisfactory. “You told me the last time I was here that you could see Number 81 from your front window. So I stood out the front of that house and used my spyglass to determine the line of sight. It took some guesswork, but it seems I deduced correctly.”

“So you did.”

Killian gave a small bow. “I aim to impress, m’lady.”

“It’s generally considered impolite to make eyes at a man’s daughter while he’s in the room,” snapped the third person, whom Killian had not paid much attention to until that moment. He looked to be in his forties – though Killian knew that appearances were not indicative of actual ages – with cropped hair, lean frame (he had no doubt the man was much stronger than he appeared) and a large white scar running from the lobe of his left ear to the middle of his chin. Killian would have liked to see the blade – or the talon – that caused that.

And he had called Zelena his daughter.

“Beg pardon?” Killian asked rather dumbly, looking from the man to Zelena.

“Captain Hook, this is my father,” she said, getting up from the sofa. “Faílinis. Although he also goes by Jonathan.”

“It’s, uh, a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Killian said, hesitantly raising his good hand for the man to shake. Faílinis did so after a moment’s hesitation, with an expression that suggested he was being asked to pick up something disgusting.

“Charmed,” Faílinis replied coolly.

“So, what’s the plan?”

Faílinis eyed him warily; Killian stuck his thumb in his pocket and stood straighter as the man folded his arms across his chest. Zelena shot them both a look from the kitchen.

“You said it yourself, Father. We need his help.”

“Yeah, I did,” Faílinis muttered gruffly. He sighed, thought for a moment and then gestured for Killian to take a seat at the kitchen table. “Alright, Captain.”
“I understand that you need my help with something?”

“You have the advantage of being able to walk around town without arousing suspicion,” said Faílinis, throwing Zelena a look. “Something that neither of us possesses.”

Killian sat back in his chair and tapped a ring against the table. “So you have to resort to asking a lowly pirate for help? Scraping the bottom of the barrel, mate.”

“This comes with an opportunity for revenge on the Dark One,” Faílinis said evenly. “And I would advise you to watch your tongue, lest I decide you’d be of more to use to us as something small and easily squashed. Like I did to the former owner of this house.”

He jabbed a thumb at the fat tabby cat sitting on Zelena’s abandoned spot on the sofa. The cat hissed at him.

Well, that explained a few things. And revenge on the Crocodile was certainly of interest to him, Killian had to admit that. And he really didn’t need any more enemies in this town.

“Fine. I’m listening.”

“Hmph,” Faílinis grunted, planting his elbows on the table. “We need you to steal some things from the heroes of this town.”

“Like what?”

“We’ll go over the particulars later. For now, let’s just say that it’s necessary to complete our plan.”

“Right,” Killian drawled. “So how does this involve revenge on the Crocodile?”

Faílinis looked confused. “Beg pardon?”

“That’s what he calls Rumplestiltskin,” Zelena explained from the kitchen.

“Ah. Well, we intend to cast a curse over the town. For matters of security, I’d rather not share the particulars with you just yet, but suffice it to say that the Dark One’s little maid will be among those swept up, and you can have your revenge.”

“What exactly does this curse do?”

Faílinis gave him a look. Killian sighed.

“Look, if you want my help, I’m going to need to know something about what we’re doing,” he said. “Otherwise, how do I know that you can actually accomplish what you say you can?”

“Hmm, typical pirate,” huffed Faílinis. “Alright, Captain, have it your way. The plan is to cast a curse known as the Spell of Shattered Sight. What that does, primarily, is remove all essence of a person’s moral compass. No compassion, no capacity for logic or any concern for consequences. The victims act on their darkest ambitions, their greatest fears, even to the point of turning on those they love most.”

“Sounds lovely,” Killian responded dryly.

“Don’t fool yourself; this is a nasty piece of work, almost as foul as the Dark Curse itself,” said Faílinis. “I wouldn’t like to meet the one who created it. But as for what we need from you, there are two ways of dispensing this curse. One is to shatter the mirror and rain the shards over the town. However, that’s particularly laborious, easily reversed and it wouldn’t affect nearly as many
people as we need it to. The second option is to imbue the curse with a little … personal flavour, if you will, that enables the curse to spread from person to person by touch.”

“That’s where I come in?”

“That’s where you come in. You can get some things from the heroes – say, a drop of blood or a treasured belonging – much more easily than Zelena or I could.”

Well, that was fascinating. Killian tapped his fingers on the table again. The thought of the Dark One killing the little bookworm with his own hands was an interesting one. But there was one thing he had to consider first.

“Would Emma be affected?”

“Oh, yes, your little sweetheart,” said Faflinis with a knowing look. “Well, it’s the same as any other curse. True Love’s kiss would break it. It would take some work to get close to them without being clubbed in the face, but I’m sure a man like yourself could accomplish it. If yours is True Love, temporarily waylaid by Sheriff Swan’s unfortunate engagement to the Dark One’s son, then the curse will break.”

“Uh-huh. And you can guarantee Emma’s protection?”

“No. But I can guarantee you the opportunity.” Faflinis extended a hand. “Do we have a deal?”

Later on, after Belle had managed to convince Rumple to come out from underneath the bench, she was making a pot of tea when the bell on the front door jingled. Dove had gotten the shop back into relative working order, thankfully, but Rumple was still pale and shaky, so Belle went to check who it was.

Fortunately, it was just Emma.

“Hey,” the sheriff greeted, giving Belle a small grin. “Is this a bad time?”

“No, it’s fine,” said Belle. There was something off about Emma; she kept shifting her weight from foot to foot and couldn’t seem to meet Belle’s eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Rumple emerged from behind the curtain; Emma’s attention turned straight to him, which put Belle on edge. What had happened?

“I, uh,” Emma started hesitantly, biting her cheek and swallowing. “I need you to come down to the station to answer a few questions.”

Emma pressed the two ‘record’ buttons simultaneously and cleared her throat.

“This is a taped interview. The date is February fifteen, 2014, four twenty-five p.m. Sheriff Swan is conducting the interview of Mr Rumplestiltskin Gold, local pawnbroker and landlord. Also present are Deputy Sheriffs Jack Spratt and Hua Mulan. Mr Gold has refused legal representation and has chosen to represent himself. Mr Gold, you have been brought in for questioning regarding the death of Mr Humperdinck van Dumpty on February ninth, 2014. You are not required to
answer any of my questions; however, it may harm your defence if you fail to give evidence now that you later rely on in court. Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Do you understand?"

“I do,” Rumplestiltskin said sombrely, sneaking a glance at the room separated from theirs by a glass partition. Belle was in there. She couldn’t hear what was going on and Emma had explained that she wasn’t allowed in the interview room; Belle just wanted to be there. She couldn’t fault that.

She put her elbows on the table and took a breath. “Can you tell us about your activities on February ninth?”

“Very well. I left home at approximately seven o’clock in the morning to conduct some business at my shop. At ten thirty, I went to Granny’s with Belle for lunch. After that, I collected the rent from five business owners on Main Street and returned to my shop at one thirty. I’m given to understanding that there was an altercation at the town hall around that time, however I was not present. Mayor Mills came by at around two o’clock to request Belle’s presence at the meeting of the royals. At five thirty, she called me at the shop. I told her that I would probably be home late.”

“A witness says that you were in Hunt Street around half past eight at night,” said Emma. “Can you tell me what you were doing there?”

Rumplestiltskin had another glance at the window. Belle was watching, pale-faced. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know what I was doing there.”

“Do you have any memory of what you were doing between five thirty and eight o’clock?”

“No.”

“What did you do after running into Miss Lucas on Hunt Street?”

“I returned home.” Another glance at the partition. “Belle was already asleep when I got back. I didn’t want to disturb her by waking her up.”

Emma nodded. Jack showed him the photograph.

“Do you remember this?” he asked, pointing to the Rumplestiltskin in the picture behind Humpty. The real Rumplestiltskin shook his head. “This picture was taken at approximately eight p.m. You don’t remember attending the lawn party that took place at 431 Randolph Street on the ninth of February?”

“I don’t.”

“Did you know about it? Were you invited to attend?”

“No. And no.”

“Do you recognise this?” Emma asked, placing the broken piece of cane on the table. It was in a plastic bag. Rumplestiltskin paused and then picked it up.

“Yes. It’s the top of my cane.”

“It was found on the shore near the murder scene,” said Mulan. “Probably washed up by the tide.”
He gave away no signs of emotion, but Emma noticed a muscle tense in his cheek. He was worried.

“When was the last time you saw this?” she asked.

Rumplestiltskin gave a slight shake of his head. “I’m not sure. I stopped using this after I returned from Neverland. I left it in my shop and I haven’t had a use for it since.”

“So you’re saying that you don’t know how it got there?”

“No.”

“Did you know Mr van Dumpty? Did you ever have business with him, or make a deal with him?”

“I didn’t know him personally, no. I recognise his name – I’ve dealt with members of the Southern Isles royal family before – but I’d never spoken to Mr van Dumpty specifically.”

“What about in Storybrooke? Did you have any dealings with him here?”

“No.”

Emma nodded again, and then shut the tape recorder off. “Okay. That’s all I need for tonight; you’re free to go.”

Rumplestiltskin looked puzzled. “You’re letting me go?”

“Well, we don’t have anything that would amount to a conviction, so there’s no point for you to spend a night in jail. Go home, get some sleep.”

He still seemed puzzled, but nodded gratefully and quickly left the room, leaving Emma with Mulan and Jack.

“Mate, wish you’d told me I’d be investigating the Dark One when I took the job,” said Jack while Emma sighed and dropped her head into her hand.

“Yeah. Me too.”

That night Emma lay awake in bed, staring at the patterns on the ceiling while Jesse made cooing noises downstairs. She was thinking about Humpty and the case, Rumplestiltskin’s blackouts, the power plays occurring all over town, Zelena and the rock trolls – and just how noisy Mr and Mrs Punch’s lovemaking was next door.

“How long have they been at it?” Neal asked groggily, his pillow over his head to block out the thumps, groans and occasional shrieks that penetrated the shared wall.

“About an hour and a half,” said Emma, wondering if Regina knew a silencing spell that she could put around the loft. “Go back to sleep.”

“Hey, I had a thought.”

“Hmm?” Robin mused as Regina passed him a glass of red wine. The boys were both asleep on
time for once, so they’d decided to make use of the night. Sitting on the sofa in front of the fire was surprisingly comfortable; Regina couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so at ease, doing nothing.

“There are tunnels that run all beneath Storybrooke, even out to the town line,” Regina explained. She’d had the thought while sitting in the town council meeting, not having much else to do except sign a few papers. “Possibly even up into the foothills.”

“To the trolls’ lair,” said Robin, boarding her train of thought.

“Exactly. We know from Frederick that they’ve probably already seen him and Hans hanging around on the surface – they’ll be expecting us to come at them that way – but if we could find an underground route –”

“They wouldn’t see us coming,” he finished with a grin.

“You and the lads feel up to a bit of snooping?”

“Hey, we’re professional snoopers. Well, Will was the professional snoop, but the rest of us are plenty competent too.” He grinned broadly, planning it all out. “How do you get into the tunnels?”

“Either through the mines, or there’s an elevator in the library,” Regina explained. “I don’t know that it’ll take you straight into the trolls’ lair, but you should be able to get close.”

“If there’s anything we can find out, it’s good enough,” said Robin, clinking glasses with her. “It’s a plan.”

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Even later at night, Rumplestiltskin sat in the armchair by the fire, coiling a piece of yarn around a peg. So many thoughts and emotions rattled around inside his skull, and he had no way to settle them. Once, he would have been able to sort them out by spinning. The peg didn’t have quite the same calming effect, but it was good enough and more importantly, didn’t trigger horrific recollections of his imprisonment.

After a short while, Belle took a seat in the other armchair, nursing a cup of tea. She passed him one as well, which he accepted with a thank you.

“I thought you’d gone to bed,” he said as she sat down.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she confessed. “Again.”

“Yeah.”

While she sipped her tea, Rumplestiltskin watched the fire. He felt better for it, like the dancing flames were cleansing his brain of unwanted rubbish. But still on edge, which Belle had obviously noticed.

“You’re really worried, aren’t you?”

Of course he was. Zelena was still on the loose, and no display of power was going to keep her from pursuing her goals. Her friend was out there with her, plotting who knew what. And a man was dead, most likely murdered, and the sheriff didn’t know who was responsible. As much as Rumplestiltskin wanted to believe that he’d had nothing to do with that, he had to look at the facts.
And the fact was that he had no memory of several hours on the same night that the man had died, and judging from the mess that had been made in his shop, the darkness inside of him was capable of wreaking considerable havoc. Havoc that Rumplestiltskin could not control.

“Belle,” he murmured softly, still staring into the fire, “what if I did kill him?”

There was a long silence in which neither of them knew what to say, broken only by the crackle of the fire slowly disintegrating the burning logs. Eventually, Belle set her teacup down, got up and joined him on his armchair, where the two of them simply held each other and found comfort in each other’s arms until the dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 15: The Case of the Broken Cane and the Missing Egg, in which Emma confides in Neal and Belle, the Merry Men check out the troll nest, and a thunderstorm hits Storybrooke.

Also: Rumple’s beliefs about his mother are somewhat ill informed, but not in the way you might think. Evanna is not the Black Fairy. I wrote a whole genealogical history for Rumple’s maternal side before we knew about that, and it just doesn’t work to change it, so I’m sticking with my original plan.
First thing on Monday morning, after dropping Henry at school, Emma called another meeting at the sheriff’s station. Neal followed his fiancée into the office, apprehension causing his stomach to do flips. The whole weekend, he had been wracked by nightmares he thought he’d buried a long time ago, all related to the fact that Mulan had discovered his father’s cane at the scene of the crime. The memory of his father squashing the baker-turned-snail under his boot. Snapping the soldiers’ necks when they came for a young Baelfire. The maid’s blood on his boots. Neal could tell himself, intellectually, that Rumplestiltskin was not that man anymore, that the curse was under control, but it seemed that his paranoid side had not got that message.

He didn’t want to believe – didn’t believe – that his father had murdered Humpty Dumpty, intentionally or not, but facts were facts. And Rumplestiltskin had admitted to a significant loss of memory that just so happened to coincide with the time of the murder. What if he was underestimating how much control the darkness had over him? Neal wanted to believe the best in his papa; he truly did – but not at the expense of somebody’s life.

“What’s the code red?” Regina asked as she joined them at the station. Jack and Mulan were sitting at their still-shared desk while Rumplestiltskin and Belle claimed the sofa, holding hands. Neal grabbed Emma’s rolling chair while his fiancée remained standing.

“Is Robin coming?” Emma asked Regina.

“No, he’s taken Roland for a play-date with some old friends of his. What’s the story?”

Emma showed her the evidence bag containing the top of Rumplestiltskin’s cane. Regina looked at it, to the owner, and back again.

“Mulan found it washed up on shore near where we found Humpty’s body,” Emma explained. “There’s no way to know for sure that it’s the murder weapon, but it looks bad either way.”

“But it’s ridiculous!” Regina exclaimed, turning to Rumplestiltskin. “You didn’t kill him, did you?”

Unfortunately for all of them, Rumplestiltskin could only squeeze Belle’s hand and grimace. “I have no memory of what I was doing on the evening the man was killed,” he admitted heavily. “I can’t provide an alibi, magically or not.”

“Crap,” Regina spat.

“It’s a common sentiment,” said Neal, folding his hands in front of him and rocking gently. He felt like he was fourteen again, the son of the town monster. “So what are we going to do?”

“Well, nobody else knows, right?” Regina asked, looking around the assembly. “It doesn’t have to go outside this room.”

There was a long silence in which they all looked at each other, or avoided each other’s eyes. Neal’s stomach twisted into knots, trying to make up his mind. On the one hand, it wasn’t such a bad idea. There was no evidence except for the cane, and nobody outside of the station knew about that.
On the other hand, neither Jack nor Mulan looked as if they had taken to the suggestion well. Neal liked Mulan, but he knew she wouldn’t like the subterfuge. Maybe she would keep the secret if he asked her to, but would Jack? More importantly, if they started down that road, where would they end up?

Neal couldn’t find it in himself to go along with the lie. Not even to protect his father.

Both Emma and Belle shifted uncomfortably, looking like they had each come to much the same conclusion, but to everyone’s surprise it was Rumplestiltskin who spoke up.

“That would be a bad idea, Regina,” he said, fidgeting with his ring. “Your leadership in this town is tenuous enough as it is. We don’t need another mess on top of the ones we’ve already got.”

“What?”

“I think what he’s saying is that we’ve been caught in a lie once already, Regina,” said Emma. “If we get caught covering this up now, the shit’s gonna hit the fan.”

“Well, not in those exact words,” Rumplestiltskin muttered.

Regina bit her cheek. “You do realise what they’ll do to you?”

“I do.”

“We all do,” Belle added, giving Rumplestiltskin’s hand a squeeze.

She never ceases to amaze me, Neal thought. He knew – and so did everyone in the room – that the two of them would be the first ones targeted if word got out that Rumplestiltskin was a potential murderer. But if it did happen, Neal had the small advantage of being engaged to the sheriff. Belle had no such protection.

“Fortunately, being the most feared man in town does have its uses,” said Rumplestiltskin as-a-matter-of-factly, as if reading Neal’s mind. While he hoped it didn’t come to that, his father did have a point. With any luck, at least it would keep Belle safe.

“Yes,” Regina agreed after sharing a look with Emma. “Alright.”

“We need to do this by the book,” Emma added. Then she sighed heavily. “And to that end –”

She took the tape recording of Rumplestiltskin’s interview out of her jacket pocket and handed it, along with the evidence bag with the cane, to Mulan.

“What are giving these to me for?” Mulan asked in confusion.

“I’m handing over full control of the investigation to you and Jack,” said Emma, which made Neal and Belle both start. They hadn’t discussed this.

“Why?” asked Jack.

“It’s called a conflict of interest. I can’t investigate my own father-in-law.”

“Yeah, but you’re the sheriff –” said Belle.

“And as sheriff, it can’t look like I’m playing favourites,” said Emma. “Look, you two can handle this. And with you two on Humpty’s case, I’m free to chase after Zelena and her friend. We still need to figure out what they’re up to – whether Hans is right about them casting this curse, and
“Jonathan,” said Regina suddenly. Everyone’s eyes turned on her. “It’s Zelena’s friend’s name,” she explained. “Robin and I went to check out the textiles factory and overheard him talking to some of Richard’s people. I forgot about it until now. Sorry. Anybody recognise it?”

Heads shook around the room, including Rumplestiltskin’s. So much for that.

“Isn’t there some law that says all villains are supposed to have ridiculously pompous names, so everybody always knows who they are?” asked Emma.

“Apparently we’re dealing with one who doesn’t have that type of ego,” Rumplestiltskin muttered. “Or heartless parents.”

“Well, we still need to figure out what they’re up to,” said Emma. “Anyone have any ideas?”

“Well,” said Regina. “As a matter of fact, Robin had an idea. Belle, we’ll need your help with the elevator.”

“The elevator?” said Belle.

“In the library. The idea is to use the tunnels beneath town to see if we can find a way to the trolls’ lair.”

Emma tapped her fingers on the desk. “He thinks he can manage it?”

“We are talking about the most infamous outlaw in the Enchanted Forest,” said Regina proudly. “He can handle it.”

They finished up with the meeting, and everybody stood to leave. Emma caught Belle’s sleeve just before she left with Rumplestiltskin.

“Can I have a word?” she asked in an undertone. “In private?”

“Sure.” Belle nodded, then turned to give her boyfriend a kiss on the cheek. “Go ahead; I’ll catch up with you.”

“Neal. You too,” Emma said, opening up her office door and letting them in. “Pastry? Don’t take the bear claw; that’s mine.”

“No, thanks,” Belle said, claiming Emma’s empty swivel chair. Neal sat on the desk and dug out a crème doughnut. “What did you want to see us for?”

“Oh, yeah.” Emma swallowed and shut the door. “Look, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was going to give over control of the investigation, but there’s something else I thought you should know.”

“Something worse?” Belle exclaimed, eyes going wide.

“Uh, not exactly.”

While Neal and his sort-of-stepmother stared at her in confusion, Emma clicked her fingers and bit her cheek.
“I need your help.”

“You didn’t hand the investigation to Jack and Mulan just so you could chase after Zelena, did you?” said Neal, suddenly getting wise.

“No.”

“Then why?” asked Belle.

“Because it’s too simple. The evidence just keeps falling in our laps. This is exactly what happened when Regina tried to frame Mom for murder during the first curse.”

The shoe dropped. Both of them stared at Emma with wide eyes.

“You think Pop’s being framed?” exclaimed Neal.

“Look, I’m the first person to admit, I’m not Rumplestiltskin’s biggest fan – uh, no offence,” Emma began, pacing her office as she tried to think, “but I know he’s not that careless. I don’t think the Dark One would be either. If he’d really killed that guy, then we’d have no evidence at all.”

Belle and Neal looked at each other as that information sank in. Emma left them to it – she’d been thinking about it all weekend, and she was certain. The pieces just weren’t adding up, and it was all too easy.

“Okay, but who would want to frame him?” Neal asked. His face told her that he’d answered the question before he even finished asking it.

Belle had reached the same conclusion. “You think Zelena’s behind this?”

“No,” said Emma, shaking her head. “Zelena’s not that smart. But we still don’t know what she and this Jonathan guy are up to. Or it might not even be them at all. But if somebody is setting him up, we need to figure out who, and why. I think I’ve got a better chance if whoever it is doesn’t think I’m onto them.”

“What do you need from us?” asked Belle.

“I need you to keep an eye on him. Anything suspicious, anyone acting strangely around him, I need you to report it to me. Quietly. And don’t talk about it in your house; it might have been bugged,” Emma added to Belle.

“You’re not worried that the station may have been bugged?” Neal suggested.

“No, I checked it over yesterday.”

“Can I say anything to Rumple?”

Emma paused before answering Belle’s question, biting her cheek while throwing Neal a sideways look.

“Um, can you keep it to yourself? At least for a little while?” she asked, though it clearly made Belle uncomfortable. “Look, we need to figure out who’s behind this. Best chance to do that is to keep them from finding out that we’re onto them for as long as possible, which means telling as few people as possible. Including Rumplestiltskin.”

Belle was biting her lip.
“But you can tell him that I don’t think he’s guilty, if that helps at all.”

It took a moment, but she nodded eventually. “Okay.”

“Remember: anything suspicious, okay?” Emma reminded them. “That includes anyone who seems to be paying more attention to you than normal, anyone asking strange questions, phone calls, trips to the shop. Anything.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks, guys.”

Just then there was a knock on the station door, and Hook opened it. “Oh, apologies. Am I interrupting something?”

“No, we were just talking,” said Emma, giving Belle and Neal both a look. “What’s the matter?”

“Actually, I was wondering if I could talk to you in private.”

When Neal looked uneasy, making a face at Hook, Belle stood up and held him gently by the elbow. “We’ll see you later, Emma,” she said, tugging Neal out of the door.

Emma kept an exasperated sigh to herself until Neal was out of earshot. She knew that he and Hook had unresolved issues, but she had hoped he would know by that she could handle a rum-addicted pirate with one hand.

“What’s up, Hook?” she asked, sitting down in the chair Belle had just abandoned.

“I, uh, wanted to apologise,” said Hook. “My behaviour earlier this month was inexcusable.”

Emma frowned, eying him suspiciously. “What brought this on?”

“Storybrooke is a place of fresh starts,” he mused with a shrug, reaching into his jacket pocket. He’d changed out of the long leather coat and pants into a modern shirt, jacket and jeans, but he still had his canteen full of rum. “Drink?”

“No, thanks, I’m on duty.”

Hook smiled softly, and then had a long drink. “I’ve decided to take Baelfire’s advice to heart and turn over a new leaf.”

“That’s great.”

“I’ve missed you, Swan.”

Emma fought the urge to roll her eyes. Not this again. “Hook, don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t tell me that you turning over a new leaf is for my benefit,” she snapped, getting to her feet. “Look, if you wanna help us out with Zelena, then great! Bring it on. But don’t do it just because you’re trying to make something happen between us. Okay? It’s not gonna happen. End of story. Accept that.”

Hook lowered his gaze in an attempt to look sad. “Are you happy, Emma?” he asked in a small voice.
“What?”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

He looked up again. “I don’t think that’s true.”

This time Emma did scoff. “Well, it’s a good thing your opinion doesn’t matter.”

“Come on, Swan.”

“I said don’t.”

“Swan –”

“Look, it is not my job to make you a better man!” Emma shouted, her temper rising uncontrollably. “And I don’t give a shit if you think I have made you a better man! That is not my responsibility! AH!”

She’d meant to swing her arm out for emphasis, but hit her inbox instead. The filing trays flew off her desk and crashed onto the floor, paper flying everywhere, while she let out a shout of pain. Her hand was bleeding, and her in/outbox was lying in pieces on the floor. God. Why the hell couldn’t some guys just take a hint?

While pressing a handkerchief into the wound, Emma walked around her desk and clumsily started to clean up the mess while trying not to spill blood all over everything. Hook joined her on the floor. “Swan –”

“Get out,” she snapped, pain and frustration temporarily overruling professional decorum. “Just – just get out.”

At least he left quietly, leaving Emma to bleed in peace.

Robin wouldn’t say he was claustrophobic, per se, but there was something about being underground that felt, to him, akin to being suffocated. Being unable to see the sky, or any distinctive landmarks, also meant that he couldn’t for the life of him tell what was north, south, up or down. If it wasn’t for the magical compass Regina had fashioned for him and Much marking the tunnels with a piece of chalk, the Merry Men would have been as good as lost. John mapped out the tunnel route to the trolls’ fortress for future reference, in case they needed to repeat this little adventure.

“Now this is what I call honest snooping,” said Alan, on the floor examining some tracks they had found. “We haven’t done this in a while.”

“Well, we’re all turning over a new leaf,” Robin replied, though he secretly agreed with Alan. Building houses was all well and good, but it was routine. He missed the new-day-every-day climate that came with honest banditry. “We need to fit in. Can’t do that if the law’s trying to hang us from the clock tower every other day.”

“Uh, Robin, you’re shagging the mayor. Pretty sure we’d at least get a trial.”

John and Much failed to disguise their sniggers as Robin threw Alan a scowl, but he was saved
from a pummelling by a nearby rumble.

“That way,” said John, pointing at the tunnel behind them.

They shuffled into a little alcove (Alan perched on John’s shoulders so that they could fit) as the rumbling grew louder and louder, enough that the tunnel shook and flakes of dirt crumbled from the ceiling. Robin crouched on the floor, his hood pulled up to shade his face, and exchanged a look with Much. Dozens of perfectly round grey rocks rolled straight past them (and uphill as well), obviously in a hurry to be somewhere. Robin counted fourteen before giving up. Eventually, the rumbling subsided, and the Merry Men snuck out of hiding.

“Down that way,” Robin whispered.

They followed the furrow made by the trolls’ passage, Much marking the trail as they went, uphill for a mile and a half before the grumble of gravelly voices hit Robin’s ears. There was an echo; Robin counted, and estimated they were maybe forty feet away from the source. He gestured to the others to shush, and crept along the ground as quietly as he could.

“Whoa.”

Hans’ description and photographs didn’t do the place justice. Their tunnel led into a grand antechamber, at least sixty feet in circumference and high enough that John could have stood on his own shoulders twice over. There were at least a hundred trolls that Robin could see, but he was willing to be there were more. Most of them were milling about the upper levels in little alcoves that looked like sleeping quarters, but there was a group of five on the ground floor. They were arranged in a square formation around a tall blonde woman, whose hands had been bound in iron shackles up to her wrists. And in front of them was Zelena, barking orders. At least the trolls looked none too pleased at being told what to do by a batshit crazy witch.

Robin stole the map off of John, flipped it over, and started to write down every detail they could use to identify the blonde woman.

Maybe five and a half feet tall, ash blonde hair, looks like she might be from Arendelle or the Southern Isles – somewhere in the north – wearing a blue cardigan and calf-length light-coloured dress, hard to tell in this light –

“Anybody we know?” asked Much.

“I don’t recognise her,” said Alan.

“Hey,” said John, nudging Much’s shoulder and pointing to a side tunnel that looked as if it circled the antechamber. “Worth a try?”

“Keep your ears open, lads,” said Robin, taking the lead.

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On the surface, Regina slid the elevator door shut with Belle’s help. The lads would be several hours at least, and Robin had said he’d call when they got back to the elevator.

“You know, I always wondered: why did you put a giant labyrinth beneath Storybrooke?” Belle asked, wiping dust off her hands.

“I didn’t,” said Regina, flinching as the wheel locks slid into place with a loud clunk. “Well, not
exactly. I needed a place to keep an old friend separate from the rest of the town and that’s what it came up with.”

“An old friend?” Belle observed. Too curious for her own good, that woman. “Are they in Storybrooke now?”

“No.” Regina sighed. “No, she’s dead now.”

She did regret that. Mal had been a good friend – well, maybe a little more than a friend, as odd as that had been – and her fate wasn’t the one Regina would have chosen for her, had there been another way.

Belle nodded sombrely. She may not have known the exact circumstances, but she was one of those people who knew when not to ask too many questions. That, Regina had to admit, was one of the things she actually did like about Rumple’s little maid.

“Listen, could you do me a favour?” she asked, leaning against the door as Belle straightened ever so slightly (though it added nothing to her height whatsoever). “Could you talk to Blue for me, see if she can offer any insight into this troll situation? I’d ask Snow, but, well, the baby and all.”

Tink might not know who this ‘Jonathan’ person was, but Regina wondered if maybe the head fairy did. It had certainly slipped her mind to ask, since she had never exactly seen eye-to-eye with Blue. Not a situation she cared to change, mind, but it couldn’t hurt to ask.

“Since when did I become your PR woman?” Belle asked, crossing her arms and scowling.

“Well, you –” Regina started, but stopped when Belle broke into a wide smile. Realisation hit her, and she rolled her eyes. “You’re making fun of me.”

Belle chuckled. “Of course I can talk to her.”

“Thanks,” was all Regina could say, the whole conversation having thrown her for a loop. Given all of their history, she hardly thought the two of them would ever be good friends – the most that could be said was that she’d never actually hurt the little bookworm (physically, at least) – but Belle’s capacity for forgiveness still amazed her. If Regina had been in her shoes, she didn’t have to wonder where the other person would have ended up.

Is this how Robin feels about Rumplestiltskin? she thought suddenly, remembering that he and Regina’s former mentor had once had a similar animosity to the one she and Belle had had. Regina hid a chuckle and followed Belle out of the library.

Henry was right. Their little family really was crazy.

Rumplestiltskin stared at the Hat, sitting on his desk stubbornly refusing to do anything more than reveal its true nature, and then flicked through the pages of the book in his lap before chucking it across the room. He was getting nowhere, and Belle’s research wasn’t providing any better results. As much as he wanted to be on the hunt for Zelena and her friend – or whoever Jonathan really was – he was beginning to panic. He needed to get the darkness under control before he did something worse than wreck his shop. Or hurt somebody, if he hadn’t already. So many factors beyond his control – Rumplestiltskin hated feeling out of control.

Maybe if he used the dagger to break the enchantments …?
No, Rumplestiltskin told himself firmly. It hadn’t come to that just yet.

“Hey, Pop!” Bae’s voice called from the front room. “Are you here?”

“Back room,” Rumplestiltskin answered, getting up to fetch the book from the floor. He dusted it off as his son came in the room. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

“Not much,” said Bae, leaning down to pick up some papers that had fallen off the filing cabinet. “How do you feel about lunch?”

“I could eat.” Rumplestiltskin gave his son a look. “Is something bothering you?”

What did Emma want to talk to you and Belle about? he wondered.

“No. Just wanted to check up on you.” Bae scratched the back of his neck. “I’m going back to New York on Thursday and I wanted to see if you were … doing okay before I left.”

“Oh,” Rumplestiltskin said, touched by his son’s concern. “Well, I’m fine. Haven’t been for a midnight wander lately.”

“That’s good,” said Bae, flashing him a smile. “So, Granny’s –? What’s that?”

He’d spotted the Hat.

“Is that the Sorcerer’s Hat?”

“You know it?” Rumplestiltskin asked in surprise as Bae leant over the desk for a better look.

“Yeah, there’s a picture of it in Henry’s storybook,” said Bae. “Some story about the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. Who is not Mickey Mouse, disappointingly.”

Well, that was interesting. Rumplestiltskin made a note to ask his grandson if he could borrow the book sometime.

“Well, uh, I was researching it.”

“What for?”

“To see if I could make good on our deal.”

Bae snapped his head up, a hint of a smile on his lips. “It can do that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” said Rumplestiltskin, even as the voices of the Dark Ones started to rage in the back of his mind. He shoved them aside, focusing on his boy. “There is a possibility that this Hat may hold the power to sever my connection to the dagger. Nobody would ever be able to control me again.”

“But not to break the curse?”

Bae tried to hide the disappointment in his voice, and Rumplestiltskin rubbed his back reassuringly. He knew that was what his son really wanted, to see the Dark One’s curse broken. But for now, this was the best he could do.

“It’s the best option I’ve found so far,” he told his son.

“Yeah,” Bae replied, chuckling. “Have you told Belle?”
“I have. In fact, she’s helping me find a way to make it work.”

That made Bae grin from ear to ear. “That’s great, Pop.”

Rumplestiltskin thumped him on the back happily. “So, lunch?”

“Did you get it?” Faílinis demanded the moment Killian landed on the carpet.

Killian held up the bloodied piece of plastic and bit back a retort. Since figuring out the actual address of the house, Faílinis had taken to wrenching him straight off the street. He called it a security measure; Killian was pretty sure the man just didn’t like him for some reason, and was taking it out on his kidneys.

“That’s the sheriff’s?”

“That’s hers,” Killian confirmed, handing over the shard stained with Emma’s blood. The old fae looked the bloodied shard over once, grunted in satisfaction and then slipped it into a ziplock bag. As he sealed it, Killian looked around the flat. “Where’s Zelena?”

“Helping the trolls move a friend of ours into a safe space in town,” said Faílinis. He gave Killian a glare of suspicion. “Why do you ask?”

“Curious. I was wondering if you fairy types eat lunch. Even a pirate can’t pass up an opportunity to be a gentleman once in a while.”

“I’d appreciate it if you would refrain from propositioning my daughter, Captain.”

That had actually not been Killian’s intention, but he scoffed all the same. He’d dealt with plenty of overprotective fathers in his time, and Faílinis was no different from the rest of them. “Why?” he said with a smirk, leaning against the sofa. “Do I not meet your lofty standards?”

“You’re a one-handed mercenary with an alcohol addiction,” Faílinis returned. “I would be willing to overlook that, but you also happen to be obsessed with another woman. So no, you don’t meet my standards.”

He turned his back and strolled into the kitchen, where he took a jar of boysenberry jam off the immaculately sorted shelf. Killian ground his teeth and bit back his usual response. The old fae was a pain in the arse, but he was possibly Killian’s last chance at killing the Crocodile. He had endured Cora for the same purpose – he could handle a few days more with Faílinis.

To that end, he had another question.

“You said that this curse – this Spell of Shattered Sight,” Killian mused while the old fae made a sandwich, “People kill even those they love most under its influence.”

“It takes some time before paranoia and selfishness drives them quite that far,” said Faílinis. “Perhaps a few hours. Don’t worry. You should have plenty of time to nab your princess and get her out of town. Even if the kiss doesn’t work, the effects of the curse won’t hold beyond the town line.”

“Actually, I was thinking of Rumplestiltskin.”

Faílinis raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, you can try to kiss him too, if you like. I’m certainly not
“Will he be affected by the curse?” Killian snapped, ignoring that comment.

“Hmm,” Faílinis grunted, slowly chewing a bite of his sandwich. “Well, I have to admit, there is a possibility that the Dark One may render him immune. There have been instances where a curse has been superseded by an existing one; lycanthropy, for instance.”

“So he may not be affected?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I have lived for two hundred years, waiting for a chance to destroy that monster,” said Killian. “I won’t leave town with him still alive.”

“Are you asking for a chance to kill him yourself?”

“I am.”

Faílinis tore another chunk off his sandwich and mulled over the question as he chewed it. “Well, I think you have a death wish, but I’m still not stopping you.”

“Thank you.”

“Speaking of the Dark One, however,” Faílinis added, finishing off his lunch and wiping crumbs off his hands, “I need you to steal some things from him. I’d do it myself, but unfortunately he’s improved the protections on his house and shop since I last broke in.”

“You want me to steal from the Dark One?” Killian asked, more for clarification than out of actual concern. The Crocodile did not scare him, unlike the pushovers in town.

“Are you up to it?”

“I’ve done it before. I can do it again.”

“Excellent,” said Faílinis while flashing a grin. “Don’t worry about him catching you; we know just how to distract him.”

There was a thunderstorm that evening, a terrific display of nature’s greatest powers that illuminated Storybrooke with every strike of lightning. Neal lay in bed waiting for Emma to finish her shower, unable to concentrate on his book. He’d never been fond of storms. As a little boy, his mother used to slap him on the back and tell him to buck up whenever he started to get frightened. After she left, his father had let him sleep in the lean-to with the sheep to help keep them calm. Neal wasn’t sure if either technique had worked, but he fluffed up a pillow and hugged it under one arm all the same.

He flinched as one strike hit particularly close to town; the lamp flickered as the power was knocked around but stayed on.

“Sorry about that,” Emma said as she came up the stairs, drying her hair off with a towel. “I might have to duck out later if the camp starts flooding. It’s not too bad now; Leroy’s taken the dwarves out on sandbag duty.”
“Okay,” Neal replied, shutting his book. There was really no point in trying to concentrate. At least the storm drowned out the sounds of the Punches.

Emma gave him a knowing look as she climbed into bed, took back the pillow he was using as a safety blanket and replaced it with her head. Neal kissed the top of her hair gratefully. Pillows were all well and good, but he really did prefer cuddling with her.

“Thanks for looking out for my dad,” he said softly.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Thanks for looking out for my brother.”

“What did Emma want to see you about this morning?” Rumple asked as he and Belle put the dishes away after dinner. Belle dropped a cup into the sink, taken back by the sudden line of questioning.

“Oh, she, uh, just wanted to ask a couple of questions,” she answered, using the dropped cup as an excuse not to look at him. “That’s all. Nothing to be worried about.”

Rumple wasn’t fooled. “She asked you not to tell me, or you don’t want to tell me?”

“She asked me not to tell you,” Belle replied. She wanted to tell him the truth, even considered breaking her promise to Emma – surely Rumple could’ve figured out who was behind this – but took a breath and kept the secret. Rumple would overreact, possibly even tear the town apart to find whoever was doing this to him. What if that was exactly what they wanted? No, Emma was right – they needed more information and they were only going to get it if the person or persons didn’t think that the sheriff was onto them.

Rumple nodded. “Is it something I should be worried about?”

“No,” Belle said a little too quickly. Lightning flashed outside the window, followed half a second later by a clap of thunder. Rumple absent-mindedly dried a plate, with the look on his face that meant he was fighting down a wave of panic – and it didn’t have anything to do with the storm. Belle reached for him.

“If it helps, Emma did tell me that she doesn’t think you did it.”

“She doesn’t?”

“No. She said something along the lines of; if you’d really killed Humpty, there would have been no body to find.”

That made him frown, just for a second before he returned to his normal impassive expression. “Well, it’s nice to know that I never underestimated Miss Swan’s intelligence.”

“She’ll figure it out,” said Belle. And I promise I’ll help her do it, she swore silently to herself. Whoever was trying to hurt Rumple now – she was not going to let them get away with it.

“Much!”

“I swear it was this way!” Much insisted, turning in circles as he looked around the cavern for any
landmarks. Robin let out a sigh of exasperation. They must have taken a wrong turn at the last fork, he figured, and now they were stuck at a four-way junction he didn’t recognise. The easiest thing to do would have been to turn back – if Robin knew which way that was.

“Come on,” he said to Much, tugging on his arm. “We’ll try this one, and double back if we get it wrong.”

“Uh, guys?” Alan gestured for them to shush. They listened, the sound of Robin’s breathing heavy in his ears, until the thundering of rolling rocks surpassed it.

“Damn it,” he swore, looking at the centre tunnel in hope. He was fairly sure they’d come out of that one – but it was also the one the rumbling was echoing from. Deciding quickly, he pulled Much to the left. “Mark it. We’re gonna have to run.”

The rumbling grew louder. Much didn’t ask any questions, just made a cross mark on the wall and ran behind Robin into the tunnel.

Regina checked the weather bureau again, but it didn’t look as if the storm planned to let up any time soon. They would probably lose Internet service soon; she just hoped they didn’t lose the phones too. Robin was several hours late now. She told herself that he would be fine, that (as woodsmen) the Merry Men had weathered their fair share of storms and that they were probably just being as thorough as they could be.

Or they had been caught by the trolls.

“When’s Papa coming back?” Roland asked, brown eyes wide and fearful as she tucked him in for the night. He had probably never slept through a storm by himself before.

“Soon. He’ll be back soon,” Regina told him as she tried to convince herself of the same thing.

Through the window, a flash of lightning illuminated the town and the silhouette of the clock tower. Moments later, a crack of thunder followed. Roland jumped out from the covers and into Regina’s arms, trembling like mad and clinging to her as tight as he could.

“Hey, it’s alright,” she whispered soothingly, hugging him in return. “How about I say here until Papa gets back? Would you like that?”

“Okay,” said Roland, voice muffled by her shirt.

“Do you want me to read a story?”

He nodded, and Regina twisted around to reach the bookshelf next to the nightstand. This was the room in which she’d kept most of Henry’s things after he’d outgrown them; clothes, toys, books. Many of them were now seeing the light of day again, as Roland was at precisely the right age for the hand-me-downs. After a brief perusal, Regina selected The Magical Faraway Tree – one of Henry’s favourites from first grade – and settled into a more comfortable position so she could read.

“Once upon a time, there were three children – Jo, Bessie and Fanny,” she read, Roland’s eyes following the words on the page as she did. “They lived with their mother and father in a little cottage deep in the country …”
Next, Chapter 16: Mirror, Mirror, in which Emma has an interesting discussion with Blue, Belle investigates the mirror, and Killian and Zelena get up to no good
“That ought to do it,” Regina announced after she was done putting a silencing spell around the loft. Neal sighed in relief. The storm had drowned out the sound of the Punches last night, so he’d actually had a pretty good night’s sleep. He vaguely remembered the phone ringing and Emma leaving around four o’clock in the morning, but not much else.

A heavy crash shook the partition wall, making Regina jump, but noise was muffled to a tolerable decibel.

“Nice job,” Neal said gratefully, watching the wall for the next crash. It came exactly eighteen seconds later, muted to a dull thud.

“They’re the neighbours from hell, alright,” Regina mused.

“Yup. Their favourite pastime seems to be beating the crap out of each other.”

“Bad word,” said Roland, sitting at the kitchen counter eating cereal with Henry.

“Oops,” Neal whispered.

Regina hadn’t noticed, too busy throwing the wall a peculiar look. “You did say there’s a kid, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” Neal grimaced. “If you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, Emma’s already tried it.”

“How’d that go?”

“How’d that go?”

The trouble was, the Punches – along with everyone else without cursed memories – still held to traditional Enchanted Forest values and didn’t see a single problem with their lifestyle.

*Maybe I will take Punch up on that beer,* Neal thought. Maybe he could reason with the man when his wife wasn’t around. The strangest thing was that, when they weren’t beating the crap out of each other, Punch and Judy both seemed like perfectly reasonable people. In public too, whenever Neal had seen them taking their kid for a walk down the street or at the grocery store. Weird.

On the sofa, Emma mumbled something in her sleep and rolled onto her back, flinging an arm over her head as she did. Neal threw Regina an amused look and tried not to laugh.

“When did she finally get home?”

“About half an hour ago,” said Neal, gently pulling the blanket loose from the back of the sofa and chucking it over his sleeping fiancée. “One of the sandbag barriers around the camp collapsed and a bunch of tents got flooded; she had to help the dwarves fix it all up.”

“Damn it,” Regina muttered so the boys wouldn’t hear. “The sooner we get all those people housed, the better.”

“You said it.”
Emma grumbled again. Suddenly feeling playful, Neal tickled her under the nose.

“Aah!” she groused, swatting his hand. Neal chuckled – softly, he didn’t want to wake her – and tickled her once more before leaving her to sleep. Regina and Henry gave him identical looks of disapproval, but whatever either of them intended to say got cut off by the sound of Regina’s phone ringing.

“It’s Robin,” she said with a gasp of relief.

Leaving Emma to get some sleep, Regina practically swept herself and the boys up and dropped them at the old toll bridge, underneath which the Merry Men were emerging. She barrelled down the hill ahead of Neal and the boys to be caught by Robin in a sweeping hug.

“Are you okay? What happened? Where have you been?” she rattled off as quickly as breath allowed her while squeezing Robin tightly. She was entitled: after a long night of broken sleep interrupted by nightmares and lightning, she just wanted to hold her True Love and know he was alright.

“Whoa, whoa!” said Robin, holding her at arm’s length. “We’re okay, really. Just got a bit lost. Much misread the map."

“Oh, sure,” Much muttered. “Blame me!”

“Papa!”

Roland ran straight past Regina; Robin caught him and lifted him into the air.

“Oh, Roland. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Papa. Gina took care of me.”

Regina tried and failed not to blush under the smile Robin’s son gave her, along with smirks from the rest of the lads. Neal, thankfully, saved her from further embarrassment at Alan’s hand.

“How’d you get lost?”

“ Took a wrong turn somewhere and then had to run from a guard patrol,” Much explained, shaking tunnel dust out of his hair. “We couldn’t find our way back to the library.”

“We’ve been up all night,” added Alan. Regina believed him without question.

“Did you see anything?” piped Henry.

“Loads,” said Robin. “You’d better call Emma. And Belle. They’ll need to hear this.”

So, a short while later, after Regina dropped Henry off at school, the Merry Men sans Alan (who had gone home to let his wife and daughter know he was back) crammed around Regina’s kitchen table along with Neal, Snow, Belle and Emma (nursing her second cup of coffee after being rudely woken by another phone call). None of them had eaten, so Granny earned herself a hearty early commission with three orders of pancakes, four of scrambled eggs and toast and two sides of bacon.
rashers – and that was just the Merry Men. While the lads filled up, and Emma’s elbow threatened to slip off the table, Regina went over Much’s scribbles.

“Hans’ estimate was way off,” said Robin with his mouth full (though he at least had the manners to cover it). “There are hundreds of those things holed up in an underground fortress. I think they dug it themselves.”

“Tink did say they were underground dwellers,” Regina mused, thinking over the catch-up she’d had with the fairy only yesterday.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance we could just storm their stronghold?” suggested Neal. Robin shook his head straight away.

“Not on their home turf. We were lucky to get as close as we did. You can barely see anything down there, and they’ve got tunnels branching all over the place. My guess is that there’s a whole network down there, and you can bet they know every hole by its first name.”

“What’s this?” asked Regina. On the flip side of Much’s crude map was a drawing of some sort. It looked like a mirror.

“Oh, yeah,” said Much, hastily swallowing a piece of sausage. “Spotted that in some fancy-lookin’ room off the – well, I guess you could call it an amphitheatre. No idea what it was, but it looked important, so I thought I’d see if you or the D – sorry, Belle, Rumplestiltskin knew what it was.”

“What is your house name, Rumple?” asked Robin.

“Rumplestiltskin, by the way?” asked Robin.

Regina grimaced, noticing how Neal’s head had ducked at that statement. She believed Rumple when he said he didn’t remember killing Humpty, but that didn’t help his case. Likely, he wasn’t going to be of much use to them until he had figured out who the real murderer was.

She didn’t want to consider the possibility that Rumple was losing control and slaughtering innocent people in his sleep or something. Her former mentor was a stubborn man capable of much damage, and if he had become a threat to the people of Storybrooke – well, Regina didn’t envy the poor person who’d have to stop him.

To offset the sudden cloud of discomfort at the table, Regina showed Belle the drawing. “Have you seen this before?”

Belle frowned, took the map and looked at it closely. “Actually, it is kinda familiar. Can I take this? I can cross-reference it with the books in the shop.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“What about Zelena?” asked Snow.

It was then that Emma’s elbow finally slipped, and she jerked awake milliseconds before she hit her head.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, embarrassed amidst the others’ poorly-hidden laughter.

“So, Zelena?” Snow repeated once she was done hiding a chuckle. “Or her friend? Did you see them?”
“And then some,” said Robin. “Didn’t see Mister Jonathan, but we spotted Zelena marching off to town with a whole platoon of trolls. It looks like they’ve found themselves an alternate route into Storybrooke, but it was guarded, so we didn’t get to look. They had someone with them, though.”

“Great, another enemy,” Neal muttered. “I was just thinking we needed more of those.”

“Actually, she looked more like a prisoner,” said Robin. “They were marching with her in the middle of a squad; all of them were armed, and it did look like a couple of them were holding ropes. We didn’t catch a name.”

“What about a description?” asked Belle.

“Uh, maybe twenty-three or -four, five-foot-six-ish, blonde hair,” Robin reported, brow creasing as he thought. “She had a blue cardigan on.”

“Blonde hair,” said Emma, suddenly looking thoughtful. “Would you say like, white blonde?”

“It was pretty light, yeah. Maybe.”

“Emma?” Snow put a hand on her daughter’s arm.

“Well, it sounds the same as the description, uh, Anna gave me of her missing sister on Friday,” Emma explained. “Queen Elsa.”

“The Snow Queen?” said Regina.

“You know her?”

“She’s my cousin, actually,” Snow offered, pausing for a second to wipe drool off Jesse’s chin. “I don’t know her very well; she had a bit of a, uh, cloistered upbringing.”

“And a minor sorceress with a knack for cryokinetics,” Regina added. Emma looked blank. “Ice magic.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know what Zelena would want with her, though. As far as I know, Elsa never studied magic seriously. Compared to others, she’s barely worth dealing with.”

“Well, there’s obviously something,” said Robin. He wiped up the last of his eggs with his toast, put it in his mouth and then stood to put his plate in the sink. “I’ll leave the experts to figure it out. Meanwhile, I’m having a shower.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Regina replied just loud enough for him to hear, which made him elbow her in the shoulder.

“I’m gonna talk to Blue this afternoon; maybe she’ll know something about what these trolls are doing,” said Belle.

“Good idea. I’m going to help the dwarves clean up the mess the storm made last night,” added Snow.

“I’ll come with you,” said Neal. “Emma?”

“I’m going back to sleep.”
The storm had been a bad one. There was debris all over town, several streets flooded, and some damage done to the cannery by the high tide. Powerlines were down all over the place, too, leaving at least eight important buildings without electricity, including the hospital (thank gods for backup generators). While the dwarves set about fixing the lines, Ruby had recruited a few hands – Dorothy, Archie and a couple of fairies – to clean up the debris around the hospital. Getting that back in working order was their first priority.

The other problem was getting the word around to all the newcomers in town, who weren’t familiar with the dangers of electricity, to avoid fallen powerlines. Ruby didn’t know which was more exhausting – clearing debris by hand (with suitable rubber-proofed gloves, of course) or explaining over and over again why electricity was safe, but the storm had done some damage that made it not safe. Frankly, she thought Jesse Nolan would have comprehended it better.

“Okay, run it at ten percent,” Leroy shouted from the top of the ladder to Happy, who flipped a switch at the base. Ruby didn’t have a clue what they were doing – she just hoped that they did. “Okay. It’s holding. Let’s go to fifty!”

“I thought dwarves were supposed to be miners,” said Dorothy, who was helping Ruby rake debris out of the hospital parking lot. “Now they’re electricians?”

“Work is work for them,” Ruby explained as she heaved a pile of leaves and twigs into a wheelbarrow. She crinkled her nose, smelling something odd. A moment later, she realised it was smoke when the transformer went bang! Taken by surprise, Leroy shouted and fell backwards off the ladder onto a pile of leaves. Thankfully, he was only two feet off the ground.

“For the most part, anyway,” she added in an undertone.

“Leroy!” Astrid cried as she raced to the fallen dwarf’s side, though everybody else except Bashful was laughing. Leroy was already up and swearing to make a navy man proud – or in other words, fine.

“I’m fine; I’m fine,” he barked at his girlfriend and brother. “Just a bit of a shock.”

“Are you sure?” Astrid asked, checking over every part of him she could reach.

Leroy grumbled and complained, but let Astrid ensure things were in working order. Despite his protests, Ruby got the feeling he secretly liked it, and smiled for her old friend. She was glad he was happy.

“Is everybody okay here?” asked a new voice at Ruby’s shoulder. She turned to see one of the hospital nurses – Anita, she remembered after a moment – looking over the scene with some concern.

“Yeah, just had a little transformer trouble,” said Ruby. Something by her knee barked, and a black-and-white shape jumped up at Anita. “Oh. Hey, Pongo.”

“Hey, boy,” said Anita, leaning down to give Pongo a scratch behind the ears. “Sorry, Perdy’s at home today.”

“Pongo! What are you – oh.” Archie stopped short, looking odd in his heavy rubber boots and gloves. He also seemed uncertain of what to look at, going from Anita to Pongo to Ruby to the ground all in one second. “H-Hi, Anita. You’re, uh, you’re out here too?”
“Well, I do kinda work here,” said Anita, gesturing to the hospital.


Pongo barked at him.

Now, dogs didn’t talk in the same sense that humans did, and one bark didn’t necessarily mean anything different from another. Usually, a bark was a ‘hey’ or a ‘look out’; something meant to attract attention. But their body language spoke volumes that Ruby understood quite well – hackles, ears, jowls and tail wagging, each capable of being analysed for meaning as critically as a Shakespeare sonnet. Pongo was, at the moment, telling Archie the dog equivalent of ‘Man up!’

Ruby hid a smile. So that was why Archie’s ears had turned bright red.

“Hey, Anita,” Ruby said, catching her a second before she walked off. “Um, would you want to grab a cup of coffee from Granny’s later? I know the cafeteria coffee’s not so great, and we’re gonna be pretty tired once we’re through here –”

She deliberately gestured to Archie when she said ‘we’, and Anita interpreted her meaning as such.

“That’d be lovely, thank you,” she said, giving Archie a smile. “Um, my lunch break is at eleven thirty; does that work or –”

“Yeah, that’d be great. Wouldn’t it, Archie?”

“Huh?”

Ruby eyeballed him fiercely; even Pongo whined.

“Yeah, that works,” said Archie after a brief pause. “We’ll, uh, we’ll see you then.”

“Great!” said Anita, smiling again. “See you later.”

Archie firmly stared at the ground until the hospital doors had shut behind Anita, then said, “Don’t you have work at ten?”

“Yup,” Ruby replied. “Be there at eleven thirty, okay?”

“But –”

Pongo barked again and thumped his tail against the pavement.

“Trust me,” Ruby insisted, winking.

As appealing as collapsing in bed sounded, the storm really had done a lot of damage. Mostly to the camp, and a bunch of power lines had been knocked down. Nonetheless, Emma knew she had to get back out there, so she went with Snow and Neal to Granny’s for another coffee (ignoring the grandmotherly look the old wolf gave her) and sat at the counter, reading the paper to try and wake up. Neal fell in beside her, reading the headlines over her shoulder.

“Anything interesting?”
"Not unless you want to buy a whole lot of handmade furniture."

"We could give it to the Punches as a late Christmas gift," he suggested with a boyish grin. Emma chuckled despite herself, the lack of sleeping making him much funnier than he really was. The smile disappeared shortly after Neal’s phone thrummed with the arrival of a text message, and he sighed heavily.

"Your boss?"

"Yeah. She’s trying to sort out the details for this meeting we’re supposed to have."

"Oh, that’s right; you’re going back to New York at the end of the week," said Snow, joining them at the end of the counter.

"Well, that was the plan," he replied, sighing again. "Now I’m thinking it’s probably not such a good idea."

"It’s only for a couple of days," said Emma.

"I still don’t think it’s a good idea."

Emma elbowed him in the ribs. "Your dad will be okay for a couple of days. You’ve been meaning to sort out your work situation for weeks now."

Given that Neal had mostly worked from home in New York anyway, his job hadn’t suffered that much from their sudden trip to Maine. But now that it was clear they had moved states, Neal needed to sort out the new situation with his work.

Emma figured things should be okay. They couldn’t exactly tell Neal’s boss that they’d had to travel to Maine where Snow White and Prince Charming – also Emma’s birth parents, by the way – lived with a bunch of other fairytale characters in a town called Storybrooke, break the Dark Curse for the second time and depose the Wicked Witch of the West. So they’d come up with a version of the truth – that Emma’s father had passed away suddenly and unexpectedly, her mother wasn’t able to live independently (failing to mention that the reason why was her eighteen-day-old son) and it was easier to move all three of them to the small town rather than flying in and out all the time. Hopefully, Neal’s work would let him fly in for meetings (he only had one every other month, with a few others dotted throughout the year), at least until they could make other arrangements.

"Yeah, I know," he agreed somberly. "Can I have the crossword?"

As Emma rifled through the paper for the right pages, the diner bell jingled and a chirpy voice asked, "Sheriff? May I have a word?"

"Mother Superior," Emma said, slightly startled by the Blue Fairy’s sudden appearance. "Of course."

Neal shifted uneasily in his seat. "I’ll, uh – ahem – see you at the camp," he murmured so only Emma could hear.

"Yeah, okay."

He left, the Blue Fairy throwing him a look Emma couldn’t quite read as he did. "What can I do for you?" she asked, waiting for the caffeine to kick in so she could think straight.

"Actually, I wanted to ask about the case of Mr van Dumpty," said Blue, folding her hands in front
of her.

“Oh. You heard about that.”

“It’s difficult to keep secrets in small towns.”

“Yeah, I know,” Emma agreed. It was one thing she did miss about New York – the anonymity. “I don’t know how much I can tell you. Legal processes, confidentiality, and all that –”

“I understand you called the Dark One in for questioning.”

Emma decided against asking Blue how she knew about that. “Yeah. Mulan found something of his near the scene of the crime. We just needed to clear some things up.”

“I see. Yet you’ve not made a conviction.”

“Not enough evidence to warrant one.”

“A personal artefact of an individual whose true intentions are questionable at best was found, as you say, near the scene of the crime,” said Blue in that overbearing motherly tone Emma hated. “I would think that, given the circumstances, it is hardly wise to allow the Dark One to walk around free.”

Emma rubbed her eyes. She’d not had nearly enough sleep to deal with this.

“Look, Mother Superior, with all due respect, all we’ve got is a bunch of unconnected evidence and a hunch. It’s not enough to arrest anybody, Rumplestiltskin included. Innocent until proven guilty – that’s how the law works in this world. And this is not my personal feelings getting in the way either, because I’m not running the investigation anymore. If you’ve got concerns, or anything that could help us find who really killed Dumpty, you need to take it up with Jack and Mulan.”

“I see.” Blue cleared her throat again, nodding slightly. “In that case, I apologise for interrupting. Good day, Sheriff Swan.”

“Good day, Mother Superior.”

Emma rubbed her eyes again, wondering how badly burnt she’d get if she jumped into the urn. Snow gave her a look.

“You gave the case over?”

“I had to – I can’t investigate my fiancé’s father.” Emma swallowed another mouthful of coffee, but Snow was still watching her, the slightest hint of a crease in her brow. God, she knew that look. “Mom, don’t start –”

“Emma, you have to admit, she does have a point. The evidence is not exactly stacked in Rumplestiltskin’s favour right now –”

“And there is still nothing to indicate that he did do it.”

Snow frowned. “Look, I know he’s Neal’s father and all –”

“Mom,” Emma snapped, leaning in closer. “That’s not it. Look, there’s one thing that this keeps coming back to for me, and that’s this – if he really did kill that guy,” she whispered, casting a quick glance around the diner for eavesdroppers, “then why was there a body at all?”
“He messed up?” Snow suggested.

“No,” Emma replied, shaking her head. “Rumplestiltskin is not that stupid.”

Snow blinked, looking as if something had just clicked for her. “What are you saying?” she asked in an undertone. “You think he’s being set up or something?”

Emma looked down at the dregs of her coffee. She really had not had enough sleep in the last week or so, even with three people working for her now. The honest answer was yes – she’d more or less convinced herself of the possibility the night of Rumplestiltskin’s questioning because it just did not add up at all – but she’d only confided in Belle and Neal so far because she needed someone to keep an eye on the man without arousing suspicion. The fewer people knew what Emma suspected, the better their chances of getting to the bottom of this – and that included her mother.

“I don’t know what to think,” Emma answered simply after a moment’s thought. “All I know is that there’s no proof either way. And I just think it’s smart to keep an open mind. For now, anyway.”

Snow didn’t exactly look convinced, but at least she didn’t ask any more questions.

“Why are we bothering to check if anybody’s home?” Killian snapped while he and Zelena hid in the hedges of the yard neighbouring the Crocodile’s. This was the so-called ‘distraction’ plan and frankly, Killian thought Faílinis had a death wish of his own. Or Zelena did, given that this plan was apparently her idea.

“Because if Rumplestiltskin has any advance warning at all, he’ll be able to stop the fire before it consumes the house,” Zelena explained. She was using a mirror to check the inside of the ugly pink monstrosity that the Crocodile called a house, and there was no sign of him or his pretty little maid. Not that Killian would have minded if the librarian was inside; Belle was attractive enough, and might have caught his fancy under different circumstances, but if she wanted to throw her lot in with the Crocodile then she was asking for trouble.

“I thought the goal was simply to distract him.”

“Oh, it is. But destroying his house is a vindictive bonus, wouldn’t you agree?”

Personally, Killian would have preferred to shut the Dark One in a cage and burn his house down around him, but since that probably wouldn’t work, this would have to do. Besides, he would suffer for it, and Killian had no objections to that.

It was rather an ugly house, anyway. He doubted anyone but Rumplestiltskin and his little maid would miss it.

Zelena shut the mirror and twisted her hands together, magic crackling around her until a small flame appeared in a pile of timber half a yard from the Crocodile’s house, far enough outside of the wards not to be detected. As Killian understood it, all Zelena had to do was sustain the fire magically until it was strong enough to burn by itself – the house’s protections would stop a magical fire, but not an ordinary one.

“You’d better get to town,” she said, her brow furrowed from concentration. “Five minutes, remember?”
As much as he wanted to stay to see the Crocodile’s house destroyed, Killian knew they were working within a time limit. So he started the count in his head and replied, “Got it.”

“Rumple. Take a look at this.”

Belle felt torn between her need to help uncover whatever Zelena was up to, and her need to solve the problem of the Hat and whatever was causing Rumple’s blackouts. But she knew she had seen that drawing of a mirror before Much had shown it to her. After half an hour of fruitless searching through the books in Rumple’s shop, she’d finally found it – a similar sketch of the same mirror in Hans’ journal, with the caption ‘Mirror of Shattered Sight’ written in the prince’s handwriting beneath.

“Looks like it’s the focal point of the whole curse,” said Rumple, sidling up next to her and reading Hans’ notes over her shoulder. “Hmm.”

“What?” Belle nudged him in the ribs when he didn’t respond.

“Oh, it’s just – just a peculiar choice of curse,” he mused, taking the book from her and reading some more. “He says that the spell infects its victims by a shard of glass from the mirror lodging in their eye.”

“What’s so peculiar about that?”

“It’s highly ineffective. You’d have to get close to the victim to curse them, and then if you want it to spread to multiple people, you’d somehow have to keep them from becoming wise –” Rumple broke off, giving her a nervous look.

Belle gave him a smile back. She knew he had a long history before he’d ever met her, and she didn’t judge him for it. “So what would Zelena and Jonathan want to use it for?”

“Well, the spell itself is quite a nightmare. It’s one of the few curses that True Love’s kiss can’t break, because a person is literally not capable of love when they’re under its effects. If they wanted to induce chaos on the town, it’d be a good way to do it. But the delivery system – I can’t see how that could possibly work.”

“What if there was another way to spread the curse?” Belle suggested. “One that Hans doesn’t know about?”

Rumple was quiet for a moment, mulling over that possibility. However, the idea was rudely interrupted by the sound of his phone ringing. He took it out of his pocket. ‘Unknown Number’ appeared on the screen, and Rumple looked at her with unease that he would not have let anybody else see. Belle clicked the speaker option for him.

“You really ought to protect your property better, dearie,” said an all-too-familiar voice, followed by a cackle that made Belle put a protective arm around Rumple’s middle. Even just the sound of her voice was enough to make his heart race – Belle could feel it through his jacket – and a shiver wracked both of their spines. “Or what’s left of it, at any rate!”

On instinct, Belle hugged Rumple a little closer. Zelena cackled down the line again, and then there was a click and a dial tone – she’d hung up. He was shaking, so badly – so much that Belle almost didn’t register what the Witch had actually said.
“Property?” she asked worriedly. “The house?”

A split second later, Rumple had both arms wrapped around her and teleported them out of the shop.

Instinct drove Rumplestiltskin, despite his panic, to drop them on the street rather than anywhere inside the house or the yard, which turned out to be a wise decision. The moment they landed, smoke billowed over them. They both coughed until Rumplestiltskin created a smoke-free bubble to protect them, and then he got his first look at the house.

He almost wished he hadn’t.

“Oh, no,” Belle murmured beside him, terror clear in her voice.

An intense, raging conflagration had almost completely enveloped the manor; the heat so extreme that he could feel it on his face even from fifty yards away, and he felt Belle take a step back. Once Rumplestiltskin had recovered enough to think clearly, he reached out with magic and felt for the threads of Zelena’s spell, surprised to find only the barest trace of her power near the base of the house. Under any other circumstances, he would have been impressed. All she had done was nurture the fire to a sustainable level, and then left it to burn on its own. The natural fire would have slipped past his wards with ease – why, why, had he not thought of fireproofing the manor before – then taken root in the house and done exactly what an inferno was designed to do. Simple, clever and entirely ruthless – exactly Zelena’s style.

It also meant that there was nothing for Rumplestiltskin to reverse. He could stop the fire, diffuse its destructive power, but the house itself was beyond saving.

As sirens wailed nearby, the firefighters coming to do their job, Belle turned her face into Rumplestiltskin’s chest and started to cry. He held her close, let her cry and tried not to do the same.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 17: When You Shut the World Out, in which Neal asks Henry for a favour before he leaves for New York, Emma has her first close-up encounter with a troll, and Rumple and Belle deal with everything that’s happened.

By the way, I don’t mean to sour the finale with what’s going on with Belle and Rumple right now; it’s just that we’re at a point of the story where things are going to get worse before they get better. And I promise it gets better!

Also: in light of the finale, and the fact that Emilie is now confirmed not to be returning as a series regular, I thought I’d assure you that I’m not leaving. I’ve got this story to finish up, as well as ‘Intervention’ and ‘The Grimm Affair’, plus ‘A Briefer History of Magic’ (which will be the third part of this series) and an untitled future fic that’ll probably take place 10/11 years after ‘Intervention’, because I really feel the need to write a Rumbelle family tale right now. So I’ll still be around for a while, and I’m gonna keep writing for as long as anybody wants to read it. Thanks again guys for
everything, all of your support, this has been so amazing!
Neal chucked his overnight bag into the back of the yellow bug, then leant against the car door and sighed. It had been two days since his father’s house burned down, and now Neal had to leave for New York. If it had been possible to reschedule, he would have; Neal did not think it was a good idea to leave his father alone right now. Yeah, Belle was with him – the two of them had moved into the apartment above the library until further notice – but she was going through her own share of trauma. Neal didn’t want to leave either of them on their own.

“Hey, Dad,” said Henry, coming down the stairs in his uniform.

“Hey, buddy. You off to school?”

“Yeah.” Henry said that like he meant, Of course, Dad; I’m not just wearing my uniform for the hell of it. “Guess I won’t see you before you leave.”

Neal pulled his son in for a hug. Henry was starting to get damned tall for his age – it must have been all the good food. He wished he had his father’s old walking stick so he could compare Henry’s height to his at the same age. “I’ll only be gone a few days. Catastrophes don’t happen that quickly, even in this town.”

Henry wrinkled his nose, unconvinced. “Bring me back a pizza?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Neal said, giving his son a friendly shake. “Oh. Actually, could you do me a favour?”

“Sure, Dad.”

“Could you keep an eye on your grandfather while I’m gone? Just … you know, make sure he’s coping okay? Belle, too?”

Despite the fatherly urge in him to keep Henry out of danger, Neal also felt the need to make sure his father was okay. Between the blackouts, the murder enquiry, Zelena’s escape, and now the house being burnt down, he knew Rumplestiltskin wasn’t one hundred percent – however much his old man worked to disguise it. Besides, Regina and Emma would be there if anything bad did happen. And as Neal had said himself, he would only be gone for a few days.

“I can do that,” said Henry with a smile.

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy – just check in on him, see how he’s doing –”

“Dad. I gotta get to school.”

“Oh. Right.” Neal gave his son one last squeeze and let him go. “So one order of pepperoni with extra cheese?”

“Yep!” Henry shouted with a wave. “See you Saturday, Dad!”
At least they’d had somewhere to go after Zelena burnt their house down, Belle figured as she collected a take-out order from Granny’s for breakfast and headed back to the library. In fact, it was almost ironic, given that she’d been contemplating renting the flat out to any one of the hundred or so displaced families still living in the tent city outside of town. The library caretaker’s apartment – the one Belle had lived in for a few weeks after the first curse broke – was a lot smaller than the Victorian manor, but at least it had a roof, and a bed. Overwhelmed with shock and exhaustion, she and Rumple had made their way there while the firefighters dealt with the last of the blaze. Belle honestly didn’t remember most of it. She knew she’d fallen asleep eventually. Rumple definitely hadn’t.

He hadn’t gone on any more midnight strolls; none that Belle knew about, anyway. Rumple hadn’t even left the flat in two days. He was rattled, and badly. Of course he was trying not to let it show – the man could do nothing else – but she knew. The nightmares were back, and both nights he’d woken up in a cold sweat. Belle didn’t know how to feel, still in a state of shock. Angry at Zelena. Wishing the witch would just leave her family well enough alone. Violated that the witch had picked the first safe place Belle had known after the curse broke, and come home with Rumplestiltskin for the first time in thirty years. Worried that Rumple was going to break down, again, just when they had started making some progress on recovering from what Zelena had done to both of them.

As if that witch hadn’t done enough already. Locking Rumple in a cage, controlling him, almost killing his own son right in front of him, and now possibly even framing him for murder. As much as Emma didn’t think Zelena was behind it, Belle wasn’t ready to dismiss the possibility. It was exactly the sort of thing a vindictive witch might attempt.

Maybe she’d take Archie up on his offer to talk after all. He’d all but ambushed her that morning, unsubtly assisted by Granny (truth be told, Belle was actually a little surprised that the older woman hadn’t locked her in the freezer with a roll of bubble wrap). She’d ducked out with the excuse that she didn’t want to leave Rumple alone for too long, but maybe if she invited Archie around for tea one day …?

“Hey. I’m back,” she called into the apartment after locking the door behind her. Rumple was on the sofa, making something with an old looming set he’d found buried in the closet. It was supposed to make a potholder, but he was well past that now. The length of wool was almost as long as Belle’s forearm and extending. Stress relief technique, similar to what he’d used to do with his spinning wheel. She just hoped it kept working.

He looked up at the sound of her voice, his face carefully blank. “That was fast,” he commented, glancing out of the window.

“Well, Granny’s is only a quarter of a mile away,” said Belle with a half-hearted attempt at a laugh. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” he replied automatically.

“Rumple.”

“Really,” he insisted, but it only lasted a few seconds. “So-so, I guess.”

He put the loom aside, took the hamburger she offered him and started to pick at it non-committedly. It had been a long few days. Belle had a few clothes left over from when she’d been living above the library, but Rumple looked slightly odd sitting there in the same slacks and shirt he’d been wearing for two days. The suit and vest had been covered in soot, so Belle dropped them off at the dry cleaners yesterday. She didn’t think he’d even noticed.
“Do you think you might be up to looking through the –” Belle swallowed heavily, almost unable to say it. “The house? A bit later?”

“I suppose we’ve got to do it eventually,” he said with a sigh, wistfully looking out of the window. Faint wisps of smoke from the wreckage were still visible on the skyline; Belle was just grateful that they couldn’t actually see the ruins from the library windows. She wasn’t sure she could’ve coped if they had.

Rumple had explained to her the night before that he could probably rebuild the house from magic, but restoring their belongings would depend on him remembering everything that had been there. He was a master strategist with an eye for incredible detail, but even he had his shortcomings. Most of their things were more or less gone.

Belle wasn’t sure she really cared about that, though. Things could be replaced. It was the violation of her safe place, her home that really drove a knife into her heart. She knew Rumple felt the same. The attack had exposed his vulnerability at the worst possible moment. And if there was one thing Belle knew Rumple hated, it was vulnerability.

“Are you?” he asked softly, startling her out of her thoughts. “Are you up to it?”

“I don’t know,” Belle admitted with a little shrug. “But you’re right, we have to do it sometime.”

Pick up, move on and keep fighting. That was all they could really do.

Emma headed to Granny’s after the lunch rush. The last two days she’d mostly been mopping up the last of the storm damage in the camp and helping the firefighters keep curious onlookers away from Gold’s house. Unfortunately, word seemed to have gotten around – on the quiet side, of course – that Rumplestiltskin had been questioned regarding Humpty Dumpty’s murder. Nobody wanted to confront the Dark One, not even over the body of a dead royal, but that didn’t mean there weren’t some souls braver than the rest who might try their luck and cause an even bigger mess.

The end result was that Emma hadn’t had the chance to follow up on Robin’s findings until now.

Anna was staying in room two with her fiancé and sister, according to Granny, so that was where Emma went. She knocked twice, hoping that Anna would be there. Thankfully, she was, and the bubbly redhead opened the door.

“Oh, hello, Sheriff,” said Anna in that unusually chirpy tone of hers.

“Hi, Anna. Can I come in?”

“Sure, sure. Would you like a cup of tea? I can’t really cook, but Kristoff makes a pretty nice brew –”

“That’s alright, I’m good,” Emma said, waving a hand. Three cups of coffee was enough caffeine for one morning.

“Hey, Emma,” greeted Kristoff, rising from the armchair.

“Hi, Kristoff – Whoa!”

Emma drew her gun as movement near the fireplace alerted her to the presence of a third person in
the room, only this one wasn’t human. It was three feet tall and made of solid rock dressed in moss – a rock troll.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?” Kristoff shouted, jumping between her and the troll.

“Stand aside!” Emma demanded. The troll had skirted behind the armchair to hide – those things could move a lot faster than they looked. “You’re in danger!”

“Yeah, from you!” said Kristoff, still trying to shield the troll.

“Emma! Emma, stop!” Anna cried, running in front of Kristoff with her arms outstretched. “It’s okay; this is Halli; she’s a friend of ours. I know she looks a little odd but that’s just because she’s a rock troll! Really, she’s not dangerous!”

“Impossible; they’d never work with her,” said Kristoff. “They’re my family!”

“Really, they are!” said Anna. “They found him as a boy, took him in and raised him and Sven – that’s his reindeer sort-of-pet, but their relationship is kinda weird – and that’s why he always eats with his hands and still washes in the river with his clothes on, even though I’ve told him it’s okay to leave his clothes with the washerwoman and wear something else for a few days–”

“I get the picture,” Emma interrupted quickly.

Anna stopped, red-faced, halfway through her sentence; she and Kristoff eyed the gun warily as the troll poked its head out from behind the armchair.

“Hans told me that the rock trolls are going to cast a curse over the whole town,” said Emma, watching the troll carefully. It looked innocent enough, and she knew Anna and Kristoff weren’t lying. “One called the Spell of Shattered Sight?”

“Never heard of it, and they’d never do something like that,” said Kristoff.

“Hans is a liar!” Anna exclaimed. “He came to my kingdom to try and kill my sister and take the throne for himself! He’s the bad guy!”

Emma looked at her. “Well, I didn’t know that part,” she admitted gently, thinking it through. She’d known that there was something to the story that Hans hadn’t told them – this certainly sounded like something he’d leave out. The troll blinked at her. Emma slowly lowered her gun, but kept it in a ready position just in case. “So what are they doing in Storybrooke, then?”

“They got swept up in the curse with the rest of us,” said Kristoff.

“And the fortress in the woods?”

“My kind is feared by humans,” said the little troll, emerging from its hiding place. It was female, Emma realised with surprise. “We have been hunted mercilessly in our homeland for generations until the only safe places remaining were the mountains and our underground fortresses. We thought we’d be safest in the woods until Kristoff and Anna could convince you that we are not a threat.”

“Emma, this is Halli,” said Anna. “Halli, this is Sheriff Emma Swan of Storybrooke.”

“It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance,” said the troll, giving an odd sort of bow. “I
apologise for our trespass upon your lands, but we had nowhere else to go.”

“Yeah, I can understand that.” Emma looked from the troll, to Anna and then to Kristoff, and back to Halli. “But that doesn’t explain why I saw Zelena at your stronghold, or why her sister –” she gestured to Anna – “was seen being held prisoner there.”

“We know about Elsa,” said Kristoff, giving Anna a look. “That’s why Halli’s here. She told us.”

Now Emma was really confused. “Wait, you mean to say that the rock trolls took Elsa captive, told you about it, and you’re fine with the whole situation?”

“Not exactly,” said Kristoff, moving to stand next to Anna. He put an arm around her shoulders. “I think maybe you should talk to Grand Pabbie.”

Most of Rumplestiltskin’s protection spells were still intact, he was glad to see. The fire had not spread to the cellar – he’d protected it separately from the rest of the house in the event of magical accidents, which did happen even when you were a two-hundred-year-old sorcerer – so everything in there was perfectly safe. That could wait for now, and he went to help Belle rummage through what remained of her library.

He’d had the foresight to individually fireproof each one of her books, a move which Belle had called paranoia, but she’d humoured him anyway. Many of them were precious volumes from her library in the Enchanted Forest, books that could never be replaced. Given that she’d set fire to the kitchen twice – and once while making toast – it had seemed prudent.

He still wanted to wring Zelena’s neck, or turn her into something particularly slimy at the first opportunity. The attack had been every bit as cruel as he could expect of her; and though he didn’t like to admit it, he felt exposed for it. The nightmares were back, so he wasn’t sleeping again – no midnight strolls, however, at least none that he knew about – and his body had come up with a new trick to torment him further. Tremors shook his hands and legs at odd moments, so Rumplestiltskin nearly tripped over a fallen beam on his way into what had been the sunroom. Thankfully, he was able to pass it off as a simple case of clumsiness – there was no need to make Belle more worried than she already was.

Intellectually, he knew he could rebuild the house with magic. It wouldn’t even be that difficult – he had the plans stored in a folder in the shop, along with that of every other building he owned in Storybrooke. But it would never be quite the same, and he couldn’t replicate their personal belongings. That would require him to remember everything that had been there in the first place, and it would still only be a creation of magic.

Belle was right: the best thing for them to do was salvage what could be salvaged, and move forward from there.

The downside to doing this during the day, however, was that curious eyes never seemed to stay away. Rumplestiltskin glared once at a dog-walker passing by with his Labrador, then did the same when Thomas Thomm – one of the junior reporters for the Storybrooke Mirror – showed up looking as though he wanted to ask some questions. After telling the young man rather sharply to stay away – the best he could manage while keeping his temper contained – Rumplestiltskin threw a glamour charm over the house to keep curious eyes away.

“Just ignore them,” Belle told him, taking his hand as they looked over the charred remains of the
bookshelves, their backs to the street where a few people were pretending not to pry, though they couldn’t see anything now. Unlike the volumes the shelves had housed, they hadn’t been protected from fire, so Belle’s library was now scattered all over the rubble. “Do you still just want to put everything in boxes?”

Rumplestiltskin nodded. “It’ll make things much easier to move when the time comes.”

“Okay. I’m alright here if you want to take a look through the basement.”

“It can wait until later. Everything down there is safe enough where it is.”

Belle gave his hand a squeeze before she went back to her searching, and Rumplestiltskin felt his shrivelled heart swell with love. He had no idea how she was coping with this as well as she was – how she was coping with anything as well as she was – and it was truly amazing. A testament to the strength that such a small person could contain within them.

“I’ll see what survived in the kitchen,” he told her.

Rumplestiltskin knew from experience that the oddest things could survive a fire, even a magical one. It seemed that Zelena’s only objective had been to destroy the house as thoroughly as possible, which hurt even worse than if she’d had other intentions. Was this payback for what he’d done to her in the shop? Probably. Zelena was vindictive like that.

Or was it somehow connected to her framing him for Humpty’s murder?

It was only after Emma’s private talk with Belle and his son – the one that neither of them seemed to be allowed to tell him about – that Rumplestiltskin had finally put the pieces together. Of course it was a frame job – there were too many coincidences for it not to be. Whether Zelena (or her friend) had seen him wandering around that night and taken advantage of the situation, or whether they had specifically planned it out, Rumplestiltskin didn’t know, but it – oddly – made him feel better. Before, he’d been convinced that he was losing his mind. Now there was another possibility. And it seemed that Emma had come to the same conclusion.

If she was right, that was.

Well, Miss Swan had made a very good point – if the Dark One had killed Humpty, why leave the evidence for someone to find? Rumplestiltskin snorted to himself while he found some mugs and cutlery that had survived the blaze. He’d spent centuries dealing with the darkness – he should have known from the beginning that it would not be so foolish as to leave a trail.

So that just left one question: what was Zelena up to?

Was she trying to get her hands on the dagger again? That was the most likely scenario, and a contingency he’d already taken care of. He’d fished the dagger out of the ruins the first night after the blaze, and it was now stored in his jacket pocket until he could find a safer place to put it.

No, she had to know it wouldn’t be that simple –

“Grandpa?” said a voice that made Rumplestiltskin start. Henry, still in his uniform, had appeared in the sea of debris. He jumped in shock too. “Sorry. I thought you’d heard me.”

“That’s alright, Henry,” said Rumplestiltskin, taking a breath. “Just lost in thought. Shouldn’t you be at school?”

“Just got out,” his grandson replied, holding up his watch to prove it. “Mom’s still at work and my
other mom’s gone to see Simba with Robin and Grandma Snow. So I thought I’d drop by and see how you’re doing.”

Rumplestiltskin smiled. “Your father asked you to keep an eye on me while he’s gone, didn’t he?”

He liked to think that Henry got his brains from his paternal side, but his ability to keep a secret came from his Charming genes. “Maybe,” the boy replied shiftily, grinning because he knew he’d been rumbled. “So what should I tell him?”

“I’m alright, Henry,” said Rumplestiltskin. Gods, the boy was just like his father at the same age. “I’m not about to pop off and turn some innocent villagers into snails, if that’s what Bae’s worried about.”

“Actually, he just wanted me to make sure you were okay,” Henry replied with a grin. “Are you? Really?”

“I’m fine,” said Rumplestiltskin, giving his grandson a smile in return. He was touched by his son and grandson’s concern. The tremors seemed to have stopped for the moment, so the statement was mostly true. “I appreciate the concern.”

“Well, you are my grandpa,” said Henry. Then his expression shifted, and he shrugged. “The only one I’ve got now, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Rumplestiltskin sighed. It was a shame – and he meant it honestly – that Charming had died the way he did. The shepherd prince had been a good man, perhaps a little too good, but he certainly wouldn’t have been Rumplestiltskin’s choice.

It also made him realise just how little time he’d ever actually spent with Bae’s son since the day they’d discovered the truth in Manhattan. There had always been something else to do – Belle’s memory wipe, the fear that Henry would be the boy the Seer prophesied as his undoing, then Neverland, then dying and being imprisoned by Zelena. All in all, Rumplestiltskin could think of maybe three proper conversations he’d had with his grandson, and now that Henry was here, he realised just how much he’d missed out on.

Like when had his grandson gotten so tall? Henry stood at Rumplestiltskin’s shoulder now – almost as tall as Belle.

“If you ever want to pop by the shop, Henry,” he found himself offering suddenly, “the door’s always open for you.”

“Really?” Henry grinned broadly. “Thanks, Grandpa. Is – is there anything I can do to help here?”

“You can give Belle a hand with the books,” said Rumplestiltskin. She’d probably be fine on her own, but it was the safest place to keep Henry out of trouble; from displaced magic and errant coals or unsafe substructures.

“Great,” said Henry. “It’s good to see you out and about, Grandpa.”

Rumplestiltskin smiled again as Henry went to help Belle. He really was a testament, both to his family’s genes and to Regina’s upbringing. Not a bad young man at all.

Zelena hid a smirk as she watched Rumplestiltskin talk with his weedy little grandson from the
safety of the old granny’s house. The old man was barely keeping it together. The tremors, the lapses of attention – his sanity was fraying. It was almost hilarious to watch.

“What were you about to tell me the other day? The thing about the Dark One’s eyes changing colour?” she asked her father, who was watching the proceedings with her. Faílinis had conjured the image of the ruins in a bowl of water – a much neater scrying spell than the one Zelena used to watch Regina through the floor of the Wizard’s house.

“You mean that?” Faílinis pointed to Rumplestiltskin, who was shaking again. The boy caught him before he collapsed, and the little maid appeared in the scene moments later. “It means that the Dark One is beginning to lose control.”

“Lose control? What does that mean?”

Faílinis ended the spell and scratched the back of his neck idly. “I’ve seen this happen before. Hundreds, hundreds of years ago, long before Rumplestiltskin’s time. It’s, uh, it’s what happens when the curse starts to consume its host. See, ‘Dark One’s Curse’ is a bit of a misnomer – it’s more like a parasite, an eons-old body of raw power that attaches itself to the most powerful magical being it can find. It’s older than the Fae Wars, maybe even older than the fairies themselves. I’ll, uh, I admit that I don’t know as much about it as I’d like, but I do know that the curse, as it is, gradually consumes all sense of humanity from its host. Their morality, their goodness, the ability to love or to feel empathy and compassion – it all eventually burns away, leaving a shell behind for the darkness to occupy. Most of them survived around twenty or thirty years before that happened. It’s a miracle that Rumplestiltskin has survived as long as he has.”

“But you think he won’t last much longer?” Her father nodded. Zelena had to admit, a part of her still fancied having Rumplestiltskin under her thumb once more. Being able to lord it over him, prove to him that he had chosen wrong, had been wonderfully exhilarating. But if he was just going to destroy himself in short order – “What’s going to happen to him?”

“Well, if the past is any indication, he’ll grow increasingly more paranoid, more unstable as he battles for control,” Faílinis reported as if it were nothing more significant than an interesting weather anomaly. “Then he’ll probably level half the town before he either self-destructs or somebody saves him the trouble and kills him. Fafnir slaughtered thousands in Arendelle before Siegfried was able to stop him, and Lilith was ten times worse.” He thought for a moment, then gave Zelena a look. “Best thing for you and me is to make sure we’re as far away as possible when that happens.”

“How long do you think he’s got?”

“It’s hard to tell; weeks, maybe months. His is something of a unique case.”

Zelena had a thought, and grinned wryly. “You’re not going to tell Hook about this, are you?”

“Of course not. If the Captain had any sense, he’d be on his way out of town right now,” Faílinis snorted. “But he wants a shot at his crocodile. It’s his gamble.”

“Fair enough.”

Faílinis was still looking at her strangely.

“What is it?” Zelena asked.

After a few seconds, he said, “Come with me. There’s something else you should know.”
It was odd how quickly a few sheets of canvas could start to look like a home, Regina thought as she sought out the right tent in the Pridelands quarter with Robin and Snow. The refugees had put up washing lines, community cooking areas, even a playground of sorts where she could see some young children kicking a ball. Then again, she supposed, a lot of them were probably used to the hardships, having come from far worse conditions than this.

Still, the sooner they got all of these people housed, the better.

Simba and Nala’s lodging was a blue four-sleeper with an awning adding an extra ten square feet of space. In that extra space, the king and queen of the Pridelands were seated on a rug with a map laid out between them, a skinny and greying red-haired man talking animatedly next to Simba. Another man, one who would not have looked out of place at a rodeo (as either a clown or the creature the cowboys were meant to wrangle) stood over a campfire stirring something in a cooking pot. The royals’ teenaged daughter – Kiara, if Regina remembered correctly – was hanging out some washing and waved as they approached.

“Princess,” Regina greeted formally, as did Snow.

“Your Majesties,” said Kiara, giving them a curtsy made awkward by the fact that she was balancing a washing basket on her hip.

“Oh, Regina! Snow, glad you could make it,” said Simba. “Good; you found the place.”

“It’s certainly coming along nicely,” Snow remarked. She had Jesse bundled up in his carrier, the three-week-old watching the Pridelander king somewhat blankly.

“We make do with what we can,” replied Nala. “Have a seat, won’t you?”

Regina had to admit that she felt rather humbled by the fact that Simba and Nala had chosen to live in a tent alongside the rest of their people. Granted, Pridelanders were nomadic by nature, spending most of their time on the road anyway, but it was something Regina could not see herself doing had she been given any other choice. Then again, the other Enchanted Forest royalty probably wouldn’t either. She sat on Nala’s left, with Robin beside her and Snow taking the spot next to the red-haired man (who Regina swore she had met before, but couldn’t remember his name for the life of her).

“So, what did you call us all the way out here for?” asked Snow.

“We’ve got a new scouting report,” said Simba, gesturing to the map. “As you know, I’ve had some of my people checking up on Richard and George’s activities for a while now –”

“Hey, Timon!” the big man called, only then realising that he was interrupting. “Oh, sorry. Can you come here for a second?”

Timon! Regina exclaimed internally, mentally slapping herself as the red-haired man got up. That was his name – and the other one was Pumbaa. They were Simba’s advisors, or something like that. Not royalty, not even nobility, but they were quite close to the family.

“Taste this,” Pumbaa said, holding out a wooden spoon damped with stew. Timon sniffed it sceptically.

“You didn’t put grubs in it, did you?”

“Oops.” When Timon looked exasperated, Pumbaa flashed a bright, white-toothed grin. “Kidding.”
Simba sighed heavily. “I get two dads, and they’re both jokers.”

“You said you had people checking up on Richard and George?” asked Robin, getting the conversation back on track.

“Oh, right. Sorry about the crudity of the map, by the way. It looks like they’ve branched out from that factory you found them in. Now they’ve taken over some of the warehouses near the dockyards, and a residential building closer to town as well.”

“Any idea how many troops we could be looking at?” Snow added.

“Five hundred at least,” said Nala. “Probably closer to six. And they still haven’t taken down those walls.”

“Where the hell are they getting them all?” asked Regina.

“There are a lot of people with not much else to do around here,” said Robin dryly. “Boredom will drive a man to a lot of things.”

“He’s right,” said Simba, clearing his throat. “There are a lot of cold and frightened people in town who are looking for somebody to lead them. Now, I’ll personally vouch for every single man and woman of the Pridelands, but there are plenty of others. Gauls and Southern Islanders, mostly, but some Dacians too. And if I were you, I wouldn’t count on any Carolingian you wouldn’t vouch for personally because a lot of them are favouring George.”

“Simba, what are you trying not to say?” Regina said, looking the former king in the eye. He shared a look with his wife, who cleared her throat.

“Look, Regina, if it comes down to it,” said Nala, “we’re willing to throw our lot in with you and Snow. But it would go a long way towards convincing others if we could assure them that this isn’t going to blow up into an all-out war.”

“We are not just going to roll over and let them take over this town,” snapped Regina.”

“We figured that,” said Simba. “What’s your plan of action, then?”

That, Regina didn’t have an answer to. She glanced at Robin, then at Snow, neither of whom looked much more confident.

“Well, we’re still trying to talk things out diplomatically,” Snow offered slowly. “So far, though, that’s been working about as well as you’d expect.”

Simba grunted huffily. “So what you’re saying is that this basically boils down to how open Richard is to negotiating?”

They all knew that they would never get the Gaulish king to the table; sadly, he was the type who worked things out by fighting, not talking. Weselton was a greedy bastard, George still bore a hefty grudge against Snow’s family, and it looked like Ernest was happy to follow in his big brother’s footsteps if it got him what he wanted.

“Yeah,” said Regina. “Pretty much.”

A second after Rumplestiltskin collapsed and Henry shouted for help, Belle was up and running.
Probably a dangerous thing to do on such unstable terrain, but then she’d never prided herself on her ability to think under pressure.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Rumple insisted over and over, though it was clear to anybody with eyes that he wasn’t. He was sweating, his hands were shaking and his legs didn’t seem to be doing what he wanted them to do. Belle crouched in front of him, watching it all happen without the faintest idea what to do.

“Grandpa?” Henry asked, looking as frightened as Belle felt.

“I’m alright, Henry.” Rumple gave his grandson a small smile and then tried to push himself into a sitting position, only to sway dangerously when he did. Belle caught him before he hit the ground.

“You are not fine,” she told him firmly, holding him by the shoulders. He looked about to protest, so she added in a whisper, “Don’t tell me that you are. You’re not.”

Rumple was stubborn, though. He reached out for the charred remains of the kitchen counter, pulled himself to it and leant against it. Even that simple movement was a lot, and he stayed there for a few moments breathing raggedly until he nodded slowly.

“Yeah, maybe,” he admitted in a small voice. He lifted a hand, wriggled his fingers experimentally – the tremors seemed to have stopped – and then wiped his brow with his pocket handkerchief. “Maybe it was a bit too much to come here today.”

“I think we’ve done enough for now,” said Belle. “Come on, let’s go home.”

“Let me just grab a few things from the shop first.”

“Rumple –”

Despite her protest, Rumple hauled himself painfully to his feet. She kept a hand on him at all times in case he fell again but it seemed that whatever it was had passed. Rumple leant against the counter, still unsteady, but upright. “It’s alright; I can manage a short trip to the shop.”

“Are you sure?”

Rumple gave her a little smile. “Henry, are you alright to get home by yourself?”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay, Grandpa,” Henry replied, though he still looked worried.

“Good. We’ll see you later then.” Rumple then offered his arm to Belle, and whisked them to town in a cloud of red smoke.

Teleportation had probably not been the best of ideas. Rumplestiltskin felt as if his legs had turned to iron casks and he reached for the counter to stop himself from collapsing again when he landed with Belle in the shopfront.

“I’m fine, sweetheart,” he insisted automatically, though he knew she was not fooled. He couldn’t even convince himself.

It had been the strangest thing. One second he had been fine, talking to Henry, and the next he had been on the floor. His legs wouldn’t work, his hands wouldn’t stop shaking and it was like a dense fog had fallen over his head, clouding his mind so that all brain activity went haywire. He had no
idea how long the episode had lasted either. He was just grateful that he’d thought to glamour the house, so the only witnesses had been Belle and Henry.

“You’re not fine, Rumple,” said Belle, which almost made him chuckle. “Talk to me; what happened?”

I don’t know.

I have absolutely no idea.

I think I’m falling apart.

“Heat, I think,” Rumple answered, mopping his still-sweaty brow with his handkerchief. “Can you – can you get me some water, please?”

Belle nodded. “Okay.”

The moment she let him go, the voices were back.

“You’re falling,” crooned Lilith, her voice soft and sultry that made Rumplestiltskin want to throw up. “Why don’t you just give in already?”

“He really thinks a coward can withstand the likes of us,” sneered Fafnir. “The fool just needs a push. I wonder how the little maid would taste, roasted on a spit –”

“Shut up,” Rumplestiltskin spat under his breath, though – to his shame – it came out as more of a whimper. “Just shut up.”

“Rumple! Rumple!”

Belle’s voice was frantic, cutting through the delirium. Rumplestiltskin realised she was shaking him, trying to get his attention, and he reached for her on instinct. Had he blacked out again? How long? Had she noticed –?

But that wasn’t what had startled her.

Cold wind gusting through the open door alerted Rumplestiltskin to the fact that there was something wrong in the shop. The door creaked in the breeze and ruffled a whole ream of paper that was strewn across the floor, the torn pieces fluttering about like snowflakes. When Rumplestiltskin turned, he realised that the till had been busted open, what little money that had been contained in it long gone, and the safe was hanging off its hinges.

“Oh, look at that,” said Fafnir gleefully. “Seems our resident kleptomaniac came back.”

“Again?” Belle murmured under her breath as Rumplestiltskin wandered around the counter in a daze, taking in the extent of the damage. It wasn’t so bad, nothing that couldn’t be fixed. He nudged the till half-heartedly as Belle reached for a shredded chunk of leather hide lying on the floor. “Hans’ journals. They destroyed them. Rumple –”

Whatever she had been about to say was buried in a cascade of broken glass as Rumplestiltskin overturned the display case, smashing the whole thing in one go. It wasn’t enough, though, so he grabbed a handy gentleman’s walking stick – one of a dozen or so he had sitting in a bin behind the counter – and swung it at the model ship sitting on the rack. He vaguely heard Belle calling his name amidst the chaos, but he couldn’t stop. He just needed to hit something.
After a while – he couldn’t tell how long – the burst of energy faded, and his prior weakness returned. Rumplestiltskin gently lowered himself to the floor before he collapsed, sweeping bits of broken glass out of his way. A moment later, Belle dropped down beside him.

“Did that make you feel better?” she asked.

He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. “No.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 18: Hell-Broth Boil and Bubble, in which Emma meets Grand Pabbie, Henry gets a job, and Rumple finds out who actually broke into his shop
Since the bug was overnighting in the Logan Airport parking lot, Emma called Jack and asked him to pick her up from the loft. She’d arranged to meet with Kristoff and whoever this ‘Grand Pabbie’ person was at five o’clock near the toll bridge (of course). She was yawning and halfway through trying to put her arm through the correct hole of her jacket when she met Jack on the street, leaning against his car and munching on a bacon sandwich.

“Granny obviously likes you,” said Jack, handing her a coffee that Emma downed gratefully, an action she immediately regretted when the hot liquid burnt her tongue.

“No, just knows me too well,” she spluttered. “Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. I remember those days all too well.”

“Bloody hell!” screeched a voice behind them. It was Punch, dressed up for an outing with a bowler hat tucked under his arm. “What the ****ing hell are you doing here, Sarge?”

“I’m a deputy now, Punch,” said Jack, “so if I hear you swearing in public again without asterisk substitution, I’m arresting you for offensive and threatening language.”

“Like I give a sh*t, ya g*t,” snapped Punch. Emma rubbed her ears to see if she was imagining that clicking noise he was making in the middle of the words, but apparently not. “How’s Madeleine?”

“She’s fine. Got a good gig taking snaps for the Mirror. What about your other half?”

“Got a spoon in the back of the head this morning. Not from me; we’re talking about training up the baby for the 2020 Olympic ladle-flinging team,” said Punch with a proud smile. “Listen, I’ll shout ya a beer sometime. Be good to catch up.”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you around.”

“See you later, Sarge. Sheriff.”

“You’re friends with them?” Emma asked Jack once Punch had crossed the street to the next block, whistling to himself with his hat wobbling on his head.

“Nah. I had some trouble with them in Rochedale,” said Jack, who was watching Punch disappear with a scowl on his face. “Actually, I arrested him once for threatening to set a crocodile on one of my constables. Would’ve kept him there too if my captain hadn’t been a greedy letch.”

“O-kay. Listen, could you explain something to me, then? What’s with all the – the –?” Emma gesticulated, looking for the right words.

“Senseless violence?” Jack offered.

“Yeah, let’s go with that.”

Jack scratched his ear idly. “Do you know what a nursery character is?”

“A what?”
“Well, you know how everyone in this town is from a fairytale? Well, a nursery character is something similar, but a bit more, uh – well, I guess the best way to describe it is that it’s like they’ve been hardwired for peculiar, repetitive behaviours. It’s not always violence – do you know Lucy Muffet, the first-grade teacher? She has arachnophobia and an obsession with cheese. Then there’s William Winkle, sleep-walking into the pub every night. Or Solomon Grundy, the cannery foreman who always works himself to death on Saturdays. It’s like the Enchanted Forest’s version of a behavioural disorder.”

“So they couldn’t stop it if they wanted to?” Emma asked.

Jack shrugged. “Maybe, but it’s not exactly that easy. Have you ever had a song stuck in your head that you can’t get rid of? Well, it’s a bit like that, but instead of a tune it’s actions.”

“That’s horrible!”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t. If I didn’t think they’d chew him to pieces, I’d ask Doctor Hopper to have a word with the Punches.”

Emma eyed Jack’s sandwich suspiciously. “Is this why you trim the fat off your bacon?”

He chuckled self-consciously. “You noticed that, huh?”

“So you’re actually ‘Jack Spratt, can eat no fat’?”

His smiled widened and he gave a little bow. “Guilty as charged, ma’am.”

Emma laughed and shook her head. Just when she thought Storybrooke couldn’t get any weirder. “So what do I do about the Punches?”

“Best just to leave them alone. I’ve known them going on ten years now, and they’re generally happy to keep their domestic oddities to themselves. Don’t worry about them throwing the baby down the stairs – Punch would sooner stick his own head in the oven than let anything happen to that kid. Although if you do get worried, you could probably threaten to get social services involved. There won’t be much that they can actually do, but it might get the Punches to calm down a bit.”

It wasn’t exactly what Emma wanted to hear. She liked it better when she had a bad guy to chase, or a drunken bozo to punch.

Jack seemed to know what she was thinking and grinned. “Come on. Let’s not keep the Troll King waiting.”

Snow left Jesse with Regina and Robin for the afternoon while she picked up Blue from the convent and then drove to Randolph Street. It still felt weird, being away from her son, even when she knew he was in the best possible care. On the other hand, it felt good to get back in the action. She’d spent far too much time cooped up lately.

Jesse would be fine, she reminded herself firmly as she rang the doorbell of Prince Ernest’s house. It was just for a couple of hours.

“Thanks for coming along,” Snow said while she and Blue waited for the person who’d shouted down to answer the door.
“You’re very welcome,” said Blue, giving a smile. “I agree; the situation is beginning to get out of hand.”

Snow nodded. The numbers growing to back King Richard had startled her, absolutely. At least six hundred and possibly more. As much as Snow wanted to believe that her fellow royals might see sense, she was beginning to agree with Robin – they couldn’t run the risk. Six hundred was plenty of manpower to do considerable damage.

Simba and Nala were right – they had to head it off before it got that far. So Snow opted to see if she could bring Ernest around. He was as stubborn as any prince, but he was reasonable. He also happened to own the loyalty of a majority of displaced soldiers, so if she could talk him down, Richard’s forces would be dealt a serious blow.

A moment later, Ernest opened the door, and Snow gave him a smile to start things off on a good foot. “Hi, Ernest.”

“Snow; Mother Superior,” he greeted formally. “Come on in.”

“Thanks,” said Snow. “Hopefully we can talk and get something sorted out.”

He murmured something Snow didn’t catch and led them into the living room. Thomas was there, lying on the rug and playing trains with Alexandra.

“Daddy, look!” the excited two-year-old exclaimed as she proudly balanced a doll on top of a toy train. “The princess is going to play!”

“Really? Where’s the princess; I can’t see her!”

Ernest cleared his throat. “Thomas, could you give us a minute, please?”

“Hmm?” asked Thomas, spotting Snow and Blue for the first time. “Oh, right! Uh, we’ll just be outside. Come on, Lexi.”

“So what exactly did you want to discuss?” said Ernest, brushing a bright yellow hair tie off the armchair so he could sit down. “Did you bring her here to tell me that the fairies are taking your side now?”

“I am here as an impartial third party,” Blue replied. “Fairies do not take sides.”

“Ernest, we know Richard and George have been building an army,” said Snow, taking a seat on the couch. She left room for Blue, but the head fairy chose to remain standing. “If they move against Regina, a lot of people could get hurt.”

“Well, there’s an easy way to resolve that,” said Ernest. “Tell Regina to step down.”

“Nobody else understands how the Land Without Magic’s legal system works as well as she does. We can’t afford to have weak leadership right now.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.”

“Ernest, please!”

“I’m sorry, Snow, but as much as you want to believe otherwise, Regina has not proven that she can be trusted.” Ernest shook his head and stood up to pace, rubbing the back of his neck and grunting. “Let’s put aside the fact that, until recently, she was known as the Evil Queen. In the last two
weeks, one person has been killed and another has gone missing. Both of them were royalty, and what is Regina doing about it?"

“It’s a murder investigation. Did you expect us to just magically solve the case?"

Ernest stopped pacing, something bubbling on the tip of his tongue. He flustered a moment, kept his temper in check and then said: “Snow, see it’s that – that little word right there – ‘Us’? That’s the problem. You keep telling us that we’re not in the Enchanted Forest anymore, but the only other choice you’re giving me is to roll over and cede to your authority. I apologise for my bluntness, but not all of us agree with the way you want to run things. The Evil Queen – fine, the former Evil Queen is sitting in the mayor’s office; the Dark One has, for some reason, been let out of his cage; there’s a dangerous criminal haunting the sheriff’s station, and a wolf girl is running roughshod over the town. Now I’m not saying that I would hang anyone for any of that, but some of us would like a say in what’s actually going on here.”

“Ernest, this cannot turn into a power struggle,” Snow pleaded. “Too many people will get hurt.”

He sighed and rubbed his neck again. “I’m sorry, Snow. I don’t think that there’s anything I can do.”

The meeting place was half a mile from the toll bridge where Emma and Jack found Kristoff waiting for them, and miles away from the ice fortress. That was red flag number one in Emma’s opinion, the fact that this Grand Pabbie didn’t want to have this conversation on the trolls’ home turf.

“Sheriff Emma Swan, Deputy Jack Spratt,” Kristoff introduced when the three of them got to what looked like an empty clearing, “meet Grand Pabbie.”

The clearing still looked empty. “Uh, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Emma, looking around and feeling like a complete idiot.

“He’s over there.” Kristoff pointed in the opposite direction, to a mossy grey rock, which looked exactly like any other rock Emma had seen in her life. Then it started to shake of its own accord until a head popped out from the top, and the thing in front of her became a real-life, and really ugly, Smurf.

Bat-like ears protruded from the sides of Grand Pabbie’s face, surprisingly floppy for something that was made of stone. His eyes were green, wide and blinking and he seemed to be regarding her with the same amount of interest as she did him. He had on clothes, of a sort anyway, that looked as though they were made of rabbit skins, and a grass necklace ringing his neck. With a jolt, Emma realised that he was the same troll she had seen talking to Jonathan and Zelena.

“How do you do, Sheriff Emma Swan?” asked Grand Pabbie in a deep, gravelly tone that sounded like an echo in a deep cave. He bowed stiffly and then gestured to the rocks around him, like he was inviting them to take a seat. Emma hoped the rocks weren’t more trolls, and sat down with Jack between her and Kristoff.

“Just ‘Emma’ is fine, thank you,” she said, to which the troll nodded politely. “So you’re, uh, you’re Grand Pabbie?”

“I am. It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, daughter of Snow White.”
“You know my mother?” Emma asked with surprise.

“By reputation only,” Grand Pabbie assured. “I know her family, but more importantly, I know of you. Many came back after the First Dark Curse with tales of the Saviour, the great hero who overthrew the Evil Queen, killed the Queen of Hearts and destroyed the demon Peter Pan. Quite impressive for one so young.”

“Well, that wasn’t just me,” said Emma. “All I really did was break a curse.”

“Grand Pabbie, I was hoping you could explain what’s going on,” said Kristoff. “They’ve got the wrong idea – they think you’re working with the Wicked Witch.”

“To be fair, it was a logical conclusion,” muttered Jack.

“Based on the evidence at hand, of course,” said Grand Pabbie, folding his stony hands and nodding. “I understand. Humans are wont to assuming the truth when it comes to those not of their own kind.”

Emma wasn’t sure whether to feel offended or not. “In our defence, you didn’t give us much of a reason to trust you.”

“And in our defence, we gave you no reason to regard us with suspicion in the first place,” Grand Pabbie returned. “Hiding in the mountains is what we do, Sheriff Swan. Our kind is hated by yours; hunted, persecuted for generations. This world is no different from the one we left behind. We feared what would happen if we made our presence known. If not for the boy who seems determined to see my people crushed to dust under the boots of human soldiers, you would never have known we were here.”

“Hans,” said Emma. Grand Pabbie nodded. “That’s a pretty big grudge he’s holding; what happened between you two?”

“Years ago, Hans sought the throne of Arendelle for his own,” explained the old troll. “His plans were foiled by the young princess he attempted to fool, and ever since he has been trying to claim that his actions were not his own. Blaming the incident on us was simple and easy.”

“Are you saying you’re just the scapegoat?”

“I suppose that is the phrase, yes.”

“And the Spell of Shattered Sight?”

Grand Pabbie frowned and gave a look of what Emma supposed was meant to be confusion. “My apologies, Sheriff Swan, but I’m afraid I do not know what you are talking about.”

“Hans told me that you’re gonna cast some curse over the town.”

“Presumably the curse is a fabrication of his, meant to give validity to his tall tale about the events that took place in Arendelle.”

Emma had Much’s drawing of the mirror in her pocket, but decided to leave it for now. She had a few more questions before she confessed to snooping.

“What about Zelena?”

“Ah, of course.” Grand Pabbie sighed, which sounded more like a cascade of falling gravel when it
“She approached us some time ago, seeking assistance with some grand plan she has to curse the town and kill the Dark One. When I told her that the trolls would not help, Jonathan held our young ones to ransom to force us to help. We have power of our own, but not enough to stand up to ones such as them. We had no choice. We acquiesced for the sake of our young.”

“Okay, but why did you kidnap Elsa then?”

“We did not kidnap her; the Witch did. She requires Elsa’s powers as a component of her plan, and has… requested that we keep her contained until she has finished her work.” Grand Pabbie looked to Kristoff. “I assure you that she will not be harmed; be it on my head if she is. We simply have not had the opportunity to free her from the Witch.”

“So you’re saying that you’re working behind Zelena’s back, then?” said Emma.

Grand Pabbie nodded again. “We are attempting to, yes. We do not wish for anybody in this town to be harmed, Sheriff. All we want is to live in peace.”

“So why didn’t you come looking for help before?” Emma asked. “We could’ve helped you capture Zelena; we could still do that now.”

“You have to understand, Sheriff, that humans regard us as an enemy,” he said. “Not just Prince Hans, but the royals of many lands and their subjects as well. And, frankly, we were not sure whether to trust you. Saviour or not, you do seem to be rather friendly with the Evil Queen and the Dark One.”

“They’ve changed,” she insisted. “I trust them.”

“Yeah, well,” said Kristoff, running a hand up the back of his head. “There are a lot of people who don’t see it, Emma.”

“We are willing to help you against the Witch,” said Grand Pabbie. “Please, do not believe Hans’ lies. We are a peaceful people who only wish to be left alone.”

He stared at her, eyes wide and yearning in a way that made Emma bite her cheek. Her head was starting to hurt from the load of information.

“Yeah, okay,” she finally murmured, more because she needed time to think than because she believed him. Grand Pabbie wasn’t human, which made him hard to read, but she still thought he was lying about something.

“I need to get back to my family before Zelena finds out that I’ve spoken to you,” said Grand Pabbie. “If there is any way that we can help you, give word to Kristoff and Anna. They will always know how to find us.”

“Okay. Thanks; we’ll be in touch.”

Grand Pabbie bowed one more time, then rolled himself into a rock that barrelled up the hill at a speed that would impress a professional car racer. The troll was gone in moments, leaving behind a trail of cracked and broken foliage. Kristoff stood up and cleared his throat.

“Well, Sheriff. Heard enough?”

“For now, I guess,” Emma said as she got to her feet. “Give me a day; this is a lot to process.”
“Yeah, I get it,” Kristoff agreed with a chuckle. “They’re certainly different to humans, aren’t they?”

That hadn’t been what Emma meant, but she agreed with him nonetheless. The three of them walked back to the toll bridge, Jack and Kristoff chatting about the trolls like a professor and a curious onlooker while Emma thought.

Grand Pabbie hadn’t told her the whole story, she was sure of it. But then neither had Hans, and she didn’t know which of them to believe.

Her head was really starting to hurt.

“I used to call this the jiggle when Roland was little,” said Robin as he gently bounced Jesse in his arms. The boy had finally drifted off to sleep about ten minutes ago but stirred every time Robin stopped rocking him. Though his arm was starting to hurt, Robin kept it up. A sleeping baby was the best baby. And it didn’t hurt that Jesse was bloody adorable. He missed holding a baby. “I remember when he was about four or five months old, the only way Marian and I could get him down was to do laps around the camp.”

“I used to put Henry in the car,” said Regina. She was in the bedroom, taking advantage of Snow’s absence to do a spot of cleaning for her. Emma had taken care of the dishes, and Regina set the broom to work sweeping the floor while she folded the laundry. “I’d have to drive him all around-and-round-and-round the block at three in the morning.”

“That sounds like fun,” Robin chuckled. Jesse stretched in his sleep, reaching out for Robin’s chin with one pudgy little fist.

He was going to look just like David one day, Robin realised with a pang. Snow’s eyes, but even with the layers of baby fat it was obvious he had David’s chin, nose and brow.

“I wonder if he’ll stay blonde,” Robin mused, the wisps of Jesse’s downy fluff fluttering as he bounced. “My little brother had black hair until he was seven, then it went ginger.”

Regina walked over with a recently-cleaned burping cloth and wiped a spot of drool off Robin’s hoodie. “I don’t know; Henry’s hair has always been the same colour.”

Robin chuckled, playing wiggling one of Jesse’s tiny stockinged feet. “I have to admit, they drive me nuts but I miss having a baby around. Roland’s just growing up too fast.”

“Yeah,” Regina murmured, looking down at her godson with love. “So do I. I love Henry like nothing else, but he’s growing up so fast. It seems like just yesterday that I picked him up from the adoption agency.”

He watched her thoughtfully as she went back to folding the towels, then glanced back down at Jesse.

“Have – have you ever thought about having another one?” he asked slowly.

In the seven months that they had been together, Robin hadn’t doubted for one second that he loved this woman, insane as the thought was. He’d never really imagined falling in love again after Marian died, but then Regina had – rather literally – come barging into his life and it had all snowballed from there. After breaking her sleeping curse, they hadn’t had much of a chance to talk
about their future. The need to solve the problem of the Wicked Witch, and come up with an alternative way to reach the Land Without Magic that didn’t result in David’s death, had always hung over any conversation like that. And after David died, it just hadn’t seemed appropriate to bring it up.

But that didn’t mean Robin couldn’t imagine marrying her, if she would have him, and maybe welcoming a little baby of their own.

“Oh,” Regina said stiffly, frozen in the action of folding somebody’s socks. “You’ve, uh, you’ve thought about stuff like that?”

“Well, haven’t you?” Robin asked, suddenly feeling self-conscious. He didn’t want to rush into anything Regina wasn’t ready for – after all, her last marriage had been the definition of a disaster – but surely she had some idea of where she wanted to take their relationship.

“Of course I have,” she said with a small laugh. “Just, uh, maybe not quite that far.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to –”

“No, no, I – I’m glad,” she added quickly, turning to face him. “It’s just – well, I’m happy with things the way they are. For now, anyway. Aren’t you?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

“Well, we’ve got time. Plus, having my batshit crazy sister running around town does put a bit of a dampener on things like that. If she worked so hard to get her hands on him,” Regina said, pointing to Jesse, “think how desperate she would be to get any baby of ours.”

Robin nodded in agreement. He hadn’t considered that. “True.”

She smiled. “Why rush? We’ve got time. Once Zelena’s back under lock and key.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He still had the oddest feeling that he had said something wrong, however.

For the second time in as many weeks, Rumplestiltskin was cleaning his shop. He could have fixed it all in a few seconds with a wave of his hand, but the feeling of doing something tactile helped him to calm down. He started with the glass on the floor, as that was the easiest to manage. Sweeping, as mundane as it was, was strangely therapeutic and he didn’t have to think about it, freeing up his mind to work on other things. The Dark Ones chatted away in the darkest corners, but he ignored them.

Step one was to figure out how to prove that Zelena – or more likely her friend, whoever this Jonathan person was – had tried to frame him for murder. Presumably, she wanted to get the dagger back. Maybe she thought that if it looked like he was too dangerous to walk free in Storybrooke, the heroes would be convinced to lock him up again and she could search for the knife without his interference. Well, if that was her plan, she had grossly underestimated Emma Swan’s intelligence – which, if Rumplestiltskin was honest, he had done himself.

He wasn’t so sure what to do with the information that Emma didn’t think he was responsible for the murder. He would have thought she’d come barging into the shop the moment any evidence
arose that implicated him, demand an explanation and possibly even threaten to arrest him. But no, she was using her head instead of her Charming brawn, and thinking it through. He suppressed a smile, suddenly feeling strangely proud of his future daughter-in-law.

Step two was to get the Witch back behind bars, out of town for good, or just kill her. Rumplestiltskin didn’t think anybody would truly mind if he went for the third option, not after the stunts Zelena had pulled.

Step three was to permanently restrain the darkness and rid himself of the dagger. That part he felt rather good about. Half of his previous worry had been over the fact that he’d thought he was spinning out of control – but now he knew that somebody else had been pulling the strings all along and, more importantly, he had the scissors to cut them. He could stop the Witch before she hurt anybody else, cleave himself from the dagger and ensure that nobody could ever control him again.

And then he could ask Belle to marry him.

The ring had been burning a hole in his pocket for over a week now. He took it out to have a look at, setting the broom to continue sweeping by itself. The rose gold glinted in the light, a faint reddish glow that only Rumplestiltskin’s trained eyes could see indicating the layers of magic with which he had imbued the metal. To protect her from the many enemies he still had, the trouble she would surely continue to find herself in – because Belle was too heroic to ever be anything but what she was – and from himself. Just in case. In truth, there was nothing stopping him from giving to it her now. It would certainly work fine against Zelena and Master Jonathan.

But he still continued to talk himself out of it. Not because he had any doubt whatsoever that he loved her, or that she loved him. They had been through far too much for even his most paranoid self to believe that. Nor was he afraid of making such a commitment – he had already dedicated himself to her in every way imaginable except for the one that mattered most to the rest of the world. He’d willingly give her his heart to hold in her hand and know that she’d treat it well in a way he’d trust of no-one else save Baelfire. But cowardice was a difficult habit to shake, and a large part of Rumplestiltskin still cringed at the thought of shackling somebody as pure-hearted as Belle to somebody as dark as himself.

She’s already done that all by herself, he reminded himself firmly. If Belle wanted to walk away, she would have done it long ago. Hell, he’d given her plenty of reason to do so, and plenty of opportunity. But the fact he kept coming back to was the fact that Zelena had never prevented her once from leaving the Dark Castle the year they had been imprisoned. And Belle had known it. The Witch’s monkeys may have stopped her if she’d tried, but she never even attempted to escape. Belle had chosen to stay and endure torture. For him.

She deserved better than him, he knew that. She also deserved better than to wait for him to scrape up the courage to ask.

He could do this.

The door opened.

Rumplestiltskin just managed to keep himself from shouting in shock or attacking the visitor on instinct, instead directing the magic crackling in his fingers to the broom, which trembled and then collapsed on the floor. Thankfully, it was only Henry.

“What’cha up to, Grandpa?” Henry asked as he shut the door, giving Rumplestiltskin a wide grin that reminded him painfully of Bae at the same age.
“Hey, Henry. You’re still checking up on me, are you?”

His grandson shrugged. “What happened?”

“I had a little magical accident. Sadly, my front counter got in the way,” said Rumplestiltskin, grinning in return. “How are you?”

“Okay. I got my science assignment finished.” Henry sighed. “Mr Crane won’t let me use real fire, but I think I got it to work.”

Rumplestiltskin chuckled. So his ‘nutty scientist’ genes, as Baelfire put it, had obviously skipped a generation.

“What about you?” Henry asked, suddenly turning seriously. “I mean, after you, you know – earlier –”

“It was just a small fainting spell, Henry. I was tired and a bit dehydrated. That’s all, I promise.”

Henry frowned curiously. “Dark Ones can get dehydrated?”

“Apparently.”

“What’s that?” Henry asked suddenly, pointing to his hand. With a jolt, Rumplestiltskin realised he was still holding the ring. As he stammered, Henry’s eyes widened. “Is that for Belle? You’re gonna ask her to marry you!”

Rumplestiltskin’s cowardly instinct reared its ugly head, fogging his brain, and he almost vanished the jewellery. Hiding it was easy, and the urge to just deny that Henry ever saw anything was overwhelming. But he squashed it down at the last second and settled for a chortle. “And if I am?”

Henry looked like he might actually squeal with delight. “That’s awesome, Grandpa! When are you gonna do it?”

“I, uh, hadn’t actually decided yet.” Rumplestiltskin swallowed. His stomach was already doing loops, and all he’d done was talk about popping the question.

“She’ll say yes, Grandpa,” Henry replied confidently, almost as if he were reading Rumplestiltskin’s mind. “You guys are True Love. Why wouldn’t she say yes? What are you worried about?”

His paranoia could provide a dozen answers to that question, none of which was particularly substantial when he actually thought about it.

“Life’s not always as easy as your storybooks make it look,” he said slowly and regretfully. “Just because you’ve found True Love, it doesn’t guarantee a happy ending.”

“It definitely won’t if you don’t fight for it,” replied the wiser-than-his-years young man. “Grandpa, I’ve seen you guys together. It’s obvious to everyone what you mean to each other. She’ll say yes.”

Rumplestiltskin chuckled self-deprecatingly. “Well, I hope you’re right.”

“Of course I am. You’ve got this, Grandpa. I know it.”

Henry’s brown eyes – exactly the same shade of brown as Bae’s – shone with such confidence that the cutting and self-critical reply Rumplestiltskin had prepared died in his throat. Instead he smiled.
“Well, you did say the shop door was always open,” Henry said with a little laugh, folding his arms across the repaired beams of the display case. “So, I uh, I wanted to know if, uh, maybe I could ask you some stuff about – well, like what it was like back in the Enchanted Forest. I mean, you know, you’re my grandpa and all but I don’t really know you. Except for what the book says.”

Rumplestiltskin nodded. “I see. Well, was there anything in particular you wanted to ask about?”

“I don’t know. Were there any stories you could tell me?”

“Quite a number, actually. We’d be here for a long time if I was to tell you them all.” Rumplestiltskin thought for a moment. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll make you a deal.”

“A deal?” Henry repeated, suddenly looking interested.

“Yes. I could do with a hand around here. How would you feel about a job? I could give you a few hours on Saturdays and maybe an afternoon or two a week after school. In return, I’ll regale you with the story of your other grandfather.”

“Really?” Henry grinned broadly again, clearly liking the idea. “That’d be awesome! Can I start today?”

“Why not? You can start by sweeping the floor,” Rumplestiltskin said, picking up the broom and handing it to him. “I would have to institute two ground rules, however.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t go in the back room unsupervised, and don’t touch anything without asking first. Just in case.”

“’Cause accidents happen, right?” Henry grinned, looking around at the mess.

Anyone else would have been snapped at for smirking like that, but his grandson simply got a glare. “Precisely,” Rumplestiltskin agreed, giving Henry’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“Here you go,” said Granny, dropping a bowl of soup and a bread roll down on the counter in front of Belle. She looked up from an advanced magical textbook; Granny stared stubbornly back.

“All I ordered was an iced tea.”

“I’m making sure you eat something, girl,” snapped the elderly woman, who seemed to think that Belle was starving if she didn’t see her eating in person. “You spend so much time cooped up in that library. It’s not healthy.”

“Granny, we’re fine,” Belle assured, deliberately using the plural. Granny wasn’t convinced. Nobody ever was. To assuage the old woman’s fears, Belle put the book down, tore a chunk off the bread and put it in her mouth. “Hmm?”

Granny shook her head, unamused. “Very funny,” she grumbled, but at least she left Belle alone to her meal and went to take someone else’s order.
Belle chewed the bread half-heartedly, contemplating the soup. It smelt delicious, but she didn’t know how much she felt like eating right now. Then again, she hadn’t eaten since breakfast, so she should probably try to get something down. She put the book aside and dropped the spoon into the broth.

“Hey, Belle,” said a voice beside her, belonging to a smiling redhead. It was Hans.

“Hey,” she said, giving him a smile in return. “What are you doing here?”

He held up a take-out bag. “Picking up dinner. Actually, while I’ve got you –” Hans pulled out a stool and sat down. “I, uh, I heard about the fire. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Yeah. Hmm.” Belle shrugged unenthusiastically. “Well, it happens. We’re okay.”

“You’re sure?” Hans asked, giving her exactly the same look that Ruby had given her when she walked in the diner.

Belle returned it with a look of her own. “Don’t you start. I’ve already got half the town trying to convince me that I’m not eating enough.”

“You’ve got a lot of people who care about you,” he said wistfully, almost as if he were talking to himself. He snapped out of it almost before Belle noticed, and added, “But you’re okay?”

“Yeah. Coping. I guess.”

That was when Belle remembered that Hans’ journals had been destroyed, and she started to tell him, but the diner door burst open – quite literally – and a gust of February air blew through Belle’s thin cardigan. The culprit was a red-haired woman Belle didn’t recognise, with stormy eyes that locked onto Hans. Belle felt the hair prick up on the back of her neck. It was obvious Hans knew her, and it was not friendly.

“Anna –?”

Before Hans could say anything more, Anna strode straight up to him – taking awfully long strides for somebody so small – and slapped him across the face. All of the frozen bodies in the diner jumped, including Belle, who felt the need to step in but couldn’t make her legs work.

“You foul little – you – you worm!” Anna shouted for all of Main Street to hear as Hans cringed away from her. “Why can’t you just leave us alone?! It wasn’t enough that you had to try and kill my sister – now you have to try and turn the whole town against my friends? They weren’t doing anything you said that they were and now Kristoff and I have to clean up your mess! Again! Just get out of my life and leave us all alone!”

And with that, Anna turned on her heels and was gone as quickly as she came, slamming the door and leaving a gobsmacked diner to stare at it.

“Hans?” Belle finally managed to murmur once she remembered how words worked, but he didn’t seem to hear her. He was too busy staring after Anna, looking as if he might cry. “Hans.”

“What? Oh.” He jolted at her touch, his cheek quickly reddening. “Sorry.”

“What just happened?”

“Nothing,” he replied automatically, sliding off the stool and not looking at her. “I’m sorry; I should go.”
“Wait – but what –?”

He was gone, letting the door slam behind him. Belle stared after him. So did everyone else in the diner.

What had just happened?

“Where are you taking me?”

For some reason her father had made her walk several miles through the freezing underground labyrinth and wouldn’t say why. Zelena was almost tempted to shake answers out of him, except that she had learnt the hard way that Faílinis had a flair for dramatics. He’d talk when he was ready.

“I’ve been keeping a few things safe down here.” He set a glowing green orb to bob just above his head while he knelt and uncovered a hole in the floor. Zelena leant over to get a better look. “I didn’t want Rheul Ghorm to find out that I still have these.”

It was hard to see in the emerald light. The first object was a box similar to the ones Regina used to keep her hearts in. Faílinis handed it to her, along with a heavy lead key to open it with. The second object was long, thin and wrapped in cloth that smelt like sheepskin. A sword.

“Hauteclare was the sword of Olivier de Vienne,” he said as he unwrapped the sword and held it up to the light. It was old, perhaps centuries, and stank of sheep and magic. “My father killed him at the Battle of Roncevaux Pass, and gave me this before being sent into exile.”

“And this?” Zelena asked, holding up the box.

“It belonged to your grandmother,” said Faílinis with a smile. “Open it.”

She did; the key slid into place with a thunk, and it unlocked with ease. Inside was an emerald the size of Zelena’s fist mounted onto a silver necklace. Zelena took it out and gently laid the box on the floor; the jewellery was somewhat gaudy, extremely old-fashioned and the sort of thing that the Evil Queen might have worn.

But her grandmother’s –

“May I?” Faílinis asked. He fixed the clasp around her neck and then stood back to admire her. “Beautiful.”

“I’ve never had a family heirloom before,” Zelena murmured, touching the emerald. It thrummed with power and gave her a little jolt.

“She used it to store a wealth of reserve power,” said Faílinis. “It’s protected with blood magic, but, ha, shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

Zelena chuckled and touched the emerald again. This time it didn’t jolt her, and warmed next to her skin.

“There’s one more thing I haven’t told you,” her father continued. “One more thing I have to do before I can free Damhsa from her prison. Kill the Guardian.”

“Who?”
“The last descendants of Fionn MacCumhail.” Faílinis paused for a moment. “See, what I didn’t tell you is when an *agape* child is close to death, they can choose to either let their power die with them, or pass it on to an heir. When Fionn died, he entrusted the power of the White Fairy to his grandson. Oscar did the same to his son, and from there it has carried on down the generations. The White Fairy has never truly died. And fairykind cannot reclaim Misthaven while the Guardian lives.”

He stopped to watch the light for a moment. “Three hundred years ago, I believed I’d found the last of Fionn’s descendants. A princess named Aoife, who’d fled her homeland to birth her bastard son in southern Gaul. I killed the boy but it seems the family is more tenacious than I’d predicted. It’s taken me this long to track down the last of them.”

“To Storybrooke,” said Zelena.

“Fionn swore that no fairy would rule Misthaven for as long as his family lived,” Faílinis said with a nod. “So I intend to see his line finished if it’s the last thing I do.”

He was going to have to teach Henry how to sweep, Rumplestiltskin realised as he tipped the last of the dirt into the dustbin. The floor was immaculate where it was visible, the debris having been swept underneath the display counters. He’d gotten that from the other side of the family, Rumplestiltskin thought with a grumble.

“*Cute little boy,*” crooned Lilith.

“Aye. I’d like to –”

Rumplestiltskin didn’t wait to hear what Zoso fancied doing to his grandson, and gave his predecessor a forceful shove with an imaginary mallet. It wouldn’t hold for long, however, and he desperately needed his mind clear.

Sitting on the recently-fixed front counter was a slime-green potion still steaming from the cauldron. Rumplestiltskin picked it up and unstoppered the vial, watching the gloop rise and fall inside the crystal. Swallowing a sudden wave of guilt, he took a breath and downed the whole potion in one go.

It tasted like absinthe and had the consistency of a milkshake. Rumplestiltskin reached out for the counter to steady himself as the poppy serum hit, making him sway and see glowing fish swimming across the back wall. It took a few seconds to pass, according to the clock ticking away behind an open-mouthed trout, but when it did, Rumplestiltskin let out a sigh of relief. The Dark Ones were no longer hammering on his mental walls. For the first time in over a year, he let his defences drop fully, the potion having created a barrier around his mind that the darkness couldn’t penetrate. Without the need to protect his mind anymore, Rumplestiltskin could suddenly think clearly.

He blinked, taking in the state of his shop with new eyes. The windows needed a clean, the shelves a good dusting and he noticed that the filing cabinet was out of order – the ‘A-J’ tray was beneath the ‘K-P’ one for some reason. He’d need to fix that, but first he had one other thing to repair.

He shut his eyes and reached out for the strands of his protection spells. He had specifically warded the shop against Zelena after the last time she had paid him a visit. Exactly how she had broken through them, he wasn’t sure – though it undoubtedly had something to do with Master
Jonathan, whoever he was – but when he scanned the spells for damage, there was nothing to find.

He ran it again, in case he had missed something.

Nothing.

*So it wasn't Zelena?*

Rumplestiltskin snapped his eyes open. There was no way that Zelena or her friend would not have left a trace. He’d designed the wards to trigger in the presence of their magic, the one thing no sorcerer could mask no matter how powerful. So unless they had gotten a human lackey to do the job –

He growled to himself, cursed his own stupidity and cast a charm that should identify the perpetrator. He could guess what lowlife Zelena might have employed to do her dirty work and wasn’t disappointed when puddle-like footprints appeared on the floor, leading from the door and around the front counter to the safe on the wall. A gash appeared in the painting’s frame, one that Rumplestiltskin had overlooked while he’d repaired the damage from his earlier loss of temper. He knew exactly what had done it.

Once a pirate, always a pirate.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 19: The Other Side of the Story, in which Belle gets Hans’ version of what happened in Arendelle, Emma gets a tip-off, and Rumplestiltskin confronts Hook
Early on Saturday morning, Regina was awake before her alarm. Actually, she’d barely slept at all. She’d been too unsettled for that.

She turned over and shut off her alarm before it sounded, then rolled onto her side to watch Robin sleep. He stirred a bit, disturbed by the movement, but a grumble later and it was as if nothing had happened.

*Have you ever thought about having another baby?*

Regina’s eyes stung as she thought about the sudden, completely unexpected question that had come out of Robin’s mouth on Thursday afternoon. At the time, she’d had no idea what to say and so babbled something about living in the moment, or whatever – all she could remember was thinking that it sounded like something Snow would say – and stalled for time.

A day later, she still had no idea what to say.

She should have known Robin would want to add to their unorthodox little family. He loved children. Anyone who had seen him with Roland knew he was a good father, and he had this sweet, endearing way of acting like a foster uncle to any kid that wasn’t his – to Jesse, little Charlotte a’Dale and even to Henry. Of course he would want another child.

Regina rolled onto her back and wiped her eyes. How was she supposed to tell him that she could never give him that?

Decades ago, shortly after she’d been married to Leopold, she’d rendered herself infertile. Children were in the picture when she’d been young and in love with Daniel, certainly, but Leopold had been a different story. How could she have brought a child into that loveless marriage? How could she have ever freed herself from her husband when doing so would mean she’d have to tell her own baby that she’d killed its father? No, Regina hadn’t been able to face that. So she’d dealt with it in the only way that she’d been able to think of. The curse from her mother’s spellbook had been simple enough even for an inexperienced, frightened young sorceress. Simple, effective and impossible to reverse by any magical means, just in case Cora ever found a way back from Wonderland, or Leopold got the Blue Fairy to undo the curse.

Then, of course, it had all turned out to be pointless anyway since Leopold had been too busy mourning his first wife to even think of his second. All he’d wanted was a trophy wife and a mother figure for his perfect little daughter. Nothing more.

Still, Regina had never regretted that decision. Why carry on a legacy of hatred and loathing? Why burden a child with the knowledge of what its mother was, what its grandmother had been? Henry was safe from whatever evil floated in Cora’s genes, and he had other parents and a grandmother who would ensure that he never fell down the same dark road that Regina had.

No, she didn’t regret it at all.

Until now.

She turned her head and watched Robin sleep for a while longer. Something deep inside her stirred,
a longing she thought she’d buried years ago. She loved Henry more than anything, she truly did, but she’d always have to share him with Neal and Emma. And, yes, she minded. She cooperated for Henry’s sake and did not begrudge him his birth parents at all, but it still hurt. Any baby she had with Robin would be hers alone – well, and Robin’s, of course. She’d be the only person on Earth that their child would ever call *Mommy*.

Maybe they should have talked about this sooner. She should have told him what he was getting himself into. His question indicated that he wanted another child, wanted to be a father again. But she couldn’t give him that. Unless they adopted, which Regina wasn’t against, but she suspected the question had been phrased with a different intention.

She sighed, rubbed her eyes and threw the covers off, climbing out of bed as a rooster crowed somewhere in the distance. Maybe caffeine would help her figure out how to deal with this.

There were few drinking establishments left in Storybrooke that the good captain was still welcome in – his drunken antics from earlier in the month still fresh in the mind of many business owners – so it didn’t take Rumplestiltskin long to track him down. When he did, it was to a reasonable-looking pub with a sign featuring a fluffy yellow duckling. Rumplestiltskin snorted. He knew this place. Garrett, the owner, could terrify the living daylights out of any mortal man with an animatronic hand (one that Rumplestiltskin suspected he’d built himself) to replace the one he’d lost in the Ogres’ War. He commanded a troupe of ruffians, all Ogres’ War veterans, but despite being somewhat overblown when it came to settling bar tabs, he was not the sort to put up with any rubbish like brawls. Hook must have been trying to keep out of trouble, Rumplestiltskin realised with another snort. As if that were even possible.

He watched through the window as the pirate in question paid his bill with money that Rumplestiltskin suspected had been in *his* possession until the day before, then left to go to the gents. Rumplestiltskin teleported himself off the street, inside long enough to grab the pirate by the arm, and then dropped them in the alley behind his shop.

“Will you people *stop* doing that?!” the pirate demanded, wrenching himself free. But Rumplestiltskin wasn’t done, and he shoved Hook against the wall.

“Were you really so stupid as to think I wouldn’t figure out who broke into my shop?” he snarled, shoving Hook again for good measure. “I know you’re working with her.”

Hook remained impassive and shrugged disinterestedly. “‘Her?’”

“Don’t – mock – me.” Rumplestiltskin shoved the pirate’s shoulders, slamming him against the wall again. “What did she offer you? A chance to go back in time, perhaps kill me in the past and take Milah for your own?”

“You have no idea what they’re planning,” Hook growled as he pushed Rumplestiltskin’s hands away. “But maybe we can work something out. A deal in exchange for what I know.”

“You have nothing to offer me.”

“I can tell you where you really were the night of Dumpty’s murder.”

Rumplestiltskin hesitated for a second, the memory and the nagging uncertainty coming back to him. But it passed in an instant, and he giggled like a maniac, the imp emerging from Mr Gold’s business suit. “Blackmail, dearie? You’ve forgotten who it is you’re dealing with.”
There were much simpler ways of obtaining information from someone, a trick so old that Rumplestiltskin barely needed to think about it. He simply stabbed a hand into the pirate’s chest and drew it back a moment later with Hook’s beating heart, appropriately battered and little red remaining, in his palm.

“Now you are my puppet,” said Rumplestiltskin with satisfaction while Hook stumbled, gasping in pain, against the wall. “Let’s try that deal now. You tell me whatever I want to know – not that you have a choice – and I don’t crush this right now.”

He squeezed the heart, inflicting Hook with another bout of pain.

“So tell me what you know about who really killed Lord van Dumpty.”

The pirate groaned as the pain of defiance hit him and kept his mouth shut. Rumplestiltskin waited for him to break – the man had to obey eventually – and smiled when he finally did, the gratification of seeing Hook answer through gritted teeth worth his patience.

“Nothing.”

“Of course you don’t,” Rumplestiltskin replied. The pirate had just been buying for time. The hand clutching Hook’s heart squeezed a tad firmer. The urge to just crush it was almost overwhelming. Nobody would miss this rum-addicted lowlife.

No!

Rumplestiltskin ground his teeth together and painstakingly lessened his grip on the crystallised organ, his hand shaking from a tremor he hadn’t noticed until then. That was the darkness inside of him talking, and he could not let it win. He’d had control of the curse for over two centuries. He was not about to let it get the better of him now.

He scrambled in his pocket for the slimy green potion – despairing at the colour, but there wasn’t much he could do about that – and quickly downed the contents. Hook watched him with a scowl.

“What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

Rumplestiltskin steadily dropped the empty vial back into his pocket, the shakes now gone, and composed himself. “Nothing that concerns you.”

He waited a moment longer until the urge to dash Hook’s heart against the bricks finally dissipated, then turned back to the pirate. He had a long list of questions that needed answering. Unfortunately, the most pressing of them it seemed Hook was not able to answer, but that didn’t mean he knew nothing. And there was one question that Rumplestiltskin needed an answer to almost as urgently.

“Zelena’s friend. The one who broke her out of jail and hid her from Regina and me. Who is he, really?”

Names were Rumplestiltskin’s trade, and he knew that Jonathan was a fake. The persona was unassuming, common, intended to blend in without arousing suspicion. It had to be a cover.

Hook glared at him a moment longer before giving in. “He’s her father.”

That time Rumplestiltskin jumped in surprise. That, he had not expected.
She was going to have to commission Marco to fix the holes in the wall, Emma thought as she missed hitting the blackboard for the fourth time. Mulan had the day off, Jack was out on patrol with Dogberry, and Emma was frustrated. Throwing darts at the blackboard – which was covered in photographs, names and half-formulated theories – helped somewhat, but it didn’t get her to the root of the problem. How to figure out who was lying to her, and why.

Grand Pabbie’s story just didn’t add up with what Emma had seen the day Hans and Frederick took her up to the hills. Granted, she hadn’t seen much, and neither had Robin, but it was still hard to believe that Grand Pabbie was really frightened of Jonathan, whoever he was.

Then there were the holes in Hans’ story. Why had he spent all this time chasing down trolls? What did he do that made Anna and Kristoff think he was the bad guy?

And then there was the small matter of who actually killed Dumpty, since Emma was more or less convinced that Rumplestiltskin hadn’t done it. Tracking down an unknown killer was not like chasing bail jumpers down Fifth Avenue, Emma had fast discovered. Yes, the evidence pointed to Rumplestiltskin – but it was just too much like what had happened to Mary Margaret during the first curse for Emma’s liking. It was too convenient, too simple, all of the evidence just falling into her lap. She knew the Dark One, and he was not so stupid as to leave a trail.

So that left who would want to frame him for murder, and why. The list of people who weren’t afraid to challenge Rumplestiltskin was short. In fact, Emma could only think of three people besides herself. Regina, Jonathan and Zelena. One could be eliminated, but nobody – not Rumplestiltskin, Regina or even Blue – had had any luck in tracking down the other two. They were somewhere in Storybrooke. But the town was still a pretty big place.

Emma threw another dart into the wall, which lodged into the plasterboard with a satisfying thunk. She didn’t get paid enough to deal with this kind of crap.

“If you’re training for the annual darts competition, I think you need more practise,” said Snow, who had just walked in the door with a bag from Granny’s and Jesse in a stroller. Emma threw the last projectile and then gathered them up for another round.

“That sounds more like something Regina would say.”

“I must be spending too much time with her.” Snow shrugged and parked the stroller next to Jack and Mulan’s desk. “Well, maybe I can help.”

“With my aim or Dumpty’s murderer?”

“Whichever would make you feel better.”

Thunk. Emma threw a dart. “Okay, look, I admit it. I’m stuck. I feel like I’m only getting half the story from everyone, and I don’t know where to start to figure this all out. Grand Pabbie claims that Jonathan’s forcing the trolls to work with them, but it sure didn’t look that way to me. Meanwhile, nobody but Hans seems to know anything about this ‘Spell of Shattered Sight’ thing. Humpty’s murderer is still on the loose, and as if that wasn’t enough, we’re on the brink of civil war.”

There had been no more riots, thankfully, and Ruby said that the protection money racket had died down. But she, Jack and Mulan had all faced confrontations on the other side of the wall, which still hadn’t been dismantled. So far they had all been verbal fights rather than physical ones, but
Emma was tempted to tell them to drop that part of the patrol completely.

She chucked the last dart at the blackboard, wishing it was Richard’s head. Only a fool would think he had given up his bid to control the town. Once upon a time, she would’ve just tracked down the miscreant and chucked him in jail. But technically, Richard hadn’t done anything illegal, and Emma couldn’t exactly go around punching former royalty in the nose or they really would have a mutiny on their hands.

“I don’t know what to do, Mom.”

Snow shifted some papers aside so she could sit next to her on the desk, and rubbed Emma’s back comfortingly. “You’re doing the best you can,” she said in her mother voice. “No-one could ask any more of you.”

“Dad would’ve known what to do.”

Rather than say anything, Snow just put her arm around Emma and squeezed, then let Emma rest her head on her mother’s shoulder. It was oddly comforting, having her mom there when she needed her, even if she was thirty years old.

Then somebody knocked on the door and interrupted the moment.

“Hallelujah!” Jack exclaimed happily, hanging his coat up. “We got something!”

“What happened?” Emma asked, swivelling around to face him.

“The bug you put in Prince Ernest’s house? It finally picked up something useful.”

He marched into the office. Emma and Snow followed in time to see him hit ‘play’ on the stereo.

“... I’m not bloody doing this anymore, George!” snapped a male English voice, one Emma didn’t recognise. “This has gone on long enough!”

“Who’s that?” she asked.


“... You signed off on this, John,” replied the voice of DA Albert Spencer. King George. “Don’t tell me you’re siding with the Evil Queen now.”

“Of course not!”

“Then just keep your mouth shut! That is all you have to do! I can take care of this business by myself. Though I can imagine what your brother will say –”

“You’re mad if you really think this is gonna work.”

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow night, won’t we?”

The recording ended with a click. Emma rubbed the bridge of her nose where a headache had bloomed.

“I was going to call Miss Lucas, see what she knew about this ‘business’ thingamajig,” said Jack. “Sounds like George is up to something.”

“Yeah,” Emma agreed. She really did not get paid enough to deal with this crap.
It was almost ten o’clock by the time Rumple finally picked up his phone, for which Belle let out a sigh of relief. She’d woken at half seven to find him gone and, naturally, panicked. If he’d gone off on another sleepwalk, there was no way to know what might happen. There hadn’t been anything she could do except wait for him to answer her, but he finally had, and straight away he’d assured her that his early-morning wander had been entirely voluntary.

“I had something to take care of at the shop,” he told her over the phone while Belle trotted down Williams Drive. “You were sleeping; I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I know, but next time, leave a note. Please?” Belle suggested while laughing in relief. “Just in case?”

Rumple chuckled down the line. “I’ll remember that. I’m sorry I worried you.”

“That’s okay. I’ll see you for lunch at Granny’s?”

“Sounds great. I’ll see you then, sweetheart. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He’s alright, Belle told herself firmly as she found the address that Archie had given her. It wasn’t the darkness taking him over; he was just working early on a Saturday morning. He’d done that plenty of times before. He was okay.

She took a breath before knocking on the door of the Coles’ house, reassuring herself one last time that she shouldn’t worry.

“Oh. Hi, Belle,” said Abigail when she opened the door, and Belle gave her a smile. Abigail was one of the few royals she knew who had their head on straight, as the young princess had proven during the war talks a year ago. Belle had also noticed how she and Frederick didn’t seem to be involved with the groups trying to remove Regina from power. “What are you doing here?”

“Is Hans home? I wanted to talk to him.”

Abigail smile faded. Then she nodded with a knowing look in her eyes. “Yeah. Come on in.”

Belle followed her inside, glancing at the bookshelf on the way – lots of law textbooks from both the Enchanted Forest and the Land Without Magic – with pictures of Frederick, Abigail, King Midas and somebody she thought might be Abigail’s little brother. They had the same eyes. Frederick’s family were noticeably absent.

“Hans. There’s someone come to see you.”

The young prince was sitting at the kitchen table, holding an ice pack to his jaw, and didn’t react. His cheek was still red. For such a small person – and Belle was hardly one to judge in that regard – Anna could certainly land a punch.

“Hans? Hello?”

Abigail prodded him in the arm, and Hans started.

“Sorry. There’s someone here to see you.”
“Abby, I told you, I don’t wanna talk about it –”

“Hey, Hans.”

He jumped in his seat and blinked several times as he took in Belle’s sudden appearance. “Oh. Hey.”

“Would you like something to drink? A cup of tea?” Abigail asked as Hans dropped his gaze shyly, avoiding Belle’s eyes.

“Tea would be nice. Thanks, Abigail.”

She went into the kitchen, Hans still hadn’t moved. Belle hesitantly drew up a chair and waited until he was ready.

“Belle, no offence,” he muttered after a long pause, “but I really don’t want to talk.”

“Are you okay? From yesterday?” she asked, figuring it was the safest place to start.

“I’m fine.”

“Who was she? The woman at Granny’s?”

“No-one,” he answered automatically. Belle waited a little longer, until he cast a shy look upwards and gritted his teeth. “Her name’s Anna. Anna of Arendelle.”

“Elsa’s sister?” He nodded. “What happened between you two?”

Belle spotted Abigail watching them from the kitchen, taking her time opening a milk carton. She wondered if Hans had told his brother and sister-in-law what had happened. Meanwhile Hans was studying her closely as if he wasn’t quite sure what to make of her. Like most people did. Being romantically involved with the Dark One did have its drawbacks sometimes.

“Look, I know it’s none of my business,” she told him gently, resisting the urge to reach for his hand. He was more or less a complete stranger and she didn’t know if he’d appreciate the contact or not. “And I understand if you don’t want to talk to me. But you look like you could use it. Maybe I can help?”

Hans continued to watch her suspiciously.

“She’s okay,” Abigail offered from the kitchen. Hans made a face at his sister-in-law before turning back to Belle, and gave a heavy sigh.

“We were engaged,” he admitted in a small voice, looking at the table. Belle leant in to listen. “Well, sort of. It all happened kinda quickly. This – ha, this is gonna sound really stupid but –”

He chuckled at himself and ran a hand through his hair.

“Six years ago, Fred went abroad to try and make his fortune. As the youngest sons of thirteen, neither of us really stands to inherit anything when our father passes. So, when Fred came back to announce he was engaged to Midas’ daughter, I realised I had nothing much to lose. I decided to try my hand at it. Fred went south to Hellas, so I went north to Arendelle. That’s where I ran into Anna. Or more specifically, she ran into me, the day of her sister’s coronation.”

Belle smiled. “Love at first sight.”
Hans laughed humourlessly. “Something like that. We danced through most of the night. Talked for the rest of it. I’d never met anybody like her. She was … well, she was just Anna. Not like the other ladies of the court who were always painting and preening themselves, trying to be what the world told them to be. Anna was just herself and she wasn’t afraid to be that. I was, ha, I was pretty taken. In hindsight, it was a terrible idea, but I asked her to marry me right there on the floor. I didn’t even have a ring. But she said yes.”

He wore the faraway look of somebody looking back on a beautiful memory. Then it darkened. Belle was almost afraid to ask why.

“What happened?”

“Well, uh, Elsa didn’t exactly take it well. I don’t think it was just the proposal that set her off. She’d looked like she was one push away from a panic attack all through the coronation. But she and Anna got into an argument, and that’s what did it. See, Elsa’s a sorceress. Ice magic. Back then, she didn’t have a whole lot of control over it. She panicked, nearly killed Uncle Oskar, and then fled for the hills. Anna went after her. I don’t know exactly what happened up there but Anna came back almost on death’s doorstep. She’d been hit in the heart with Elsa’s magic. A freak accident. She was half-dead by the time she got back to me, hoping I could break the spell —”

“True Love’s Kiss.”

Hans sighed heavily. “Yeah, uh, except –” He shut his eyes and opened them again quickly, the colour draining out of his face like he’d just had a nightmare. “See, I, uh, I remember leaning in to kiss her but then something – something like this horrible, awful cloud of darkness came over me the moment I touched her. It was – I’m not even sure how to describe it, really. I was saying … terrible, terrible things. It was like watching myself from inside my own head while I did – I did things I had no control over. I –”

He gulped, caught in a painful memory. When he spoke again, it was in barely more than a whisper.

“I left her to die, Belle,” he admitted like he was pulling teeth. “And then I tried to murder her sister and take over the whole kingdom.”

“The Spell of Shattered Sight,” Belle murmured, remembering what little she’d been able to read of the curse before Hans’ journals were destroyed. Hans nodded. “So it wasn’t your fault, then, if you were acting under the influence of the curse —”

“No, no, Belle, you don’t understand. It – it wasn’t just the curse.”

“I’m sorry?”

Hans gulped again before continuing. “Part of it was me. There was a part of me that wanted to do exactly what I did. It enjoyed it. And that’s the worst part.”

Belle had no idea what to say. Neither, apparently, did Abigail, who had given up all pretence of not eavesdropping and stood in the doorway, gaping. Hans swallowed heavily.

“I think that the way the curse works is by digging out the deepest, darkest desires of a person. It suppresses everything that makes us good. Your morality, your ability to empathise or see reason is gone. Compassion flies out of the window. Mercy is next to impossible. You’d act on your darkest dreams, the things you wouldn’t admit even to yourself and damn the consequences. The curse, it – it makes you capable of anything. And worst part of it is, when it’s over, you’ll always know that,
deep down, you wanted to do it.”

He finished his story downcast, looking like he was about to cry. Belle still had no idea what to say.

She’d known from the little she’d read of Hans’ journals that the Spell of Shattered Sight was a nasty piece of work. Now that she’d heard the story, it sounded more like a living nightmare, something that had destroyed the foundations of True Love and the man in front of her was forced to live with the consequences.

Belle shivered just at the thought. Zelena could not be allowed to cast this curse.

“I called Ruby. From what she heard through Jolly MacDonald, they’re planning to hit the club strip on Miner's Boulevard at eleven o’clock tomorrow evening.”

“On a Sunday?” Regina asked, pacing her living room as Emma’s voice sounded over the speakerphone. “There won’t be that many people there.”

“I know, but I don’t think that’s the point. We have no idea what they’ve got planned, but between what she’s heard and what the bug picked up, it sounds like an ambush. She could be walking straight into a trap.”

Robin tapped his fingers on the tabletop and looked thoughtful. “Did Jolly know any details about what George is planning? Troop numbers, armaments, that sort of thing?”

“No, just the time and location. Don’t even know what they’re really up to. You don’t suppose that maybe George let this information slip on purpose?” asked Emma.

“I wouldn’t put it past him, but I still say it’s worth checking out. If it is a trap, at least we can be ready for it.”

“Alright. Just be careful, okay?”

As the phone clicked to signify that the caller had hung up, Regina sighed and collapsed on the sofa. Once, as the Evil Queen, she would have just turned Richard into something small and slimy. They were at an impasse now, and she wasn’t sure what else to do.

“How are you feeling?” asked Robin, getting up from the table and walking over to sit next to her.

“Honestly?” Regina sighed. “Like I’m playing a game of chess, and I’m waiting for my opponent to make the next move.”

“And you’ve got no idea what that next move is,” Robin finished for her. She nodded. He reached out and squeezed her knee. Steady as a rock, like he always was.

A sudden wave of guilt gripped her. She needed to tell him the truth about why she’d avoided his question the other day. It was on the tip of her tongue. All she had to do was say it, and now seemed as good a time as any –

Then Henry distracted her by walking in the door. “Hey, Mom, can you give me a hand with this thing?” he asked, pointing to the tie hanging from his shoulders.

Regina started. Her twelve-year-old stood in the doorway, wearing a suit she’d never seen before.
It must have been from New York.

“Well, look at you all dressed up,” she said, getting up from the couch. Her little boy looked all grown up, his hoodie and jeans replaced with a dark grey jacket and matching slacks. His choice of tie was a bit odd; crimson red, and probably an inch or so too long for him, but she supposed it didn’t look too bad with his suit. “What’s the occasion?”

“I’m getting married. Didn’t I tell you?”

Regina blinked, certain she’d misheard. Henry grinned cheekily.

“I’m going to work. Remember?” Regina did, and laughed at herself. “With Grandpa, at the shop. He said if I’m going to learn the family business, I’d have to represent the family business,” he explained, waving a hand down at his slacks and the shoes he’d actually polished for once. “Which would be fine, if it didn’t also mean wearing a tie.”

As Robin chuckled, Regina helped her son with the aforementioned tie and then buttoned his vest for him.

“There we go.”

“Thanks, Mom. How do I look?”

All grown up.

“Very handsome,” she told him with a smile, patting his tie down flat.

At least no matter what else happened, this part of her life would always make sense.
this new land. We wanted to know if, hypothetically, there was a revolt in town, say around the industrial quarter, what safe places could we tell people to run to so that we could be sure they’d be out of the line of fire?”

“Hypothetically?” asked Abigail, giving her father a suspicious frown.

Midas grimaced. “Maybe not so hypothetically.”

“We’ve been building a small army of our own in response to King Richard’s threats,” Simba explained. “It’s nothing particularly fancy, but we think we could match his forces well enough.”

“Right now, our main concern is collateral damage,” Nala added. “We don’t want anybody to get hurt. That’s why we want to head off Richard’s forces before they can proceed with whatever he and George have planned. So, to that end, where could we send people to get them out of the way?”

“What are you saying? You’re going to try and overthrow Regina yourselves?” asked Jefferson, to which Archie nodded in agreement. This didn’t have to come down to a firefight – but how to make the displaced royalty see that?

But Nala shook her head. “We don’t want to unseat Regina. All past actions aside, we understand that we don’t know anything about how this world works. She does; that makes her the best person to deal with the current crisis. We’re just … a little concerned that she and Snow aren’t taking Richard’s threats seriously.”

“Richard and George aren’t going to yield to negotiations, no matter what Snow believes,” said Simba. “So we intend to shut them down before it devolves into a civil war.”

“But why does it have to come down to a contest at all?” Archie exclaimed, for now ignoring propriety. If it could help avoid a war, he’d gladly hang himself. “We could still talk them out of this –”

“Doctor Hopper, I appreciate your sentiment but if talking was going to work, it would have done so by now. Like I’ve said, we don’t want anyone to get hurt.” Simba repeated confidently, though Archie was less certain. Battles, no matter what field they took place on, always came at a cost. “That’s why we’re asking for your help.”

In the time it took for her to walk from the station to the pawnshop, Emma had come up with no further conclusions. The investigation into Humpty’s murder was going nowhere and Blue had called to say she’d made no progress on breaking through whatever protective spells Jonathan was using on himself and Zelena. Even Regina’s blood magic wasn’t working, despite the number of times she’d tried.

The sign on the pawnshop door was flipped to ‘Open’ when Emma barged through, though she didn’t register the fact until it slammed shut behind her.

“Okay, look,” she snapped at the person standing behind the counter while she fixed the elephant-foot umbrella stand she’d just tripped over. “I’ve exhausted all other avenues and come up with a big, fat nothing. You have got to have something!”

“Hi, Mom.”
Emma stopped short, almost upsetting the umbrella stand again as she did a double-take. Henry smiled at her from the other side of the counter holding a feather-duster. He was wearing the suit that Emma had told him to pack when she’d believed they were going to Maine for Neal’s father’s funeral. In it, he looked the spitting image of his father – right down to the tie, which he’d borrowed from his dad.

He’d even combed his hair. Who was this boy and what had he done with her son?

“He? What are you doing here?”

“I work here now. Remember?”

“Oh, right,” she said, mentally smacking herself on the forehead. Yes, Henry had mentioned the fact that his grandfather had offered him a job, but between murder cases, crazy witches and a screaming baby with a vendetta against sleep, she’d kind of forgotten about it. “Where’s your grandpa?”

“Right here,” said the voice of the shadowy pawnbroker, emerging from the back room with a slim black folder. He looked up and gave Emma a grin. “What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

“Oh, I’m the one who needs help!” Emma said, taking a deep breath to calm down. She needed to think clearly, not rush headfirst into this problem. “Either Hans is lying about the curse, or the trolls are lying about Zelena coercing them to help them. I need to figure out which one and stop them so I can get on with putting Regina’s nutcase sister back behind bars.”

“I see.” Rumplestiltskin pursed his lips. “And what would you like me to do about it?”

“You’re seriously telling me you’ve got nothing? No leads as to where Zelena is or why she killed Humpty?”

“Emma, I assure you that if I had any idea of the witch’s whereabouts, she would be long dead,” he replied. “And I thought you said you had no idea who killed Mr van Dumpty.”

“Well, it’s the best I’ve got because I don’t think you did it.”

“Really? Why’s that?”

She frowned at him. He didn’t sound in the least bit surprised. “Belle told you, didn’t she?”

“That you believe I’m being framed? No, she kept her word. I guessed.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Of course you did. Okay, here’s my question: why would Zelena wanna frame you for murder?”

“Well, why do you think she would?”

He was doing that thing where he was getting her to voice her opinion without admitting to his own and making it sound like they were in agreement. Emma huffed, braced her arms on the counter and told him her theory. “I think she and Jonathan want to set you up to take the fall for this Spell of Shattered Sight thingy.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Rumplestiltskin grunted, nodding thoughtfully. “Well, it’s an idea.”

“Can you please not make this difficult and just help me?”

He grinned again. “My apologies. How would you like me to help you?”
Emma bit her cheek. “I don’t know.”

“My book says that the trolls are descended from fairies; sorta like the dwarves,” said Henry, looking like that was supposed to be helpful. “Maybe the Blue Fairy would know something?”

“I already asked her; she said she doesn’t know anything. She’s never heard of the curse either.”

Rumplestiltskin grunted haughtily. “Hardly surprising.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” asked Emma.

“I have a long history with the patron of your mother’s family,” he explained. “Suffice it to say that she often claims to be far more knowledgeable than she actually is.”

“Okay. How does that help us?”

“It doesn’t.” Rumplestiltskin put the folder down on the counter. “Is there any chance that the trolls could lead us to Jonathan and Zelena? Perhaps figure out what they’re up to that way?”

“I didn’t think of that,” Emma admitted. “But that wouldn’t help us if the trolls are lying about why they’re working with Zelena.”

“Obviously there’s a lot that we don’t know.”

“Yeah,” Emma replied. “That’s what scares me.”

After the second curse had broken, Rumplestiltskin restored all of the former protection spells that kept outsiders from stumbling upon Storybrooke by mistake. As Neal drove the yellow bug back from Boston, rubbing his eyes and yawning from a combination of a long drive and a boring meeting that really could’ve been done over Skype, he felt the familiar tingle of magic trying to convince him that he’d forgotten something important and should turn around right away. His eyes watered with the concentration needed to keep driving straight along the highway until he spotted the bright pink ribbon he’d left hanging off a tree three days ago so he’d know when he hit the town line.

Still ignoring the nagging voice that insisted there were bears lurking in the woods, Neal called his father and then waited for whatever was supposed to let him back into town.

Ten minutes later, there was a low rumbling and a strange wave pattern appeared in the air in front of the bug. Then Neal’s ears popped as a bundle of fabric tumbled out of the air with a note attached. Frowning, he picked it up. It was his old shawl, the one his father had made for his fifth birthday. He’d loved that shawl.

*Put this around your neck and drive back into town – Papa*

“Love you too, Pop,” Neal said as he jumped out of the car on the other side of the town line, still dizzy from the effects of the cloaking spell. Then he blinked. Henry had rushed over to give him a hug.

“Hey, Dad! How was New York?”

“Yeah, okay. I brought your PlayStation back,” he said, holding his son at arm’s length. “What’s with the suit, buddy?”
“Oh! I got a job!” Henry stood straight, fluffing his suit jacket proudly. “I’m Grandpa’s shop assistant.”

“Oh. Wait, what?” Neal said, looking at his father in confusion.

Rumplestiltskin shrugged. “I thought it couldn’t hurt.”

“O-kay.” Neal looked over to Emma, who gave him a tired wave from the door of the Caddy. She had dark circles under her eyes and it looked a bit like she’d tried to pull out chunks of her hair. “What else have I missed?”

“I met the leader of the trolls and they may or may not have been forced to work with Zelena, which would mean Hans is lying about the curse,” said Emma. “Got a tip that King George is doing something sneaky at the Rabbit Hole tomorrow. Oh, and Jesse’s new favourite toy is an empty milk carton.”

Neal blinked, just in case he’d missed an important joke. Nobody moved.

“Seriously? I was gone three days!”

Given that Baelfire was worn out from a plane trip and the four-hour drive back from New York, and Emma’s current appearance reminded Rumplestiltskin somewhat of the haggard soldiers limping off the training field in Taloire, he arranged to meet his son for breakfast the next day at Granny’s for a proper catch-up. In the meantime he let them go for some well-earned sleep, said goodnight to his grandson, called Belle to say he’d be late and then drove out to the cabin.

He parked the Caddy around the back and locked the doors. Hook was scowling at him from the porch. He couldn’t do anything for as long as Rumplestiltskin held onto his heart, but it didn’t hurt to take precautions. The organ in question beat away in his suit pocket, which he pulled out with just a flicker of pleasure at the pirate’s pained flinch.

“Show me where the Witch is.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 20: Down the Rabbit Hole, in which Storybrooke’s political tensions finally reach breaking point

Before anybody panics: I DO NOT INTEND FOR ZELENA TO CARRY ANYONE’S CHILD. Like, ever. That woman shouldn’t be trusted with a wet cotton ball.
“You’re late,” Rumplestiltskin snapped as the pirate finally trudged his way to the top of the hill in semi-darkness. Hook snarled as he shoved pine branches out of his face with considerably more brutishness than necessary. Rumplestiltskin bit back a giggle as the pirate tripped, adding another slick of mud to that already caking his jeans. He, of course, had endured no such discomfort, having simply teleported to the top of the hill and commanded Hook to meet him there.

“You are just loving this, aren’t you?” the pirate growled.

“Immeasurably.” Rumplestiltskin turned to the view before them. “This is it?”

“This is it.”

The trolls’ fortress lay in the valley beneath them, illuminated by a wall of shimmering blue ice. Rumplestiltskin sniffed. Wild heather, bluebells, and lily-of-the-valleys. The trolls had been busy.

“But the Witch isn’t here right now,” he remarked with a trace of disappointment.


“Where else could she possibly be?” Rumplestiltskin demanded. Zelena wasn’t the type to make herself any less comfortable than she had to be, and he could not imagine her roughing it in the hills when there was a town right beneath her.

“How should I know? They’re the ones who called me, not the other way around.”

The pirate’s heart beat faster inside Rumplestiltskin’s coat, but he fought the urge to take it out and crush it. Hook hadn’t yet proven completely useless.

“What are they conspiring with the trolls for?” he asked instead. “This ‘Spell of Shattered Sight’. What do you know about it?”

“It’s real,” the pirate replied. “As real as Hans claims it is.”

“Is that so? So why have they delayed? What are they waiting for?”

Hook’s cheek muscles twinged. “They needed to get other ingredients so the curse would spread,” he answered with a growl. “They already had your maid’s blood. Zelena’s blood will work to curse Regina as well. They just needed me to get Swan’s, and something from you.”

“And you broke into my shop for that.”

“Well, contrary to what you might think, I’m not stupid enough to attack you.”

“No,” Rumplestiltskin replied, shoving the pirate so his back hit a tree. “But you are stupid enough to think that Faílinis will really uphold his end of whatever deal you two have made.”

“I don’t care,” said Hook with a scowl. “It’ll be worth it just to see your face when you’re holding your little maid’s lifeless body in your arms. Then you’ll finally know how it feels!”
Pine needles flew everywhere as Hook crashed through the undergrowth, propelled by a wave of crimson magic. Rumplestiltskin ground his teeth together, fighting back the darkness that compelled him to rip the pirate apart piece by piece. The image of Belle dying at Hook’s hand flitted into the forefront of his mind, and he shoved it down. Now was not the time for his old insecurities to get the better of him.

“It’ll never happen,” he growled as Hook picked himself up from the forest floor. “Because you and I will not let it happen.”

Sometime in the last month, Sunday nights had become family nights, and they were the best part of Henry’s whole week. He didn’t get to see his entire family – all three of his parents, grandparents, baby uncle plus Robin and Belle – in one place that often. Granny had to set up an elongated table at the back of the diner for them – it was that or sit outside in the cold listening to Basil, the homeless fiddler with a nicotine addiction – but it was worth it.

Right now his dad was keeping Jesse entertained with a stuffed ducky while Snow had something to eat and laughed with Regina. Emma was laughing too, which Henry was glad to see. His mom had been working far too hard recently. It was necessary, given the circumstances, but it was still good to see her have a break.

There was one person who didn’t seem to be having such a good time, though. Henry collected his cocoa from Ben Spratt and went to sit with Belle, who was at the counter all alone, picking absent-mindedly at her fries.

“Hi, Grandma Belle,” he announced, trying it on for size. Belle laughed airily.

“Just ‘Belle’ is fine for now, Henry,” she said, giving a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. Where’s Grandpa?”

“He just called. He’s running a bit late. Got caught up with some work at the shop.”

“Maybe he’s got a surprise planned,” Henry suggested coyly. Ever since he found out that Rumplestiltskin was going to pop the question, he’d been waiting anxiously for it to happen. Belle was already a part of the family as far as Henry was concerned, but he’d still love to see her formally marry his grandfather. Then she’d have no excuse to not to let him call her ‘Grandma’.

“Hah. Yeah, maybe.” Belle chuckled. “Hey, how’s working at the shop going?”

Henry shrugged. “Well, it’s great hanging out with Grandpa, but all he lets me do is sweep and file inventories. It’s kinda boring. I was hoping he could teach me some magic stuff.”

“You know that he keeps most of his artefacts locked up in the shop for a good reason, right?” said Belle with a smile. “Some of it can be dangerous.”

“I’m twelve, I’m not stupid,” Henry argued. Belle gave him another smile. “Couldn’t he just cast some spell to repel the dust or something?”

“He could, but then he wouldn’t have a reason to keep you around,” Belle replied, grinning wider. “He likes you, and he likes the company.”
“Yeah,” Henry agreed softly. His grandfather had seemed, well … softer, lately. Not much at all like the shady pawnbroker he’d known during the curse – and really, Henry hadn’t been that frightened of Mr Gold at all.

_Come on, Grandpa_, Henry said internally, glancing at the bare fourth finger on Belle’s left hand. _Just ask her already! Do not let her go!_

As if on cue, the diner’s bell jingled and Rumplestiltskin walked in the door, spotted Henry and Belle and headed straight for them.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said to Belle, kissing the top of her head. “Sorry I’m late. Hey, Henry.”

“Hey, Grandpa. What’cha up to?”

“I just had a few things to take care of. New tenants, new rental agreements, that sort of thing,” Rumplestiltskin said. “I hope I didn’t leave you alone too long.”

“No, it was alright,” Belle replied with a much more genuine smile. “Henry was keeping me company.”

“Oh. Thanks, son.”

“Not a problem, Grandpa.”

“You guys gonna join us or you having your own bull session over there?” Neal called from the table, jiggling Jesse on his shoulder.

“Be right there, Bae,” Rumplestiltskin called back, then he turned to Henry and Belle, offering her his arm. “Shall we?”

“Yes, let’s,” Belle agreed.

Henry followed them back to the table, eying his grandfather the whole way.

_Come on, Grandpa. I know you can do it. Just ask her. She won’t say no. I know it._

“This looks like your father’s sort of place,” Robin remarked as he and Alan took seats at the Rabbit Hole bar. It was an upgraded version of the seedy inner-city taverns that Robin remembered from the one or two times he’d been to Nottingham. No ladies of the night – or at least none quite so obvious – but the dimly lit, slightly smoky atmosphere remained the same, from the sticky residue on the tabletops to the overzealous pickpockets lurking in shadowy corners pretending not to watch for an easy mark.

“My father wouldn’t have been caught dead in a place like this,” Alan muttered, dusting off the barstool with a tissue before he sat down. “And that’s saying something.”

“Hey, guys,” said the smiling barmaid (although Robin understood that ‘waitress’ was the appropriate term in this land) with a too-short uniform shirt. “What’re you drinking?”

“Just a beer, thanks,” said Robin.

“What kind of beer?”
“Sorry?”


Robin flustered; thankfully Ruby came to the rescue.

“Just get them something English people drink,” she told the barmaid. “And I’ll have a glass of white.”

“There’s multiple types of beer?” Robin asked while the young lady toddled off to find something that matched Ruby’s description. Back home, alcohol came in a few forms – beer, wine, mead, ale, et cetera – but generally it came in one keg (or bottle, in the case of wine) made to the standards of the local brewery and poured into a tankard. You asked for a beer, you got a beer, and that was that. Maybe a dash of barley wine to add taste. In the city, there was sometimes more variety, but cities were a world unto themselves that Robin had never got a handle on.

“Mmm-hmm,” said Ruby. “Welcome to commercialism.”

The barmaid returned, carrying two bottles labelled ‘Heineken’s’. Robin thanked her and took a cautionary sip. It was sweeter than he was accustomed to, but it tasted fine all the same.

“So, you gonna be able to recognise these guys when they show up?” Ruby asked while she tapped out a message on her phone.

“Depends on if they send people we know,” said Robin, licking his lower lip. This world put a lot of sugar into everything. “Otherwise, all we can do is keep an eye out for anyone who looks suspicious.”

“Yeah, that only covers about half the people in the bar,” snorted Alan.

“Well, the guys have got all of the entrances covered,” said Ruby. She sipped her wine, reading the return message from the Eastern warrior. “If anybody makes a break for it, Mulan and Dorothy’ll be onto them in a second.”

She slipped off her stool and stretched. “I’m gonna take a look around, see if I can sniff anyone out.”

“Alright. We’ll be here,” said Robin.

She left, taking her phone and glass with her. Robin then took stock of the Rabbit Hole’s patrons. The bar wasn’t what he’d call busy, but neither was it quiet. Alan and Ruby aside, there were maybe twenty people around, mostly in groups. Five teenagers, three girls and two boys, had taken over the billiards table, to which one of the boys was losing profoundly to a blonde girl. A middle-aged couple sharing drinks underneath a window, presumably for privacy. One bloke about Robin’s age stood by the music player – the jukebox – and another snuck an ace out of his sleeve when his opposing card player wasn’t looking.

“All looks pretty ordinary,” said Alan, who had been making the same observations. He’d settled on the billiards-playing teenagers, holding back a snort of derision. “That boy would have better luck if he looked at the ball once in a while.”

“Oi, mate!” shouted the man sitting further along the bar to Alan’s right, thumping his fist on the counter to draw attention. “Pass us the pretzels, won’t ya?!”

_The what?_ Robin thought, sharing a look with an equally puzzled Alan. “Uh, sorry?”
“The pretzels, you idiot!” The man jabbed a finger at the woven basket in front of Alan. When they hesitated, he rolled his eyes and grabbed for it. “You daft or something?”

“No, sir, just new to this land,” Alan replied, giving Robin a look. He’s had a few. “What are they, miniature bread sticks?”

The man then called Alan a name that would have made Robin’s granny box him about the ears.

“Hey!”

“Bloody outlaws thinking they run the fuckin’ town,” the man spat. “What next, eh? Where’s your wolf friend got to? Gone to off some poor man just going about his business?”

“Mate,” said Robin firmly, keeping his tone neutral. “Just trying to have a friendly beer.”

“Here, have another on me!”

He chucked his beer in Alan’s face.

“What the hell?”

“I think you might’ve had enough, mate.” Robin stood up and pulled Alan back in case the man decided to take a swing at him. The fellow had maybe an inch or two on both of them, but he was alone and almost definitely drunk. “Come on, let’s get you out of here –”

Robin caught the man’s arm a millisecond before it hit him and used the momentum to throw him into the counter. He’d done this plenty of times – wrangled the copper-noses by catching them off guard, pin their arms behind their back while Alan or John picked up their legs so they could cart them outside where they couldn’t hurt anybody. But another person jumping on Robin’s back made the task much harder than usual.

“Gedddofffme,” he growled, trying to keep his grip on the drunk man while his assailant wrapped his arms around his shoulders. Robin let go and wrestled free just before Alan punched the new person. Or persons, he couldn’t tell how many there were.

And that was when the gun went off.

People screamed. Robin rammed an elbow into the face of the person who’d just tried to grab him by the throat and shoved somebody else into the counter. The kids had – smartly – taken refuge under the billiards table.

Ruby was on the floor, not moving. There was a shadow in the entryway.

“Oi! You!”

Robin ducked. A chair flew over his head and smashed into the bar. Glass flew everywhere. The gunshot hadn’t stopped the brawlers, whom Robin was starting to think weren’t as drunk as he’d first supposed. He heard Alan shout, ducked another wild swing and wriggled his way out of the fight.

The shadow fled in the direction of the back exit. As he ran after it, Robin registered the security guards shouting into their radios and trying to contain the fight. He slipped through the perimeter by jumping over the bar. The terrified staff did nothing to stop him.

“Oi!”
The back door was locked. Robin realised that because, in the time it took for the shooter to kick it open, he had caught up and tackled the man onto the pavement. The gun flew free, knocked loose from the shooter’s grip. He was on his back, dazed, so Robin went for the gun and grabbed it before he could –

Then hit the ground again, a second after a sharp pain burst in the back of his head.

The outlaw crumpled to the ground and remained there. King George got to his feet, never looking away from the fallen criminal. Only a fool turned their back on a thief.

“Is he dead?” George asked the man responsible, the fae who called himself Jonathan.

“Nope.”

George frowned; why ever not?

“We need a scapegoat,” said Jonathan as if the question had been aired aloud. “Mr Locksley here should serve that purpose just fine.”

“You’re sure they won’t remember anything?”

Jonathan snorted. “Well, he definitely won’t,” he said, giving the unconscious outlaw a kick. “As for the guards, all they’ll be able to remember is the fight and a known criminal running from the scene.”

“I still don’t understand what you’re getting out of this,” George replied. He brushed himself off – his hands appropriately gloved, no sense in leaving easy evidence behind for the sheriff – and eyed the fae warily.

But Jonathan remained as cryptic as ever. As much as it infuriated him, George couldn’t get any useful information out of him. Only the fact that he was a valuable ally, and a powerful sorcerer who could turn him into a snail on a whim, kept George’s mouth shut.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. We both want the same thing,” the fae answered. “To go home with Snow White and the Evil Queen out of the game. Now, we should hurry. My spells will only keep the deputy at bay for so long. Leave the gun.”

Blue and red lights flooded the street outside the Rabbit Hole, and sirens blared down the entirety of Miner’s Boulevard. Emma had to shout to make herself heard over the racket and the people behind the yellow tape yelling for somebody to tell them what had happened. First, she needed to figure that for herself.

Robin wasn’t a great source of information, as he was currently sitting on a step in the parking lot with Alan holding a bloodied towel to the back of his head. He remembered walking to the bar, but not much else. Alan had been fighting off a man twice his size when Emma arrived and had a nasty bruise developing under his left eye. The shaken night manager was able to say that a brawl broke out – that much was obvious – but was unclear on the details, like who started it and why, except that Robin had been involved. So he’d been right about the ambush after all.
“Eight casualties reported so far,” Mulan called down the radio. “Ambulance crews are attending to the worst of them.”

“What the hell happened?” shouted Regina, who had just pushed her way past the Rabbit Hole security working crowd control. Neal was behind her. “Robin?”

“I’m okay,” he insisted while weakly trying to push Alan away. “There are others worse off.”

“Yeah, right,” said Neal, dropping down to take a look at Robin’s injury. “Someone get over here and look at this man, please?!”

“Emma.”

She looked up at the sound of Regina’s emotionless call and then followed her line of sight to the nearest ambulance.

“What the hell happened here?” she asked, staring as the paramedics loaded Ruby into the back of the ambulance. One of them was ventilating her, and the sheets around her midriff were stained with an alarming amount of red. Dorothy was sitting on the steps to the back entrance of the nightclub, watching them cart her friend away; she’d been given a bag to throw up in but otherwise left on her own as there were others the paramedics needed to see to first.

“I’ll make sure she’s okay,” Neal offered.

“Right,” Emma agreed. “Robin?”

He coughed, the towel coming loose from his head as he did. There was a lot of red there too, but he was still refusing help. “I don’t really remember,” he said, gesturing to his head.

“I saw a man shoot her,” Alan filled in. “Robin ran after him. I was a bit busy trying to survive a bar fight to help.”

“Is that the gun?” Emma asked, nudging the weapon that was lying in the garden by Robin’s feet. Twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun. What did they think they’d be shooting, elk?

“Guess so,” he answered with a shrug. Then the colour drained from his face, he doubled over and vomited in the shrubbery.

“Alright, that’s it.” Alan grimaced and chucked the bloodied towel aside. “Somebody get over here right now!”

“On my way!” shouted one of the paramedics.

“Alan, what do you remember?” asked Emma.

He paused before answering. “There was a man at the bar. We thought he was drunk. He chucked a beer at me and took a swing at Robin, so we tried to tackle him. Chuck him outside. Only he had mates, and now I think the drunkenness was just an act. They weren’t surprised when the gun went off. That’s how I got this.” He pointed to his eye. “Blockhead punched me while I was trying to figure out what happened. I think … I think they were just trying to keep us busy. Ruby’s the one they were after.”

Groaning, Emma started to pace. “Mulan? What have we got?” she called into the radio.

“I’ve put two men under arrest based on Alan’s testimony. Dogberry’s questioning them right now,
but they’re not particularly cooperative. Jack is still getting statements from witnesses.”

Emma paced some more, tugging at her hair as she did. “Oh, this is bad.”

“What makes it all the more baffling as to why you haven’t arrested the perpetrator yet.”

“The shooter ran for it,” Emma snapped at him. “We’ve been a bit too busy trying to contain the situation here to chase after them –”

“I beg to differ,” said Richard. “It seems to me that you’ve already caught the guilty party red-handed.”

“What?”

He nodded at Robin, who had just thrown up again. Alan was on the ground with him, looking as if he would seriously consider jumping the former king if his best friend hadn’t needed him more right at that moment.

“You have got to be kidding me!” Regina exclaimed, rounding on Richard. “You think Robin is responsible this?”

“It is a perfect example of the kind of lawlessness that results from inept leadership allowing known criminals to wander about this town freely,” Richard retorted.

“Or the kind of terrorism that comes from idiots who think they can bully us into giving the town over to them,” said Emma. Her hand itched over the handle of her automatic. If there just weren’t so many witnesses …

Richard snorted, the corners of his mouth curling up in amusement. “Well, who was holding the gun when you arrived, Sheriff?”

“Give it up, Richard,” Regina snarled. “This has gone far enough.”

“Oh the contrary, m’lady,” Richard replied. “We’re just getting started.”

He chuckled and then turned his back. Emma tasted rust, and she grabbed Regina’s hand.

“Don’t,” she warned, careful to keep her voice low. “There are too many people.”

Regina scowled, and glanced at Richard’s retreating back, but lowered her hand nonetheless. She knelt next to Robin instead and held his hand as the paramedic finally arrived. Emma pinched the bridge of her nose and breathed out heavily.

So much for a diplomatic solution.

Somebody was prodding her arm, and Emma did not appreciate it. She grumbled a complaint and swatted at the annoyance. She was perfectly comfortable right where she was, asleep, and she wasn’t going to end it for anything –

“I have muffins and coffee.”
Except that.

“Did you sleep here?” said a voice that, as Emma dragged herself back to the land of the living, started to sound like Belle. She followed the smell of coffee until she managed to pry her eyes open and was faced with the bright light of morning spilling through the hospital windows.

“Aah,” she groaned as she gently pushed herself up from the couch where she’d fallen asleep on top of Neal. He was still conked out, head bent at an awkward angle so that he whistled every time he exhaled. Dorothy was curled up like a cat on another couch. Probably best just to let her sleep, Emma thought as she took the coffee Belle had brought and sipped it. She’d been up and pacing most of the night, waiting for news from the OR. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” said Belle.

“Have you heard anything about Ruby?”

“Doctor Whale says she’s not out of the woods yet. She’s in pretty rough shape,” said Belle, much to Emma’s relief. Whale was still operating when Neal fell asleep in the lounge, and Emma must have passed out not long after that. “The bullet missed her spinal cord but she lost a lot of blood. She won’t be awake for a while yet.”

“She’ll be alright. Ruby’s tough, and she’s got the best doctor in two worlds looking after her,” Emma replied. She looked over at Dorothy, who was still asleep. “Has anybody told Granny what happened?”

“Yeah, Archie told her last night. Apparently, he had to hide her crossbow so she couldn’t go after Richard herself.” Belle chuckled. It lasted a second, and then she turned serious again. “How bad is it?”

“Bad,” Emma answered flatly. “Richard’s scapegoating Robin for what happened. And by extension, me and Regina for protecting him. I don’t think we’re gonna talk our way out of this one.”

“We’re not at war yet,” said Belle, to which Emma could only shrug.

“This is a complete and total mess, Belle,” she replied. “No matter how this ends, I guarantee it’s not gonna be pretty. Not after this.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 21: The Snow Queen, in which the Merry Men run into a wall while camping, Ruby gets visitors, and Richard continues to be a bully.
The Snow Queen

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Sorry for the longer-than-expected hiatus! Alright, let's get back to it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ruby really hated being stuck in hospital. It was boring, there was next to no privacy, and the man in the room next door snored like a misfiring car engine. If not for the fact that she felt like the dog's breakfast and couldn't even sit up without help, she would have snuck out at the first opportunity.

A fresh breath of wind arrived around lunchtime on day five with coffee and grilled cheeses.

“Gods, I hope that’s for me.”

“Sorry,” said Belle, shutting the door after Snow wheeled the stroller inside. “Doctor’s orders. You’re on an all-liquid diet until further notice.”

“Coffee is a liquid,” Ruby protested. Belle waggled a finger reproachfully.

“How are you feeling?” asked Snow.

It hurt to shrug. “Okay, I guess. They took the nasogastric tube out this morning and my stomach hurts less.” Although that probably had more to do with the amount of pain medication Whale had her on, Ruby thought as she tried to maintain focus on her friends. She knew that Archie had been around sometime last night with Granny, but for the life of her Ruby could not remember a single thing that they talked about.

She tried to sit up straighter, failed and settled for a weak wipe of her nose to push the nasal cannulae back into place. Then she waved at the armchair. “When she comes to, will you please tell her to go home? She hasn’t left in two days.”

Despite the visitation, Dorothy remained asleep, curled up on the cushion like a cat. Whale hadn’t let her bring Toto in, not that it stopped her; the mutt was asleep too, only his fluffy head visible out the top of Dorothy’s backpack.

“We’ll see,” said Snow. “In the meantime, think you feel up to a cuddle?”

“Yes! Please!”

Jesse went right back to sleep as soon as Snow helped Ruby get into a position where she wouldn’t drop him. His head flopped back, mouth open showing a pink tongue and toothless gums, and wisps of blonde hair curled out from underneath his beanie.

Ruby instantly felt ten times better.
“Ow!”

Neal tried not to laugh as Henry stubbed his foot on yet another root, stumbled backwards and caught himself on a branch before he made a complete spectacle of himself. Then fell on his backside anyway when he lost his balance.

“Bit different from the park, yeah?” Neal joked, letting Henry struggle for a good five seconds before he helped him get up. His wooden sword had flown off somewhere into the forest; Neal spotted it a few feet away, lying in a patch of grass fighting the last of the frost. “Got to watch your feet out here.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” Henry retorted, rubbing his lower back.

Elsewhere, one of the Merry Men sniggered.

(Probably Alan; Neal had learnt by now that it was usually Alan. Blasted troublemaker.)

The Merry Men had slunk off to their old campsite in the woods three days ago when it became apparent that staying in town was just going to make things even messier than they already were. It didn't matter that there was no evidence that Robin, Ruby or Alan were responsible for what happened at the Rabbit Hole; Richard continued to put the blame on them, and that was enough for the masses. Emma had done her best to keep the mob out of the hospital, but Walter still sported a nasty black eye sustained while forcibly removing Nottingham from the building the day after the Rabbit Hole incident. After that, Robin snuck out without Whale’s permission; torn between a lynching and a concussion, he’d picked the concussion.

Henry had been bugging Neal to go camping with the lads for weeks, though. Now seemed as good a time as any.

“Hey, Henry!” called Much. “Want a lesson in what you can and can’t eat out in the woods?”

“I thought we brought food with us?” asked Henry, leaving his sword against the tree as he joined Much around the campfire.

“Doesn’t mean it’s not a skill worth learning. Even if we never go home, it could come in handy one day.”

“What is all this stuff?” Henry picked up a plant at random from Much’s collection. It looked like a strangled apple twisted into the shape of a potato.

“A bit of chickweed, sorrel tubers, burdock and some early dandelions,” said Much proudly while checking the cooking pot to see if the water had boiled. “Not a bad haul for the tail end of winter. Right, lesson number one: how to be sure what you’re eating isn’t poisonous. There isn’t one, except by experience, which brings me to lesson two: a general way of identifying stuff that could make you sick when you’re not sure what kind of plants you’ve got.”

He snapped a random stalk in half so that Henry could see the sap.

“See how it’s milky-coloured? Means it’s probably bad. If you’re not sure, have a little nip, but don’t swallow. And if it tastes bitter, or like soap, chuck it. No good. Spines and thorns are generally a no-go, but you can eat nettles if you boil ‘em. Same with most anything that’s got seeds or beans in a pod. Except your garden-variety peas and beans, a’course.”

“Couldn’t I just catch a fish?”
“Can’t live off just fish, buddy.” Neal tore off a chickweed leaf and chewed it to prove his point. “Or rabbits, for that matter. Not enough vitamins, or something like that.”

Henry looked thoughtful. He picked up a green stalk, sniffed it carefully, nibbled the end and immediately spat it out.

“Oh, God!” he gagged in between the lads’ laughter. Neal couldn’t help but chuckle along with them. “What is this?”

“Burdock,” Much answered. “Bitter, ain’t it?”

Henry nodded, looking like he was trying to swallow a sour furball.

“You’re s’posed to peel and boil it first,” Much continued, taking the stalk back. “Doesn’t taste so bad after that.”

“So why’d you let me eat it?” Henry asked.

Much shrugged. “Wasn’t gonna kill you, and taught you lesson number three; don’t ever put something in your mouth if you haven’t made sure it’s not poisonous, even if somebody else put it in front of you. Better you learn that from a bit of burdock than deadly nightshade. Which reminds me: berries. Unless you’re dead certain you know what they are – blackberries, raspberries, mulberries and so on – don’t eat ‘em.”

“Also, don’t eat the crunchy bugs,” added Neal. “Grubs and worms are generally okay, but don’t take your chances on anything with hard shells.”

“Eww!” Henry screwed up his face, horrified – as Neal expected – at the thought of eating a worm. “Dad!”

“Got to be done sometimes, lad,” said Robin, grinning madly. “What are you gonna do if you’re stuck somewhere in the middle of nowhere with no food? Can’t always guarantee there’s going to be rabbits around, and even then, you’ve still got to catch the bloody things.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“When you’re hungry, you’ll eat anything. And I mean *anything*,” said Robin.

“You wanted camping, buddy,” added Neal, thumping Henry on the back and hugging him.

“Yeah, *camping*, Dad, not wilderness survival school. I’m not gonna have to eat worms.”

Robin made a face. “Huh. So I probably shouldn’t go into too much detail about what we survived on in Agrabah, then.”

Neal made the mistake of asking. A bush unfortunate enough to be within lunging distance bore the brunt of his regret.

Belle finished up the last of the things she needed to do around the library before the weekend and firmly shut the door behind her. As she fished in her purse for the key, a cool Maine breeze blowing bronze leaves over the road, she shoveled all of her worries into a little box in her mind. She and Rumple had a lunch date at two, and then they were going to spend the whole weekend out at his cabin. Two days entirely to themselves, where they wouldn’t have to think about royal
revolutions or escapee witches, or burning mansions or dark curses. There were to be no interruptions, nothing to get in their way –

“Lady Belle.”

Except that.

She hid a sigh as she turned around. “Your Majesty.” she replied as politely as she could to King Richard, who appeared as innocent as a crooked man could. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Just a friendly visit.” Richard’s smile was as fake as the gold watch on his wrist. “How are you?”

“I am well, thank you. How are you, sir?”

"Can't complain." He pretended to breathe in the crisp air. "I've recently realised that I never did offer you my condolences for your father's unfortunate demise. 'Twas indeed a shame. Sir Maurice was a good man. Raised a daughter any man should be proud to carry his name."

Belle kept her face carefully blank. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“He also knew which way the wind blows,” Richard said with a glint in his eye, “if we understand each other.”

*And we finally get to the point.*

“No misunderstandings, sir. But I’m afraid that doesn’t change my mind.”

Richard dropped the smile. “I think we both know Snow White is not the saint she pretends to be. Sooner or later, the people of this town will realise the truth –”

“What are you asking me, Richard?” Belle snapped, abandoning all manners.

Richard’s grin returned. “You have influence in this town, my lady. Bizarre as your continued relationship with the Dark One is, there are those who consider you a friend and value your insights. It would be of great assistance –”

“I’m not interested.”

"If it’s that monster you're afraid of, arrangements can be made –"

*Your Majesty.* Try as she might, Belle couldn't keep her voice level. The tiniest of squeaks escaped her throat, betraying her nerves. She charged on nonetheless. "Rumplestiltskin is no monster, and I am no friend to those who would call him such. I have no interest in anything you have to offer, so if you'll excuse me –"

He was suddenly much larger, and was it her imagination or had the wall gotten that much closer?

"Don't be a fool, Belle," Richard growled, the grey hairs in his beard quivering with each syllable. "If your father were here, he wouldn't let you make the mistake of siding with those traitors."

She squared her jaw. “Do-not,” she snarled between gritted teeth, “tell me what my father would or would not do. No-one chooses my fate but me.”

“‘Words by which heroes die,’” Richard recited. “Suit yourself, then.”

“Is there a problem here?”
Belle was sure her heart stopped the moment she saw Archie appear in the corner of her eye. If she hadn’t been close to vanishing into the library wall, she might have hugged him.

“Not at all, Doctor,” said Richard, stepping back. Belle felt as though she could breathe again. Pongo nuzzled her hand, so she gave him a pat.

“Belle?” asked Archie. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thanks, Archie.”

He looked from her to Richard and back again.

“Well,” said Richard, clearing his throat. “Think about our discussion, Lady Belle. I look forward to hearing from you. Good day.”

Belle curtsied as best she could with shaking knees. “Good day, Your Majesty.”

And then he was gone, and salty tears stung her eyes. The muscles in her hands, shoulders and knees relaxed; she felt as if her body had turned to jelly.

“We need to talk, don’t we?” Archie stated flatly while Pongo whined and rubbed his ears against her skirt.

“Archie –”

“Come on.” He offered her his arm, leaving no room for arguments. “I’ll buy you an iced tea. You need it.”

Belle couldn’t bring herself to argue.

Basil lit his third cigarette of the night with clumsy fingers. Storybrooke could get cold at night. Even colder than London, where Basil had always had his townhouse to shelter in. Here, he had yet to find suitable accomodations.

Still, it could have been much worse. He had a warm coat and a long scarf that he could almost wrap around himself twice over, and a not-too-raggedy blanket that kept his little stoop outside the town hall from freezing overnight. Plus, his favourite cap and his battered old violin had made it over with the curse. That, he was most certainly thankful for. Busking outside of Granny’s Diner during peak hours made good money, especially when the sheriff’s family was eating there. Her scruffy-haired fiancé always dropped a fiver into Basil’s violin case.

Today, however, he wasn’t playing. Today, he was investigating.

The Rabbit Hole was still a considerable mess from the brawl that took place just four days ago. It would be another week before the bar opened again, according to the Mirror. Police tape hung from the doors and cordoned off the rear entrance. Basil stayed on the outside of the tape and watched the council groundsman, a tall red-haired boy barely out of his teens, sweep glass off the back door stoop.

As Basil watched, he chewed the end of his cigarette thoughtfully. He coughed when the smoke tickled his lungs in just the wrong spot – an awful habit, really, but then the withdrawal was even worse – and thumped himself on the chest. That caught the groundsman’s attention.
“Afternoon, sir,” said the boy. Basil wracked his memory for a name – Webber, Weeder, something along those lines. “Can I help you?”

“Nah, mate,” said Basil. “Just having a look ‘round.”

The boy shrugged. “Dunno what you’re hoping to find. Mr Dogberry just got through with all of his examinations.”

Frankly, Basil thought Dogberry was to policing like a poodle to a horse race, but he kept his opinions to himself.

“It’s curious, isn’t it?” Basil asked nonchalantly, flicking ash from the end of his cigarette while the boy went back to his sweeping. “What I don’t understand is why Mr Hood would want to shoot poor Miss Lucas. Seems to me the two rather like each other. They’re certainly not mortal enemies.”

“Wrong place at the wrong time?” suggested the boy.

Basil grunted. “Perhaps. But then why is everybody so fuzzy on the details? You’d think if somebody got shot, there’d be at least one person who saw the fellow what did it. What’s your name, son?”

“Nick Weaver, sir.”

“You hang around the Rabbit Hole often?”

Nick shook his head. “No, sir. Not my kind of crowd.”

“How long have you been in Storybrooke?”

“Since the first curse, sir.”

“Alright, knock off the ‘sirs’,” Basil snapped, “and tell me something, Nick.”

He beckoned for the boy to come closer. Nick did so, and Basil quickly checked that they were well out of earshot.

“See, I don’t think Mr Gold really killed Mr Dumpty at all,” said Basil, and he was happy to see that Nick didn’t even pretend to be surprised. “And I know Mr Hood wasn’t the one who shot Miss Lucas, and I know that Sheriff Swan knows everything I just told you. So the question is – who did?”

“What makes you think I know, sir?” asked Nick. Basil let it slide this time.

“You’re like me, son. Council groundsmen, janitors, security guards, homeless fiddlers – we’re people that everybody sees and nobody pays attention to. I know somebody saw something the night Mr Dumpty died,” said Basil, putting careful inflection on his words. Nick missed nothing. “And I know somebody’s being careful to keep his head down in case it gets him into trouble. Correct?”

“Maybe, sir,” Nick whispered.

“Excellent.” Basil clapped his hands together. This one was going to be good; he knew it. “Nothing like a mystery, eh, Nick? I’ll be in touch.”

He left the boy to finish up his sweeping and all but skipped down the road, headed for Grimm’s
Road. As far as he knew, the Wicked Witch was still holed up there with the scarred sorcerer. Why they would want to work with Mad King George, Basil couldn’t figure, but he knew there was some connection to Mr Dumpty’s death three weeks ago.

He just had to find out what it was.

At least learning how to tie knots was more interesting than the basics of woodland foraging, Neal thought while Henry’s fourth attempt at a half-hitch appeared to hold the weight of their shelter roof. He inspected his son’s work while Henry jumped down from the tree, beaming proudly when the sheet stayed aloft.

“Nice work,” said Neal, nodding approvingly. “Now we just gotta put the walls up.”

“I still don’t get why we couldn’t bring tents,” said Henry.

“’Cos tents are bulky, heavy and a pain in the a – neck to put up,” Neal explained, covering his near-slip with his most innocent smile. Henry rolled his eyes, not fooled. “Plus, we haven’t actually got a tent.”

“Your birthday present from Mom? Then we could go camping all the time.”

Neal chuckled. “Well, you could mention it to her. Then – whoa, careful!”

Sadly, he was too late to stop the tarp from collapsing on top of them, trapping them in a royal blue wonderland. Manic laughter tore itself from Neal’s chest as he tried to find the exit, bumped into Henry twice, tripped over a rope and finally tumbled to the ground, dragging his son down with him. At this rate, it was going to be Easter before they got this shelter built.

“Dad!”

Henry struggled, but Neal was stronger and unrelenting.

“Dogpile!”

_Oh, crap. “Ooofff!”_

Two bodies, one smaller than the other, squished all of the air out of Neal’s lungs with the force of one jump. The smaller one, lying across Neal’s shoulders and giggling in the vicinity of his left shoulder, was Roland, while Charlotte a’Dale pinned his knees to the ground.

“Got you, got you!”

“Alright, alright, children! Settle down!”

The twin weights lifted off them, kicking and screaming, by their respective fathers, and somebody pulled the canvas from Neal’s face. He yelped when Alan’s freckled nose appeared less than two inches away from his.

“What the hell?!”

"Having fun under there?” joked the merry prankster with his giggling daughter clinging to his back like a monkey.
“Get off. Let us up, will you?”

Saluting dutifully – thumb pressed to his forehead and wiggling three fingers – Alan stepped off the canvas. Neal scrambled out of the khaki tangles and then freed Henry.

“You three are not making a good argument for this parenthood thing!” Much shouted from the other side of the camp, where the shelter he was to share with Little John and Friar Tuck was perfectly constructed.

“What are you talking about?” Neal retorted with a gesture at the swirling mess on the ground. “Coming along right on schedule.”

“Don’t worry, Mother Goose, we’ll have ‘em in bed on time,” said Robin. “Now, Henry, Much here needs his beauty sleep, so we’re definitely not gonna wake him up early with cold water on his toesies, right?”

He winked cheekily at Henry, who gave him a thumbs-up.

“Right-o, Stepdad.”

“Stepdad?” said Neal. “When did we start calling him that?”

Henry shrugged. “Just trying it on for size.”

"Not sure if that's quite accurate though," said Much with an unusually thoughtful face. "So you've got Emma and Bae, biological mother and father; and Regina, adopted mother, but she wasn't married at the time of the actual adoption. So - would that make Robin the adopted father, stepfather or adopted stepfather?"

Good question. And not one Neal had considered. It soon became clear why. He felt a headache form between his eyes as he tried to figure it out. Henry wasn’t having much better luck; his hands moved like he was trying to do complex calculations on an invisible blackboard.

“Well, I got no bloody idea,” Alan finally concluded.

“It’s all academic anyway,” Robin protested. “Regina and I aren’t even engaged yet.”

“Yeah, and I’m starting to think I’m gonna have to do it for you.”

“Guys, what’s that?” asked Neal.

“Took you long enough just to admit you liked her in the first place –” Alan continued over him.

“It’s none of your bloody business!”

“Sleeping curses seem to do wonders for speeding things up. Bae, what’s your father charge for –”

“GUYS!” Neal suddenly thundered, catching everyone’s undivided attention. “What the hell is that thing?”

It wasn’t even that far from the Merry Men’s campsite, but on the other side of a ridge, which explained why they didn’t spot it sooner. Neal only noticed the icy blue glow because grey clouds washed over the sun, throwing the forest into shadow. And even then, he didn’t figure out what it
was until the lads were almost right on top of it.

“It’s an ice wall,” said Henry.

Robin, further down the ridge, got as close as he dared and prodded the wall with the tip of his bow. “This wasn’t here earlier. We’d have noticed something like this before now.”

The ice extended as far as Neal could see in either direction and seemed to curve gently outwards. The sheer wall stood at least two times his height, smooth as a mirror, all a single piece of blue ice. The crowns of trees stuck out from the top, and inside pine branches were encased in what looked like the most outlandish museum display of the Ice Age that Neal had ever seen. And, just to top off the unnaturalness of the spectre, the wall was glowing. From less than a foot away, all he could see of his reflection was a ghostly, slightly darker blue shadow.

"Ice doesn't form like this," said Neal, whose experience of ice and snow was mostly limited to a ski resort in Canada. But even if the glow hadn't given away its supernatural origins, he was pretty sure a ten-foot-tall block of ice did not spontaneously form in an almost perfect rectangle in the middle of the woods.

“Not naturally, anyway,” the outlaw agreed.

“Didn’t Mom say she was looking for a missing sorceress?” asked Henry. “One with ice powers?”

Crap, he’s right. Neal quickly fished his phone out of his pocket. “Damn. I’ve got no reception out here.”

“Emma needs to know about this,” said Robin.

“I know, I know.” He wrung his hands through his hair. “Look, you and the lads stay here and keep an eye on this – whatever this is. I’ll head back towards town, see if I can get a signal.”

Robin nodded. “Right. Take Alan with you.”

“What about me?” Henry asked. “I can help. There’s got to be a way to find out what this thing’s for. Or we can follow it. It could lead us straight to Elsa.”

“No, Henry, you stay here,” Neal insisted. When Henry looked about to protest, he added; “This could be dangerous. If it is Elsa, then Jonathan and Zelena can’t be far behind.”

“But Dad –”

“No.” He leant down so he was eye-to-eye with his son. “Look, I am not gonna let anything happen to you. And if something does happen, then somebody has to make sure that Roland and Charlotte get out safely. That’s your job. Okay?”

The attitudinal twelve-year-old in Henry looked about ready to argue, and Neal feared that he’d have to drag him back to town. He was not going to let Zelena get within ten feet – make that ten miles, actually – of his son ever again. Then a couple of seconds passed, and Henry – only somewhat grudgingly – relented. “Okay.”

Neal gave Henry a hug. “Promise me. If the lads tell you to run, you run, okay? No arguments.”

“Yeah. I promise.”

“Thank you.” He gave him another hug for good measure. “Be back soon.”
“There you go. One iced tea and one Earl Grey, two sugars,” said the young Mr Spratt proudly, setting Archie and Belle’s orders down in front of them. He looked so pleased that Belle didn’t have the heart to tell him that he’d gotten the drinks the wrong way around.

“Thanks, Ben,” she said nonetheless, then waited until he was gone to swap the cups.

“You’re sure you’re feeling alright?” Archie asked.

She chuckled humourlessly. “I’m fine, really. I promise.”

“If there’s anything you want to talk about –”

“I know where to find you.”

He smiled sweetly. Belle squeezed his arm, ever grateful to have him as a friend.

“Alright. Well, I’ll just be over in that booth if you need anything.”

“Please. I’m not interrupting your date.”

He blushed.

“Ruby told me,” Belle confessed. “Congratulations. It’s really great.”

“Uh, well,” he flustered, running a hand through his hair. “We’ll – we’ll see how it go.”

“Go on. Don’t let me keep you.”

Archie nodded once, then again with confidence. “Right. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

She waited a minute before sneaking a glance at the middle booth, where Archie took a seat opposite a bespectacled auburn-haired woman Belle knew from somewhere – the hospital, she remembered then. Anita, or something like that. The two of them made a cute couple, she decided then and there.

“You’re early,” remarked Rumple, joining her at the counter with tiny snowflakes dotting his hair. Belle instinctively brushed them off. “I thought you were going to meet me at the shop.”

“I – I was, but –”

“What happened?” Rumple asked, suddenly grave.

“Richard,” Belle said quickly, knowing he would think the worst of it if she didn’t tell him the truth straight away. Besides, it wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened. “Just being his usual self. I’m fine, I promise.”

“If he hurt you –”

“He didn’t,” she insisted. “Just let it go, okay? Nothing bad happened.”

After a painstaking minute, Rumple nodded. “Alright. I’ll let it go.”

“Thank you. I already ordered. Hamburger and fries, extra pickles.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.”
Belle shifted on the stool so that she could lean into him, breathing in the smell of a dusty pawnshop and tarnished bronze. It was all okay, she told herself for the tenth time. It would all be okay.

Regina's spell dropped her and Emma expertly at the fork in the hiking trail where Alan and Neal were waiting, a yellow ribbon tied to the tree behind them. The moment the smoke cleared, Emma's head spun, and she stumbled forwards. Neal caught her by the elbow.

“I’m never getting used to that,” she grumbled, shaking her head to clear the sensation of having been squeezed through a spinning vacuum tube.

“Where are we going?” Regina asked Alan, getting straight to the point.

“This way.”

Was it Emma’s imagination, or was it starting to get awfully dark? It didn’t look like the trees had gotten any thicker …

“Dead serious, it’s this giant block of ice that looks like it’s been dropped in the middle of the forest,” Alan told them as they trudged through the woods following the trail of coloured ribbons.

“How far does it go?” asked Emma, shivering and pulling her jacket closer around her. The cold had started to bite through her layers.

“Dunno. Farther than I could see,” said Neal. “It could go on for miles.”

“We hadn’t started to explore it yet,” said Alan. “Ya know, just in case it was something bad –”

“No, that was a good idea.” Emma shivered again and stopped walking. “Okay, am I the only one who thinks it’s suddenly got really cold?”

“Yeah, actually,” said Neal. “Now that you mention it …”

Up ahead, Regina was unnaturally still, looking at the treetops.

Emma felt a chill, this time unrelated to the cold. “Regina …?”

She pointed upwards. “Feel that?”

You mean besides a whole lot colder than it did when we got here? Emma retorted, but the words escaped her when she realised what had got Regina’s attention.

“There was no storm warning for this weekend,” said Neal, equally as perplexed as the dark grey clouds continued to fill the sky like a painter had pushed a roller across it, completely obscuring the afternoon sun.

“And storm clouds don’t move like that,” added Alan. “Too bloody quick.”

Emma glanced at Regina. “You don’t think …?”

Instead of answering, the other woman took off at a jog. Emma followed, Neal and Alan bringing up the rear.
A few seconds later, they heard the shouting.

The ridge above Elsa’s ice wall provided the perfect vantage point to watch the carnage below. Zelena cackled softly to herself as she watched Regina’s dumb outlaw shoot three arrows harmlessly into the snow monster’s chest. His companions had no better luck and ran around like blinded apes, dodging the monster’s swinging arms by margins that even a mouse couldn’t slip through.

Idiots.

"Oi, Marshmallow!" shouted the short, tubby one with the silly name Zelena couldn't be bothered to remember. He threw a rock at Marshmallow All that happened was that the outlaw received a complimentary shower of snow on his crown.

Marshmallow stumbled from side to side, his peabrain-sized consciousness vaguely aware of the three small figures running about below him. What little intelligence he did have couldn't comprehend the words they shouted at each other, but it did understand one thing: these creatures were trying to hurt him. So he did the only thing a snow monster with the motor control of an infant could do to protect itself, which was to swing his catapult-sized fists, on arms thicker than oak trees, in every direction in the hopes of hitting something.

Zelena smiled in approval. Elsa’s snowy creation was a work of art; unfeeling, incapable of reason, dumber than a bag of coal, and literally as cold as ice. The perfect abomination to release on unsuspecting heroes.

“Henry!” shouted a new male voice. The one of Emma Swan’s fiancé, the Dark One’s son, emerging from the forest with said fiancée, the red-haired outlaw and Zelena’s little sister. “Get the kids and go!”

Next to her on the ridge, Faúlinis gave Zelena’s arm a gentle squeeze. That was what they had been waiting for. He waited long enough to see which direction young Henry Mills ran (or was it Cassidy now?), then vanished in a swirl of green smoke.

Meanwhile, down below, Regina seemed to have attracted the monster’s attention. She sent a fireball flying into its face, but even magical fire had its limits when confronted with cold beyond what the deepest winter could imagine. Marshmallow’s cheek glistened with a layer of melted snow, but he was otherwise unharmed. And angrier than ever.

“Somebody get to the cave!” shouted Robin. “She’s in there!”

He fired two more arrows, each as ineffective as the first round. But it got Marshmallow's attention for long enough that he didn't notice Emma Swan race past him and into the hole produced by Marshmallow's arrival on the scene. Zelena didn't bother to stop her. Whether she found Elsa or not, it wouldn't matter in the end.

And following the sheriff wasn’t worth missing out on the sight of Regina being smashed to the ground by a ton of ice and snow.

“Not long now, little sister,” she murmured. “Not long now.”
“Sorry about that,” said Archie. He dropped into the booth opposite Anita and picked up the menu without his hands shaking. Third date, and he had finally stopped feeling nervous every time he had to make a decision, or say something. “Belle’s been having a rough time lately.”

“That’s alright.” Anita sipped her tea. “You really care about people, don’t you?”

“You’re awfully observant.”

“Well, I am a nurse.”

“Always?” he asked, suddenly curious.

“Mmm-hmm.” She set her teacup down. “Yeah, I volunteered with a nursing corps in London when the war started, then I served in France for three and a half years. It was nothing like here. Horrible conditions, really; I used to think some of those boys would’ve been better off dead.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that Archie couldn’t help but be slightly taken aback. "Uh –"

“Oh, sorry. I’ve been told I can be rather blunt about it. You just get so used to it, you know?”

“Desensitisation. Of course.”

“What about you?” she asked, peering at him over the top of wire-rimmed glasses. “Were you always a psychiatrist?”

“Uh,” Archie stammered, unsure what to say. He hadn’t yet told her much about his past, for obvious reasons. How did one explain – to anyone – that the Blue Fairy turned a lowly thief into a winged invertebrate almost a century ago?

After a moment of awkward silence – during which Anita’s expression changed from curiosity to mildly startled, obviously having believed it not to be a difficult question – he opted for honesty.

“Actually, I, uh – ahem – I used to be a cricket.”

Stony silence. Or at least what would have been stony silence if it wasn’t the dinner rush at Granny’s.

“A cricket?” said Anita, looking at him like she wondered if he was pulling her leg. But not terrified that it might be true, which Archie took to be a good sign.

“Well, I was human before that,” he added hurriedly.

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s, uh, it’s a bit of a long story.”

“Is it at least an interesting one?” she asked with a cheeky sparkle in her eye.

“I suppose so?”

“Can I hear it sometime?”

Archie fidgeted uncertainly. “It’s not a very good story. There are –” He stopped to swallow. “There are parts of my life that I’m not proud of.”
“I don’t think you’d be a very good psychiatrist if that weren’t the case,” Anita rebuked, looking down. “Who doesn’t have chapters in their story they’d forget if they could?”

“Mmm. True.”

Their fingertips brushed then, resting on the tabletop, Archie realised with a jolt. If he inched his hand forwards, just a little, they’d be touching – was he allowed to do that? It was only the third date – and she didn’t seem to have noticed – no, no, he really shouldn’t –

“What the heck is going on out there?”

“You’re sure you’re alright?” Rumple asked. Again.

“I’m fine. Really. Just a bit shaken.”

Belle tried not to sound exasperated. Four short figures who could have been either dwarves or mine-dust-coated golems trudged into the diner, waved hello and sat down. As she went off to serve them, Granny grumbled something Belle pretended not to hear.

“If he –”

“He did nothing,” she insisted. Again. “I promise. Please don’t get any ideas about going after him.”

“Belle –”

“Rumple.” She met him with a steady stare. “All I want is two days together without having to think about any of that. Can we just do that? Please?”

He held her gaze for a long time, every argument known to man bubbling behind his eyes.

“Alright.”

Belle reached for his hand and held it. “Thank you. Besides, there was something I wanted to show you.”

He raised an eyebrow as she held a hand over her glass of water and concentrated.

“You’ve been practising,” Rumple remarked when she steadily ceased the refilling of water. The ice cubes clinked together, bobbing on the surface. “Well done.”

“Thank you.” Belle triumphantly had a drink. She then gagged as her throat clamped up, unable to spit or swallow. “Oh, that’s horrible,” she gasped once she finally forced the water down. “It takes like rust.”

Rumple nodded. "Most things will. Here." He passed over his tea, and Belle downed half the contents in one go. It burnt her tongue but did not eliminate the foul taste.

“Is this why you always bought fresh food from the market instead of making it yourself?”

“Mmm-hmm. I experimented with magical food flavourings for some time, but all that did was make the taste stronger.”
“Huh. That does make much more sense now.” Belle bit her lip. “Everything?”

“Everything except curry powder,” said Rumple, taking his cup back and sipping. “I’m not sure why.”

She allowed herself a little chuckle. The more she learnt about magic, the more Belle understood Rumple’s fascination. It wasn’t all fireballs and fancy flourishes; there was a hidden art to the subject, one that she had begun to appreciate.

“You know, we could take a few of those books up to the cabin,” said Rumple, a suggestive look in his eye. "Just for practice, of course."

“Of course,” Belle replied. Ideas not wholly related to magic then flooded her mind, and it occurred to her that it might not be such a bad idea to change her lunch order to go –

The ideas vanished as floodlights filled the diner.

“What the hell?” various voices shouted. There was then a lot of movement as several people – Belle amongst them – fumbled their way to the door, arms raised to offer some protection against the blinding lights. Belle couldn't see much more outside than she could from inside. As her eyes adjusted, she found the outdoor dining tables, then the fence, the edge of the sidewalk, the road –

And twenty or so parked four-wheeled drives, turned so that their headlights illuminated the diner and surrounding buildings.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” somebody near Belle shouted. It was King Josef.

“Stand down, old man!” somebody else shouted back. She could make out the vague silhouette of a person perched atop the nearest Jeep, holding something long and thin that was pointed in Josef’s direction –

“Like hell!”

The gun went off. People screamed, and Josef crumpled against the hedges. He clutched at his jacket, which was now had a bright red circle staining the middle –

“Richard!” Belle shouted, finally finding her voice. She counted at least fifty men and women amongst the armada. In addition to the man who’d shot Josef, there were four rifles, a dozen sidearms, a dozen more swords and a large assortment of hunting knives, pitchforks, butcher’s cleavers and the odd cooking pot. “What are you doing?”

"I would've thought that was obvious, Lady Belle,” Richard replied cooly, sauntering across the road with all the confidence of a king with an army at his back. He waved, and four soldiers rushed forwards, one by one forcing those who'd exited the diner to their knees. "I believe you'll find that, as of right now, we are in command of Storybrooke."

What?!

“You can’t do that!” she protested.

He smirked, showing off a single white canine. Belle didn’t dare look away. Her mind raced with a hundred thoughts at all once.

There was no way to know how many of them there were. The line of vehicles extended all the way up Main Street, further than Belle could see. Josef was on the ground, Rapunzel by his side.
trying to stem the flow of blood from his wound. There were maybe eight other patrons of the diner, plus five staff, and a dozen or so pedestrians who’d wisely put their hands on their heads and stood with their backs to the walls. Plus maybe another two dozen that Belle could see being pulled out of the shops and corralled into one area by Richard’s soldiers –

She couldn’t hear any sirens either. But that didn’t mean Emma didn’t know –

*But what was one sheriff going to do against a mob this size?*

“Richard, you can’t do this.” Belle stood as straight as she could and stared the former king in the eyes. She wasn’t afraid of him. She could do this. “Stop this now.”

"This is not a negotiation, my dear," said Richard. He scowled at Josef. "You should have taken my first offer. So what shall it be now? Do you surrender?"

*Of course not!* Belle wanted to shout. But her mouth wouldn’t release the words.

One man was already hurt. How many others would be too if this turned into a bloodbath?

“I –”

Richard grinned maniacally. "I'll take that as a yes, then." And he grabbed her arm.

The temperature suddenly dropped several degrees.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, dearie.”

“Elsa!”

The word echoed a thousand times in the icy cavern, a ghostly scream that continued on for miles and miles. Emma couldn’t even begin to guess how long the tunnel was. At least it was all in one direction, so she didn’t have to fear getting lost.

Though an ambush was beginning to seem more and more like a possibility. Emma raised her gun and continued on straight, straining to hear any sounds of life. She figured she'd see or hear anybody coming long before they found her, proven by the number of times she'd almost shot her own reflection, mirrored over and over in icy fractals –

Boy, it was cold.

“Elsa?” Emma called again, just in case. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, she tasted rust in her mouth – really, really cold rust, mixed with the perfume of a flower that made her think of tundra and reindeer – and she kept going. “Elsa!”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 22: White Out, in which Emma catches up to Elsa, Richard makes a foolish move, and Henry runs - literally - into trouble

Lots of stuff is starting to happen all at once now!
“I wouldn’t do that if I were you, dearie.”

There were two instances in Belle’s life that she could say she had honestly been, as her father used to say, afraid to her bones.

Once had been as a girl of five learning to swim. Her grandfather had jumped in ahead of her and Colette, and taken too long to rise to the surface. He’d emerged after a minute – a hundred years to a small child who couldn’t find her Pop-pop – grinning like a fool, and then hugged her and sat with her on the rocks until she’d cried away the fear.

The second time had been huddled underneath the merchant’s stand, right before her mother died. Caught between a ragtag army and that voice, Belle felt the same tremble in her spine once again.

“This is not your battle, Dark One,” Richard demanded, though Belle was pretty sure she heard his voice waver. Just a touch. “Begone from here.”

Gradually – fighting every instinct that wished for her to run, and run far – Belle turned. The four soldiers had frozen in the process of removing people from the diner. Granny stood in the doorway, crossbow at hand, but she made no move to fire. Sleepy, on his knees, tried to sneak behind a table without anybody noticing. And in the middle of it all was Rumple. But it wasn’t him.

Oh, he had the same face and wore the same clothes. But what gazed upon Richard with the blankest of expressions, was eyes as black as a dungeon in the nighttime. An automaton could not have produced a face with less emotion.

“Rumple?” Belle murmured.

He didn’t hear her. She didn’t know if he could.

“I said begone, demon!” Richard commanded. He pulled a handgun from his back pocket and aimed.

Not-Rumple had one look at the gun and – without any change in composure whatsoever – magicked it away. It landed harmlessly in a hedge.

“Sire?” called the nervous-looking young man who had been driving the white van.

IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO LEAVE, KING RICHARD THE LIONHEART, said not-Rumple. His mouth had not moved.

Belle realised she had stumbled backwards when prickly leaves stabbed her in the back and not-Rumple ghosted past her, stopping within arm’s reach of Richard. The king – who was either as incredibly brave as his sobriquet suggested, or incredibly foolish – did not back down.

“I’m not afraid of you,” said Richard.

YOU SHOULD BE.
“Rumple!”

Several things happened at once.

The first was an arrow loosening from Granny’s crossbow. Richard ducked; the arrow lodged in the side of a black pickup truck.

The second was the gunshot from the same sniper who had shot Josef, this time aimed at not-Rumple.

The third was Belle crashing into Rumple with enough force to send them both hurtling into the hedges. Something ripped Belle’s shirt and arm, though she wouldn’t register the pain until much later.

“Belle, what the – Oooofffff!”

His eyes were brown again. Before Belle had the chance to ask him what had happened – or even consider the possibility that it hadn’t been an iced-tea-induced hallucination – a pistol cocked behind them. Belle could see straight down the barrel of Richard’s gun. There was a flash, then a vortex of red smoke.

“DIE, YOU STUPID LUMP OF MARSHMALLOF FLUFF!”

Regina held her arms out in front of her and focused entirely on a streaming column of fire that engulfed the snow monster. It roared and swung its arms in every direction even as the flames tore its snowy hide. Lumps of smoking, melted ice dribbled from Marshmallow, and he bellowed even louder; Regina fought to stay focused on controlling the inferno.

Slowly, painfully, the roars ceased as Marshmallow’s legs turned to slush beneath him. Another minute passed, and all that remained of the monster was a puddle of melted snow. Regina let her arms fall to her sides and wobbled on the spot. Neal grabbed her before she fainted.

“I’m alright,” she gasped between breaths, trying to straighten up. She stumbled again. Neal held her steady while she doubled over, bracing her arms on her knees. “That took more than I thought.”

“What the hell was that thing?” said Alan, skirting the edges of the slush-pool hesitantly.

“Looked like a giant snow monster to me,” said Neal. Alan rolled his eyes.

“Thanks, mate. No way I could’a worked that out for meself.”

Regina took one last breath and managed to straighten without falling over. “Come on, we’d better –”

She broke off. Somebody was standing in the cave mouth.

“Oi!” Robin shouted as he fired.

Zelena caught the arrow in flight with a gloved hand, grinning maniacally in the half-light. Regina prepped herself for a fight, but then Zelena turned on her heels and ran into the ice cave.

“Where is she going?” said Robin while reloading his bow.
A sinking feeling gripped Regina’s stomach. She looked to Neal, who had come to the same conclusion.

“Emma,” he murmured. A moment later he sprinted into the cave after the Witch, leaving Regina with no choice but to chase him.

———

“Elsa!”

Emma had a bad feeling in her gut. She didn’t know how far she’d gone. It didn’t help that she kept running into the walls, the ice was so transparent in places, or that she wasn’t sure she knew how to turn around if she tried. Mirror reflections of herself stared out of every crevice, making her jump at every sign of movement.

“Elsa!”

She couldn’t be that far, Emma thought.

*Whoosh!*

Emma ducked. A chill froze her bones as the flying snowball grazed her before smashing into the wall. White snowflake silhouettes burst onto the glossy blue surface.

“Stay back!” called a voice.

“Elsa!”

“Please stay back!”

Emma leant back on the ice, watching fractal patterns continue to form, a thought nagging at the back of her mind. Then she made a random connection and mentally smacked herself on the forehead.

*Ice wall, ice sorceress!* she chided herself. *Why the hell didn’t I see this before?*

“Elsa, I promise I’m not here to hurt you,” she called, saving the breakthrough for later. “My name is Emma Swan. I’m the sheriff.”

“Please!” Elsa cried. She was somewhere nearby, Emma thought as she crab-crawled against the wall. “Please, just stay back! I don’t wanna hurt you.”

Emma turned a corner. She could see a hint of blue darker than the rest of the ice. Just a few feet more.

“Elsa, I can help you. If somebody wants to hurt you, I can help –”

“No, you can’t,” sobbed Elsa. “You can’t help me.”

Emma rounded the last column of ice to see a figure crouching in a crevice, huddled into a ball with her knees drawn up to her chest. Emma lowered her gun right as Elsa looked up, bright blue eyes reddened with tears. Just in time, Emma jumped out of the way as pale blue light arced from Elsa’s hands and hit the roof, sending a ton of ice crashing into the tunnel.
They landed in the cabin. Belle gasped and stumbled against a chair, trying to pull as much air as possible into her lungs.

“Belle …?” Rumple murmured uncertainly, hands ghosting her shoulders.

Once she caught her breath – and pushed the image of King Richard and the gunshot out of her mind – she murmured, “We have to go back.”

“What?”

She turned to him, staring him straight in his eyes. “We have to go back. We can’t just leave Granny and the others to deal with them alone –”

“Belle, you’re hurt.”

She was, now that she noticed. “It’s just a cut,” she said. There was a first aid kit in the cupboard above the fridge; she went to get it.

“I could heal that.”

“It’s alright; it’s not that deep.”

“Belle –”

“Rumple.”

He remained still for a moment, then found a bandage in the kit and helped to wrap it around her injured arm. As he did, Belle watched his carefully guarded expression.

“It happened again, didn’t it?”

A few seconds passed. Then he slowly nodded. “Yes.”

“You said you had it under control.”

“I thought I did.”

“Then how –” Belle cut herself off with a groan. That wasn’t going to help them right now. “How do you feel?” she asked instead.

Rumple shrugged. “A bit light-headed.” He glanced at her, worry shadowing his face. “Did I hurt anyone?”

“No.”

He shut his eyes and sighed in relief.

Belle lifted a hand, laid it on his shoulder and gently massaged his neck with her fingers. “Look,” she started softly, “I understand why you did what you just did. You probably just saved my life; thank you. But we can’t leave the rest of the town to deal with Richard by themselves.”

“Emma and Regina –”

“Could use all the help they can get.” She smiled sweetly. “Especially now.”
“But what if –” He gulped and looked away. “What if I black out again?”

“I’ll be right next to you to make sure it doesn’t.”

Another few seconds passed. He silently begged her – she could almost hear his voice in her head, pleading – but she remained still. It was the right thing to do. They could handle anything else afterwards.

He nodded. “Alright.”

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There was ice everywhere. Robin didn’t think he had ever seen so much ice in his life.

At least it was all one, nice straight tunnel, and not a maze they had to try and negotiate. He slunk along the wall, Regina and Bae in front of him, with his bow half-drawn. His brain was doing cartwheels trying to take in the number of reflections; with each new angle came new shadows for Robin to jump at. Their feet crunched on the snowy ground. The sound circled the tunnel, repeating over and over until Robin’s head hurt.

“How far could she have possibly gone?” Bae whispered to Regina. In the confines of the tunnel, he may as well have shouted.

“I don’t know,” said Regina, ducking to avoid a glistening stalactite.

Crunch, crunch. The others turned a corner. Robin hung back a second, something other than the cold causing his skin to prickle –

“Hello, Robin.”

As he spun around, Zelena closed the gap between him until she was within arm’s reach. Robin realised his bow was gone. He tried to yell for Regina, but his mouth would not form the words.

“Shh, now,” Zelena crooned, laying a finger on his lips, which did nothing to hide the sadistic glint in her eyes. Something sticky that smelt faintly of olives came to rest on Robin’s skin. He had no idea what the spell was supposed to do, but given its caster, it couldn’t be anything good. “There’s no need for that. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you,” said Robin in an undertone. That was all the witch’s charm would allow.

The icky feeling on his skin wouldn’t go away, and he wanted to squirm. Pity he was trapped between a witch and an ice wall.

“Why do you wish to be with my sister?” Zelena asked, her voice low and sultry as she leant in uncomfortably close. “Would you come with me? I can give you so much more, so much better than her.”

Well, this was a new tactic. Surprise had turned Robin’s thought processes to slush. “Uh –”

She lunged in to kiss him, and he did the only thing he could think of, which was to shove her away with both hands. She hit the ice with a sickening crack, desire turning to fury as her eyes flashed.

“You’ll regret that.”
“I get that a lot.”

Zelena rounded on him, face burning red and eyes flaming. Robin found that he couldn’t move, couldn’t shout, and was most likely a dead man if not for the fireball that burst from the end of the tunnel and slashed Zelena across the face.

“*Take – your – hands – off – him,*” Regina snarled, another fireball ready to go.

Zelena laughed like she was perfectly happy to give Regina the fight she was asking for. She was so focused on her sister that she didn’t notice Bae had picked up Robin’s bow and fired it until the arrowhead sliced through her arm. Blood splattered on the wall behind her as she yelped in pain. Regina sent another fireball flying, which Zelena was able to deflect the worst of, but it still burnt her hands and face. Bae had another arrow ready to go. Zelena vanished before he could shoot.

“Nice shot,” said Robin now that his voice had returned. That icky feeling hadn’t gone, however, and upon seeing Regina, had morphed into a dreadful tug of desire that urgently demanded to be fulfilled. Suddenly – and not without a sick feeling in his gut – Robin understood the point of Zelena’s attempted charm.

“Are you alright?” asked Regina, checking him up and down. Robin fought the urge to do something stupid, like shove her against the wall and kiss her repeatedly.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Sorry, she got the drop on me.”

Bae handed the bow back. “You’ll need that, then.”

“Thanks, Bae.” Robin took a deep breath and whispered to Regina, “Can you take this thing off me before I do something stupid?”

Regina raised an eyebrow. “Define stupid.”

“Uh, something that would be highly embarrassing to do in front of Bae and would likely make you hit me.”

“Oh.”

She looked just a touch too amused as she unravelled Zelena’s charm, and Robin steadily regained full control of his impulses. A little of the urge remained but was satisfied with a quick kiss.

“You too about done?” said Bae. “We’ve still got to find Emma –”

That was when the whole tunnel rumbled as in an avalanche.

Emma was having a really weird dream. She was trapped in an ice cave. She had a gun, a lacy white gown that sparkled like freshly fallen snow, and no boots. Strangely, the floor didn’t feel cold underneath her bare feet. Somewhere, far off, something roared. And again. Every time, it seemed to come from a different direction. Emma spun around, but all she saw was a different face reflected in the ice – Neal, Henry – Regina – Snow – Elsa – David –

“Dad?”

“*Emma? Emma! Wake up!*”
“Wha –”

Something or somebody shook her roughly by the shoulders. Suddenly, Emma felt extremely cold. She then realised that was because her cheek had become plastered to the floor.

“Aah!”

“Oh, thank God,” said a nearby voice, presumably the person who had woken her. “Are you alright? I’m – I’m so sorry, I tried to stop it from caving in –”

It was Elsa, Emma finally registered. “Whoa, whoa. Stop. Can you help me get up?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.”

Holding onto Elsa for support, Emma managed to drag herself off the floor and sat upright, leaning against the ice wall until the fog cleared from her head. Nothing hurt, exactly, but her entire left side felt numb. That wasn’t half as disturbing as the scene that greeted her – a ton of ice, snow and slush that had fallen from the cavern roof, trapping her and Elsa inside a tiny crevasse that they could stand in only if they stooped.

“Huh,” Emma muttered, feeling dumb.

“I’m so sorry,” said Elsa, looking down at her hands while flexing her fingers. “I tried to stop it, but once it gets started it has a life of its own –”

“It’s alright,” said Emma. She shivered and her breath fogged in front of her face. The cold had cut straight through her jacket. “How long was I out?”

“Not long. A minute or so.”

“Okay, that’s not so bad.” She shivered again and hugged herself, trying to conserve warmth. “Regina’s probably dealt with the snow monster by now, so all you have to do is press the undo button, and we’ll get out of here.”

“Uh,” Elsa stammered. “That, uh, that’s kind of the problem. I – I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“I – I can’t – can’t undo this.”

“Oh.”

Elsa cringed apologetically and then sat cross-legged with her back to the wall, staring at the cave-in.

“Aren’t you cold?” asked Emma incredulously, looking Elsa up and down. All she had on was a calf-length light blue summer dress and a navy cardigan. She was even barefoot.

“It’s never bothered me.”

“Lucky you.” Emma pulled herself up straighter and bent her knees experimentally. It hurt but nothing felt broken. Her gun was gone, however. Probably buried under the snow. “Are you alright?”

Elsa shrugged. “I don’t know.”
“Well, just sit tight, okay? Regina and the others won’t be too far behind. They’ll dig us out.” Emma chuckled to herself. “Although if I know Regina, that’s assuming we don’t drown in melted ice first.”

Elsa cringed again. “I really am sorry.”

“That’s alright. I know you’re scared.” Elsa didn’t look convinced, so Emma added, “I know what it’s like to have powers you feel like you can’t control.”


“Hey.” Emma reached for her. Elsa’s touch was as cold as the ice around them, but it made the younger woman stop stammering. “Really. It’s okay. We’ll get out of here.”

Elsa nodded and wiped her eyes.

Emma bit her cheek. “Elsa, I have to ask – what are you doing out here?”

“I’m hiding.”

“From who?”

“From the one they call Faílinis.”

Emma shook her head. “Faílinis? Who’s that?”

“He’s the man who locked me up,” said Elsa. “He caught me, two weeks ago, after Weselton came for me. I – I was being kept in a building somewhere. I – I don’t know where. But, uh, yesterday I managed to break the lock on my cell. I – I didn’t know where I was, so I just ran into the woods –”

“Hey.” Emma gave Elsa’s hand a gentle squeeze. It had the needed effect, and Elsa took a deep breath. “It’s gonna be okay. I promise. We can handle this Faílinis guy and –”

“No, you can’t. You don’t even know who he is.”

“Do you?” The other woman made no response. “Elsa, who is he?”

She sniffled and looked up. “He’s the Witch’s father.”

“Emma!”

Main Street was a mess. Snow didn’t know where to go first. There were wounded lined up outside of Granny’s, attended to by Tinkerbell and Anita. Others had been corralled into the nearby shops, the doors guarded by gruff, heavily armed soldiers. Everywhere Snow turned, she saw looks of capitulation.

Obviously, the battle hadn’t gone well.

The masked gunman who had pulled her out of the loft – right when she was getting Jesse to sleep, of all times! – grabbed her by the arm as they passed the diner.

“Alright, alright!” Snow protested, wrenching her arm free. Her arms were full with a baby; what
did he think she’d do?

The gunman muttered a curse and settled for prodding her in the back with his shotgun.

In the main square beneath the clock tower, a command centre had been established. Four vans and a pickup truck blocked the intersection, each vehicle with its doors wide open and folding tables set up in the middle.

“Ah, Queen Snow!” said Richard jovially, rolling up a length of paper that looked suspiciously like a map as Snow approached. “Just in time.”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, Richard?” Snow demanded. “This town will never follow you.”

Richard just chuckled. “Well, we’ll see.”

“If you think Emma and Regina will just stand by and let you run roughshod over Storybrooke, then –”

“Oh, I fully expect that a certain amount of persuasion will be required,” said Richard. “That is, of course, where you and your little prince come in.”

Snow self-consciously cradled Jesse closer to her chest.

“We’ve already secured the length of Main Street,” he continued, striding confidently around the table. “We’ve also closed access to our side of the wall once more, which means we control the majority of the town, all of the major businesses and hold – at last count – two hundred and sixteen of your loyalists hostage in various locations. I’m afraid there were a few unfortunate injuries, but no fatalities – yet.” Richard’s eyes twinkled maliciously. “You’re welcome to try and contact your allies on the other side, but good luck getting them onto our side of the wall.”

“So this is how it’s going to be, then?” asked Snow. “You’ll hold my people hostage until we give over control of the town to you?”

Richard grinned. “Yup.”

He stepped aside and a guard opened a minivan door.

“I expect you’ll wish to consult with your governing council about this matter,” said Richard. The man guarding Snow jabbed her in the back with his rifle, prodding her towards the van. “They’re all in there. Take as much time as you require. Of course, I should mention that some of the injured are quite seriously so – and the hospital is on the other side of the wall. So for their sakes, you may not want to take too long.”

Snow stepped inside, and the guard slammed the door shut behind her.

“Snow?” murmured a voice. Snow saw that it was Archie once her eyes had adjusted to the low light.

“Archie?” she called, looking around. “Granny? Dorothy? Leroy?”

“We’re all here, Snow,” Leroy grunted. He and Happy were squished in the passenger seat, Bashful in the driver’s side. Granny, Dorothy, Archie and Sleepy took up the remainder of the room in the back of the minivan.
“What happened?”

“It’s a little hard to tell,” said Archie. He got up and stepped over Sleepy’s prone form, directing Snow to his empty seat as best as possible in the cramped space. “They showed up, waving guns and knives. A few people tried to fight them. It didn’t last long.”

“Anybody hurt?”

“King Josef took a pretty nasty shot in the stomach,” said Leroy. “He was alive last I saw.”

“I saw Tink and Anita tending to the wounded,” said Snow.

“Yeah, they split everybody up into groups,” Archie offered. “I guess they thought it’d make it harder for us to fight back.”

“I’ve been trying to call Emma for twenty minutes now,” said Dorothy, shaking her head. “No luck.”

“Regina isn’t answering either,” added Happy.

Snow pinched the bridge of her nose. She felt Jesse grumble and wriggle about in his wrap.

“How many of them are there?”

“Too many to take on, sister,” growled Leroy, “if that’s what you’re asking.”

“We can still show those dogs a damn good fight,” said Granny, making to stand up. Snow placed a hand over the old wolf’s.

“No,” she declared, her words like cymbal crashes in the confined, stuffy space. “If we try to fight back, they’ll start shooting people.”

“Too many people will be hurt,” Archie concurred.

Snow nodded. “We don’t have a choice,” she said, looking at each person in turn. Expressions varied, from Archie and Dorothy’s looks of sombre acceptance to Granny’s glowering defiance and Sleepy’s monotone snores. “I’ll make the call. We surrender.”

She got up, squeezed her way to the minivan’s sliding door and knocked.

“Emma!” Neal bellowed as he threw himself on the pile of collapsed snow and ice, ignoring the way his hands and fingers froze until they burned. “Emma, can you hear me?”

“Neal?” called a voice. It sounded weak, but it was hard to tell through all the ice. “Is that you?”

He almost cried in relief. “Yeah, it’s me! Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine! I’ve got Elsa with me! Did you think you can dig us out?”

“Way ahead of you!”

He dug as best he could, scraping his hands on the blocks of ice he hauled out of the way. Within thirty seconds, he’d dug a basketball-sized hole and couldn’t feel anything below his wrists.
“Go on, get out of the way,” said Regina, who had just caught up with Robin. Her hands flickered with the onset of flames. “I’ll have this sorted in no time. You two keep an eye out for Zelena.”

That suited Neal just fine, and he plunged his hands into his jacket, shivering profusely.

“Emma!” Regina shouted. “I need you to get as far back as you can! I’m going to try and blast through!”

“Alright, just hurry!” Emma shouted back. “It’s getting pretty damn cold in here!”

“Hold up!” said Robin, raising his bow and ready to shoot in less than a second. “We’ve got company!”

Neal heard the rumbling a moment later, and a round shape zoomed across the reflections in the ice. It came to a stop at the bottom of the slope, where it then grew arms and legs and a head decorated with a leafy crown. Neal stared. He’d never seen a troll before, but Emma’s description of ‘ugly Smurf’ was pretty much right on the money. Not that he was going to say that, of course.

Regina skidded down the slope and glared daggers at the troll, who looked entirely unconcerned.

“You did this,” she said with enough venom to kill a rhinoceros.

“I did nothing, Queen Regina,” the troll replied coldly.

“Get them out of there.”

The troll shook his head. “I am sorry that it has come to this, dear lady.”

“Hey!”

Neal had barrelled down the slope and grabbed the troll by the arms, and only realised what he’d done after shaking the rock creature enough to make its eyes spin.

“You heard her. Get them out of there. Or you get out of here; I don’t care.”

“I can’t do that either, I’m afraid,” said the troll, still without any inflexion. Neal shook him again.

Robin grabbed Neal and pulled him back. “Bae, I don’t think that’s such a good idea –”

He never finished the sentence, because the moment Neal let go of the troll, it curled into a ball once more, rolled up the wall, gaining enough momentum to send itself flying into the collapsed tunnel. Shards of blue ice rained over all of them.

One hit Neal in the eye.

“STOP RIGHT THERE!”

Henry had no idea where Jonathan had come from, or how he happened to have found the Merry Men in the middle of the woods, but he definitely seemed to know what he had come for. Henry did his best to shield Roland while peering around Little John’s side to watch Alan and Much raise bows. Jonathan didn’t even seem to notice them.

“I said, stop right there!” Alan demanded, raising his bow higher.
Jonathan raised his hands.

“I have no desire to quarrel with you, Alan of Rochedale,” he said calmly, never once breaking stride. His eyes glinted as he said it; Henry felt a tremor down his spine and he gripped Roland’s hand tightly.

“I’m warning you, mate. Back – off – now!”

“All I want is the boy,” said the man, still advancing. “Hand him over, and I’m happy to let you go.”

“Like hell,” Much spat.

Does he mean me or Roland? Henry wondered in between calculating which was the best way to run.

Meanwhile, Alan steadily shuffled backwards until he stepped on John’s toes. “I’ll take him. You grab the kids …”

“I don’t want to fight you,” said the man.

“… count of three …”

“Just give me the boy. Don’t make this any messier than it has to be.”

“… ready? One, two …”

“You don’t want to fight me, Alan a’Dale. Think of your daughter –”

“GO!”

Alan and Much fired in quick succession; the man blocked both arrows with a magical shield, but it was enough for Alan. He lunged and tackled the man while John scooped Roland into his arms and Henry grabbed Charlotte’s hand, pulling her with him into the dark woods. Brambles cut at his hands and face as he raced to keep up with John’s giant strides. He didn’t look back to see what happened to Alan, Much and Tuck.

Footsteps crunched on the undergrowth behind him. Henry ran faster.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 24: The Spell of Shattered Sight, in which the trolls’ curse takes effect: Emma snaps, Neal has a fight with his father, Snow and Belle realise they have a common enemy, Regina protects her family, and a storm hits Storybrooke
Elsa huddled as far back in the ice as she could manage, as if making herself small and invisible so the storm couldn’t find her. She could feel it, lurking, brewing, looming in the darkest depths of her mind where existed the monsters she thought she had buried so long ago –

If only she could control it.

“Stop it,” she muttered. “Please. Just make it stop.”

The others in the cave took no notice of her.

“What the hell, Regina!” shouted Emma Swan, kicking a pile of debris. Snowflakes scattered over the cave in a miniature snowstorm. “Were you trying to kill me with that?!”

“Well, you’re welcome for the rescue!” Queen Regina spat back with equal ferocity. “Again!”

“Will you two just shut the hell up already!” snapped the man engaged to the sheriff, Neal Cassidy.

Off to the side, Robin Hood looked confused.

“Why the bloody hell am I here?” he said, more to himself than anyone else. “I’ve got a score to settle.”

Ignoring the others, he shouldered his bow and marched out of the cave. Elsa buried her head in her hands and frantically rocked back and forth, trying to block out the sounds of the argument.

“Please stop. Please, just stop.”

“And speaking of what you were thinking,” continued Regina, “you’re the one who ran into what was obviously a trap!”

“After your sister!” Emma retorted. “Maybe I should just arrest the both of you before my son gets kidnapped again!”

“Funny, you didn’t seem so worried about him for the first ten years of his life!”

Neal snorted. “Huh! Apparently, neither did you!”

Immediately, both women rounded on him.

“You think I’m the bad guy here?” demanded Regina. “I’m the one who took care of him while you were off robbing jewellery stores or whatever the hell it was you were doing!”

“That’s not my fault! I didn’t even know he existed!”
“You left me in jail!” Emma shouted. “I couldn’t have told you even if I’d wanted to!”

“I lost ten years with my son because of you!”

“He’s not your son!” Regina cried, loud enough that the whole cavern shook. “He’s mine! And I am not going to let either of you take him away from me again!”

And with that, Regina flung up her hands and teleported away. Unnoticed in the corner, Elsa let out a sob.

“Oh, great! More magic!” Neal made a rude gesture at the dissipating red smoke. “That’s just the fucking answer to everything in this town!”

Emma huffed and rolled her eyes. “This again!”

“Yeah, this again!”

“Well, if you’re so damn smart, Mr Son-of-Rumpelstiltskin, maybe you should run the place!”

“Maybe I will!”

“Ha!”

They continued to argue as they left the tunnel, the force of their shouting quaking the ice. Elsa dug her fingers into her scalp so hard she drew blood, but she barely noticed the pain. The storm just continued to grow, and she could still hear the shouting, the arguing, the hatred –

She got up and ran.

The storm followed.

“I’m glad you decided to make this easy, Snow,” said Richard as he rolled out a length of paper marked with the royal seals of Gaul and the Southern Isles. It easily covered the table in Granny’s diner and written in tiny, spidery script. “Contrary to what you might think, I wanted a drawn-out battle no more than you do.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Snow.

Richard merely gave a little huff and offered her a pen.

She took a moment to adjust so that she could hold Jesse in one arm and write with the other, squinting while she tried to decipher the handwriting. Overhead, the lights flickered. Obviously, whoever had penned this had done so with the intention of covering all possible bases. There was a blank line beneath Richard’s signature and seal for Snow to sign, but she hesitated.

It was long overdue that she took a leaf out of Rumplestiltskin’s book.

“Before I sign this,” she said, slowly and clearly, “I want to make a deal.”

Behind her, the Duke of Weselton snorted. “You’re in no position to be making demands, Queen Snow.”

“This is a deal you’ll want to make,” said Snow, ignoring the Duke and focusing on Richard. He
leant against the counter with a mug of hot tea, watching her with curiosity.

“I’m listening.”

“I’ll hand over full control of the town to you – the mayor’s office, the sheriff’s station, everything. You can elect whoever you want to any important position in the town. And I’ll make sure Emma, Regina and Rumplestiltskin cooperate.”

Richard nodded. “Alright.”

“In exchange, I want you to personally guarantee everyone’s safety.”

“Everyone being your family, I’m assuming?”

“No, I mean everyone in this town.”

He raised an eyebrow. Snow went on.

“They’re to be allowed to live in peace, without fear of injustice or discrimination. Your government is to accept proper and equal representation from all classes, not just the nobility. And if we ever do find a way home, I want everyone, regardless of former station or nationally, to be offered the choice of either staying in Storybrooke or returning to the Enchanted Forest as free men and women, not prisoners.”

Richard was contemplative.

“And I want it in writing. With Princess Abigail present during the drafting and the signing.”

Oh, Snow could make the demands well enough, but when it came to the fine points of the deal – and she knew Richard, or at least those backing him, would be onto any loophole they could find like bloodhounds – she lacked the necessary eye for detail. Sadly, she doubted they would let Rumplestiltskin be the one to broker the deal – and truthfully, Snow didn’t trust the man not to throw in a clause or two for his own benefit anyway. That left Abigail Cole, a student of law in both the Enchanted Forest and Storybrooke, as the next best person.

“We hold over two hundred of your precious townfolk hostage right now,” snarled the Duke. “Sign the damned document.”

“No, no, Oskar, her demands are reasonable enough,” said Richard, sipping his tea. “If we were in her shoes, we’d do no less.”

The Duke’s moustache quivered as he tried to find the right words. “Are you joking, man?”

Richard ignored him. Instead he took the pen back from Snow and rolled up the terms of surrender.

“I’m not a complete brute,” he said, directing the statement at Snow. “You want to do what you think is best for the people. So do I. We simply have different methods of achieving the same results.”

“If you’re attempting to appeal to me,” Snow snapped, shifting Jesse to her right arm as the left had gone numb, “you can save it for the peace talks.”

Richard gave a small smile. It might have been Snow’s imagination, but she thought he might actually be a little impressed.

She had no chance to find out, as at that moment, the lights flickered again and then died
completely. While everybody in the diner looked at each other in surprise, a young page burst through the door.

“Pridelanders, sir! Practically on our front doorstep!”

Richard was on the move in an instant. “To stations!” he barked at the guards, who all followed him and the Duke out of the door. Nobody remained, so Snow looked down at Jesse, grabbed somebody’s abandoned coat and made her way outside unhindered.

“What’s going on?”

“It seems King Simba had gone and made himself a little army of his own,” Richard replied while the commanders rattled off orders and scout reports. Snow followed him as close as she could amongst the sudden outburst of movement. “It seems he and Queen Nala intend to contest the terms of your surrender.”

“Do you intend to fight them?”

“If they force my hand.”

“We had a deal –!”

“You can only ensure the capitulation of your daughter and stepmother, Snow,” Richard snapped. “If others intend to rise up, we will shut them down. Might I suggest you get yourself and your son to safety? I can spare no men to protect you.”

“I want to talk to them!” Snow demanded, which made Richard stop in his tracks and sigh exasperatedly. “If it’s my surrender they intend to contest, then I demand that I be allowed to speak with them!”

Richard looked as if he were about to protest, but the sound of a nearby argument cut their conversation short.

“...can’t see the looks he gives you; I’m not fucking blind, you know,” said a familiar male voice. Snow frowned and fought her way to the edge of the crowd, with Richard and the Duke close behind.

“You know, I am this close to setting your testicles on fire!” barked a female voice in return.

“Great! More magic; just what I needed today –”

“Neal?” Snow called, the faces of her daughter and son-in-law appearing from the alleyway behind Mr Gold’s pawnshop. “Emma?”

They were both red-faced and shouting; Snow felt a prickle in her skin, and knew instantly that something was wrong.

“You know what, I’ve just about had with you and –”

Emma and Neal both stopped mid-criticism when they spotted the army gathered on Main Street.

“What the hell is going on here?” Emma demanded.

The Duke cleared his throat and stepped forwards to speak. “By order of His Majesty King Richard of Gaul, His Majesty King George the Third of Carolingia and myself, the Grand Duke Oskar the Second of Weselton, I hereby declare that the town of Storybrooke is now under our command.”
There was a pause.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” said Emma. In an instant, she had drawn her gun and fired. The Duke cried in pain and fell, clutching his bloodied leg as he writhed on the ground.

Snow later remembered letting out a little scream of her own, but in the moment all she could focus on was the storm burning in Emma’s eyes.

“That was for being a pain in the ass!” her daughter shouted.

“You go too far, Sheriff Swan!” Richard roared. He unholstered his own gun and aimed it at Emma. She simply laughed.

“Alright, let’s have it your way then.”

Perhaps it was shock that kept Richard from firing up to that point. Perhaps it was distaste at shooting a woman. Either way, the duel never happened, as a third party, unbeknownst to the rest, had joined the fray, signalling his arrival by the arrow that sliced through Richard’s hand and knocked his handgun away.

By this point, Prince Ernest – who was leading the line that held the Pridelanders at bay behind the wall – had realised that something was wrong, and left a Carolingian general in charge while he fell back to find out what was going on with Richard. He arrived in time to hear the gunshot, then witness the shadowy archer take off in a hurry after missing his fatal shot at the king, and then alert the troops to the events happening behind their backs. Ernest was too late to prevent Emma from kicking Richard down and holding a gun to his head. But Snow was.

“Emma!” Snow cried in shock and disgust at her daughter’s behaviour. Yes, Richard and the Duke were complete and utter scoundrels – but nothing warranted this sort of brutality! “What the hell has gotten into you?! Stop it! Right now!”

Her mistake was to grab Emma and attempt to gain her attention that way. Emma swung an arm up to strike Snow across the face, and the moment they touched, the sensation of being dunked in a deep bucket of icy water washed over Snow.

She looked at Richard with new eyes.

“You know, you really are an asshole.”

______________________________

Given what had nearly happened outside of Granny’s, Rumplestiltskin decided that his own shop was the safest place from which to return to Main Street. He dropped himself and Belle – who had changed into a clean shirt and flat shoes – in the back room. It was dark and gloomy, and Rumplestiltskin cursed when he hit his foot on the desk leg.

“The power’s out here, too,” said Belle, flicking the light switch experimentally, with no results.

Rumplestiltskin illuminated the room with a floating ball of pale yellow light while Belle found the emergency flashlight.

“Do you have a plan?” he asked, ignoring the little shakes that had taken hold of his hands.

“Oh, not really –” She paused when sounds emanated from the front room. “Hello?”
Before he could stop her, Belle had gone to investigate.

“Hello? Hello, is somebody – Bae?”

His son took no notice of her, and continued to search through the contents of Rumplestiltskin’s safe. He’d have questioned how anyone else might crack the code, but Baelfire’s birthday had probably been one of his son’s first guesses.

“Son? What are you doing?”

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” Bae growled, abandoning his search of the safe. He moved on to the front desk, where he proceeded to pull out all the drawers with unnecessary force. “I’m going out to the well and I’m gonna destroy magic before it destroys all of us.”

“What?” Rumplestiltskin and Belle said in unison.

“Bae, no,” Rumplestiltskin begged, reaching for his son. “I can’t let you do this.”

Bae slammed the drawer shut as he straightened and fixed Rumplestiltskin with a cold glare.

“Can’t or won’t, Papa?”

“Baelfire –”

“IT’S NEAL!”

Rumplestiltskin gulped and forced himself to meet Bae’s gaze, no matter how small he felt. Obviously something must have happened to Emma or Henry to make Bae behave like this.

“Son, whatever happened, we can fix it, I promise –”

“You promised me that if I came up with a way to get rid of the Dark One without killing you, you’d do it,” Bae snapped. “Well, I’ve got one. Now are you going to help me, or are you going to break our deal for the second time?”

“That’s not what I’m doing –”

“Yes, it is! You always do this! You always choose your power over your family! You’re a coward and an idiot, Papa!”

“Bae –”

It was the wrong thing to say. Bae punched him. Rumplestiltskin fell to the floor and struck his head against the counter on the way down. He stayed there dazed for several seconds, vaguely taking in the events of the next minute.

As Bae prepared to hit again, Belle grabbed him by the wrists. “Bae, stop it! This isn’t–!”

She never finished the sentence. Instead she went still, and Bae wrestled himself free.

“How can you stand to be with such a coward?” he snapped before barging out of the shop, slamming the door on his way out.

By the time Rumplestiltskin had recovered and hauled himself to his feet, Belle was still frozen. She didn’t even blink; just stared at the door.

“Belle?”
She calmly turned to look at him. “He’s right. You are an idiot.”

“What?”

Instead of replying, she merely rolled her eyes and made to follow Bae out of the door. Rumplestiltskin sharply followed.

“Belle! Please talk to me! What is going on?”

She stopped so suddenly that he almost ran into her.

“What’s going on is that I’m in love with an idiot,” she snapped, eyes blazing ferociously. “Seriously, the Evil Queen tells you that I’m dead and you just take her at her word? How stupid are you?”

“Well –”

He stood there blubbering, trying to make some sense of the situation while Belle waited for him to come up with an answer. He took too long.

“You do what you want. I’m going out there to make sure Richard doesn’t hurt anybody else.”

And with that, she wrenched the door open and marched out.

“Belle, please! Please come back! Belle –”

She hadn’t gone far. In fact, she had only made it to the corner, where something much more interesting had caught her attention. Primarily, Emma holding a gun to the head of King Richard, who was on the ground and already bleeding.

On instinct, Rumplestiltskin magicked the gun away.

“Hey!” Emma shouted, singling him out as the obvious perpetrator from the people around. “Who the hell asked you to get involved?”

Belle huffed. “If you think this is bad, you should try living with him,” she muttered.

Meanwhile, Snow had walked straight up to Rumplestiltskin with the baby cradled in one arm, and slapped him across the face.

“That’s for separating me from my daughter for twenty-eight years!”

“Would you mind not beating him up too much?” asked Belle with utter indifference while Rumplestiltskin let out an involuntary gasp of pain. “Whatever you break, I have to fix.”

“What the hell is going on?” gasped the Duke of Weselton, who had left a trail of smeared blood behind in an effort to get far away from an unusually trigger-happy Emma Swan. It seemed that Richard had been smarter and ran for it while everyone else was distracted.

Emma glared at the injured duke. “Are you still whining?”

“You screwed up and it cost you your son. I get it; I really do,” Snow continued as if nothing else were happening. “But how – dare – you – punish the rest of us for your mistakes! Do you even care what your godforsaken curse did to us?!”

“Wasn’t his only mistake,” Belle muttered.
“I lost my child and my husband because of you!” Snow went on. Rumplestiltskin cowered by the shop door, unable to make any sense of the situation. It didn’t help that the tremors had come back, stronger than before. “Thousands of people lost their homes, their livelihoods, their families, because of you! How can you be so selfish as to think that’s a price worth paying for your –”

“Whoa, whoa, wait a second,” Belle then interrupted, bringing Snow’s tirade to an end. Rumplestiltskin felt a glimmer of hope, strange as it was, but the feeling was immediately quashed by Belle’s next words. “What are we wasting this on him for?”

Snow looked thoughtful, then clicked her fingers. “Right!”

Like scholars who had just come up with a groundbreaking idea, the two women jumped into action – Snow shoved Rumplestiltskin aside and made her way into the shop, while Belle picked up a handgun that had been discarded in the street and stuck it in the waistband of her slacks. A moment later, Snow returned with a long strip of material that she handed to Belle.

“Can you help me with this?”

Rumplestiltskin’s voice returned. “What – what are you doing?”

“Have you ever tried carrying a baby around all day?” Emma snapped. She’d searched Weselton for weaponry and come up with a small knife, which she seemed to find suitable enough. “It’s exhausting. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got an asshole to chase down.”

“And we should get going, too,” said Belle, tying the last knot that would allow Snow to carry Jesse in a sling and left both hands free. When she was done, she came over to Rumplestiltskin – who flinched, fearing a third attack – but all she did was kiss him on the cheek.

“See you soon, sweetheart.”

Wait, what?

“Belle, where are you going?”

She looked at him like it should’ve been obvious. “We’re going on a witch-hunt, of course.”

“What?!”

She just gave him a smile. “We’ll be back soon,” she said before joining in step with Snow, the two of them determinedly marching down Main Street as if they were late for a meeting.

Rumplestiltskin found himself unable to do anything but stare. His brain had simply stopped working. Absent-mindedly, he lifted a hand and gently touched the spot on his cheek where Belle had kissed him. A few cogs kicked back into action when he caught the smell.

“Twinflowers?” he muttered, looking at his fingers. The magic was fading rapidly, overtaken by the darkness of his own, but enough of a trace remained for him to identify the pale blue tendrils present in the aura. Rumplestiltskin had made it a habit to know the colours and scents of every sorcerer in the Enchanted Forest, lest he ever run into a problem such as this. He only knew of one marked with the scent of the Arendellian flower. “Queen Elsa.”

There was a second marker, in addition to the foul taste of tarnished metal that Rumplestiltskin barely noticed anymore. This one was so faint that Rumplestiltskin had to feed it a little magic of his own – the Dark One had no aura to contaminate it – until it was strong enough for him to taste a touch of bluebells on the tip of his tongue.
Bluebells meant rock trolls.

And rock trolls meant –

Rumplestiltskin started, and looked around for Belle and Snow, only to find that they had vanished from view.

So it seemed that Prince Hans had been right after all.

Archie watched the entire commotion from the other side of the intersection. The soldiers guarding him and the dwarves were long gone, swept up in the battle with the Pridelanders that had since moved further down Main Street. Mostly. Archie ducked a flying saucepan, which hit the minivan with a *thunk*, and raced across the street after Snow and Belle. *This* wasn’t them, whatever *this* was. Belle would never raise her voice to Rumplestiltskin like that; and truthfully, Archie didn’t think Snow would either.

She certainly wouldn’t *slap* the Dark One in the face.

“Belle!” he shouted, breaking into a jog as he tried to catch them. “Snow!”

He made it to the pavement before somebody barrelled into him, that same somebody then dragging him through the library’s double doors and slamming them shut a moment later.

“Trust me, buddy, you do not want to be out there right now,” said the mystery man, who had a maroon scarf covering the lower half of his face and a grey cowl obscuring the rest.

“What? What’s going on? What –?”

“Archie?”

Somebody lit a flashlight in the gloom of the library, searing Archie’s corneas. He raised an arm and the person lowered the light.

“Sorry, doc,” said Tinkerbell, revealed to be the caster of the light. Now that Archie’s eyes had adjusted to the gloom, he realised she wasn’t alone. With her were Dorothy, four of the dwarves, Frederick, Abigail and – much to Archie’s relief – Anita. Granny was by the door, her crossbow prepped and ready to fire the moment somebody undesirable tried to cross the threshold. A small crowd huddled amongst the bookcases, searching for whatever warmth and safety they could find. Propped up by the main desk with his legs on a cushion was King Josef, looking extremely pale and labouring with each breath.

“We dragged him and the worst of the wounded in here when the guns started blazing,” said Anita, dabbing a wet towel on the king’s forehead. Archie knelt next to her. Outside, the battle raged, but it sounded like it was moving further away.

“How is he?”

Anita let out a breath that was half-huff and half-sigh. “Very bad. All I can do is stem the bleeding and hope the bullet didn’t nick his liver or the mesenteric artery. And two of the others are going to be in a similar condition before long. I don’t have the equipment or the training to help them.”

Archie looked up. “Tink?”
The young fairy looked squeamish. “I can try, but there isn’t a lot I can do without my wand. If I had some fairy dust –”

“Even if all you do is slow the bleeding, that could buy him several hours at least,” said Anita.

After a moment, Tink slowly nodded. She took up position at Josef’s side, her left arm glittering with fairy magic. Archie stood up to give them some room. That was when he realised that an argument had broken out.

“Yes, I realise there’s a war going on out there, but that’s not our biggest problem at the moment!” shouted the man in the trench coat. He’d divested himself of the hood and lowered his scarf, revealing a mop of flaming red hair and a youthful face no older than twenty-five. Archie recognised him from the town hall: Prince Hans.

“Oh, really! I’m guessing you didn’t nearly get shot by a man in a tin dress!” Leroy shouted right back. He was backed by grumbles of approval from the dwarves.

“Did you count how many soldiers they’ve got out there?” asked a dark-haired woman. Charlotte Webster, the fifth-grade teacher. “If that’s not our biggest problem, then –”

“Alright!” Archie then shouted, attracting everyone’s attention and another burst from the flashlights. While he blinked the twinkling worms away, he continued: “Hans. What happened to Emma and Neal?”

Hans breathed a sigh of relief as everybody went quiet. “That is the Spell of Shattered Sight. Uh, simplest way to describe it is that it’s a curse that turns people into the worst possible versions of themselves. See, Sheriff Swan, and the others who got cursed – they’re not thinking right now. At all. They could do just about anything, and it’s only going to get worse.”

“You’re sure that’s what this is?” asked Archie.

“Look, you saw what happened out there as well as I did,” said Hans. “You look me in the eye and tell me you actually think Sheriff Swan would, under any rational circumstances, shoot an unarmed man. Even one who’s as much of a pain as Uncle Oskar.”

Archie shook his head. “No.”

“Exactly. And that storm out there – that’s no weather anomaly. That’s Elsa, and unless she’s decided to take up the Evil Queen’s mantle, I’ll bet she’s been cursed too. And that’s a big problem.”

A few people looked at each other. Even in the confines of the dusty library, everybody could feel the cold.

“It’s only going to get colder as long as that storm keeps up,” Hans went on. “And Elsa could keep it going for days. Weeks, even. This is what happened at her coronation. She started a freak storm, froze the whole fjord in a matter of minutes.”

“Well, then we need to get people out of here,” said Archie. “If there’s a magical snowstorm about to hit –”

“It won’t do any good,” Frederick interrupted. “The road out of Storybrooke is already snowed over.”

“The power’s out across most of the town, too,” said Abigail.
“We need to find Elsa,” said Hans. “Find her, break the spell, and then she can stop the storm on her own. And in the meantime, we need to be get everyone who’s been cursed and lock them up.”

“Why?” demanded Leroy.

“Because we’ve got enough problems out there with King Richard and King Simba duking it out,” said Hans. “If we add in a bunch of cursed people with no sense of reason, it’s going to get even uglier, and fast.”

“Wait, wait, I thought you said it was only Emma and Neal who’d been cursed?” said Abigail.

“No, now it’s Snow and Belle too,” said Archie.

“Because they touched Emma and Neal,” said Hans. “Look, it’s just a theory, but there’s no way that the trolls or anybody else could curse everybody in this town all at once. So I think what they’ve done is made a way for the curse to spread by touch from person to person. One cursed person picks a fight, somebody else steps in – well, you saw what happened to Belle and Snow.”

Oh, gods, thought Archie. That could mean dozens of people had been cursed already –

He had a horrible thought. “Has anybody been able to get in touch with Regina?”

A few heads shook. Some, like Abigail and Tinkerbell, went pale when they realised the same thing Archie had.

“That doesn’t necessarily mean anything,” said Dorothy, though she looked uncertain. “We lost the phones just before the power went out.”

“Doesn’t matter; we’ll find her,” said Leroy. “The rest of you track down Emma and Snow and anyone else who’s been cursed.”

“You’ll need gloves,” said Hans. “Cover up as best you can. Don’t let them touch you.”

Leroy nodded. “Understood, brother.”

“How do we round up the rest of them?” asked Dorothy.

Hans shook his head and sighed. “I don’t know. Somehow. They won’t come easy; any of them. And they’re gonna be a danger to themselves as much as anybody else.”

“We can lock them up in the sheriff’s station,” Frederick suggested.

“I can make some room in the freezer,” added Granny.

“Well, we’ll cross that sund when we get to it,” said Hans. “Most important thing right now is to try and stop this from spreading.”

“Hans,” said Archie, taking a deep breath. “How do we break the curse?”

The young prince swallowed visibly. “I don’t know.”
there was anything out there, then John would find it first –

“This way!” shouted John, suddenly changing course. Henry tripped over a branch trying to keep up. “The toll bridge runs over this river –”

He got no further. A blast of blue-green light hit John in the back. He flew forwards, crashing clean through a pile of brambles. Roland rolled off John’s back and landed a few feet further on – Henry held his breath until he heard Roland sob in pain.

“Uncle John?!” Charlotte cried helplessly, running to the big man and shaking him. “Uncle John, wake up! Wake up!”

“Charley! Charley, shush!” said Henry. He dragged her away from the body, grabbed Roland, and huddled in the bushes, looking left and right for whomever had attacked John.

Rumplestiltskin hadn’t yet made good on his promise to teach Henry magic, but he’d seen enough to recognise a spell when he saw one.

But it was too dark to see anything further than what was right in front of him. He could barely even see Roland, who clutched Henry by the middle and sobbed quietly into his jacket. Far away, thunder rumbled, which just made Roland and Charlotte cry all the more –

*Crunch.*

Henry spun around and leapt to his feet. But there was nothing there when he looked, unless –

“Hello, Mr Mills.”

Henry spun back around. Jonathan grinned, an evil glint in his eyes which stared in a way that made Henry want to be really, really far away right now –

Then the guy collapsed, hit in the back by something.

Immediately, Charlotte made to dash, but Henry held her back when he spotted the person who’d taken Jonathan out.

“Mom?”

Something felt off as Regina stepped from the shadows, a chill Henry couldn’t explain. His mom had a weird look on her face; it was the look she’d had a lot when he started asking questions about his storybook and the Evil Queen –

“Mom? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Henry,” Regina breathed with a smile. Motioning to Jonathan, she added, “Did he hurt you?”

“No, we’re fine.”

“Good. I’m glad.”

Henry just couldn’t put his finger on it. He grasped Charlotte’s hand tighter, wondering if he should tell her and Roland to run for it after all –

“Mom, what are you doing here? How did you find us?”
“It’s alright, Henry,” said Regina. “I’m here now. I’m going to take you somewhere where nobody will ever hurt you again.”

She extended her hand. Henry wasn’t sure why, but every instinct he had was screaming for him not to touch her. He stepped back, careful to stay between Regina and the kids.

“Thanks, Mom, but I think we – we really should just – just get back to town –”

On the forest floor, Jonathan groaned. Obviously, whatever Regina had hit him with wasn’t going to last long. While she was distracted by the noise, Henry made up his mind and made to bolt, only for a hand to grab his collar and the forest disappeared in a storm of purple smoke.

The call came, a relentless tug right in the centre of his chest, and Killian was forced to follow it like a porpoise speared by a harpoon. He stomped all the way to the crocodile’s shop.

“You called?” he snapped as he walked across the shop floor to the back room. That infernal bell seemed to jingle on forever, and the beaded curtains scratched his face. Killian could do nothing to stop them.

“I did,” said Rumplestiltskin.

Killian unwillingly stayed in the doorway while the old crocodile fiddled with some potion ingredients on his counter. Rumplestiltskin bore a nasty bruise on his left cheek and he worked on his project with unusual haste.

“What are you doing?”

“That’s none of your concern,” Rumplestiltskin snapped. With shaking hands, he snapped a twig in half and dipped it into a beaker half-full of clear liquid, whereupon the contents immediately turned a dark shade of emerald green. The Dark One, apparently satisfied, poured a small amount of the liquid into a glass and downed it all in one go.

“There’s something wrong with you, isn’t there?” Killian guessed as Rumplestiltskin shut his eyes, perhaps waiting for the effects of whatever magic he had just swallowed to take hold.

The crocodile growled.

“I said it’s none of your concern.”

Killian rolled his eyes. Fine, the crocodile didn’t feel like sharing. He just hoped that whatever ailed Rumplestiltskin at the moment, it bloody well hurt. “Fine. What did you call me for?”

“It seems our dear witch and her father have cast their curse,” said Rumplestiltskin, setting the glass down.

“Good.”

“Good, is it?”

“Aye. Your precious Belle will be dead before long.”

“If she dies, so do you.”
Killian chuckled. “Do your worst, Crocodile.”

The old man would not kill him, or else Killian knew he’d be dead already. Obviously, he was still of some use to the Dark One, as detestable a thought that was.

“Oh, I will,” snarled Rumplestiltskin. “I am going to stop this curse, and you are going to help me.”

“And how exactly am I going to do that?”

“Oh, you just let me worry about that.”

He patted his coat pocket as if checking that something was there while he swept through the doorway. Killian thought he spotted a glimmer of metal. Then an invisible string gripped his chest once more. He stumbled out of the shop behind Rumplestiltskin, straight into the storm.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 24: Smash the Mirror, Part 1, in which the round-up team struggle to contain the curse victims, doubts are cast on Hans’ true intentions, and Rumplestiltskin meets Faílinis

So, the curse is underway. Feel free to offer any items of comfort you like to Rumple, who did spend a large portion of this chapter being unfairly (or perhaps fairly, I won’t make your judgements for you) attacked. Poor guy :(
The storm had arrived.

Fog laid its misty breath on the windows of Granny’s Diner while the wind rattled the glass like ghosts raging in an abandoned manor. The lack of electricity didn’t help the haunted feeling that chilled Frederick’s bones.

“What the hell is going on out here?!” he shouted against the wind, running across the street. The six young soldiers ignored him and continued fighting. “Hey!”

He rammed the nearest of the boys and wrenched his weapon off him – which was probably his mother’s broom handle – then used it to stop a Pridelander girl from hitting a different boy with a frying pan. That got the others’ attention and they all stopped.

“What?”

“That’s what, sir, Mr Palmer,” Frederick snapped at the high schooler whose soccer team he used to coach. “And I might ask you lot the same thing. What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“There’s a war going on here, sir,” answered the Pridelander girl, who was maybe fourteen at most. “Me and my brothers were just teaching these Southern Islanders a lesson.”

“Well, you can stop it right now!”

The oldest of the lads huffed. “You can’t tell us what to do, Mr Cole.”

Frederick glared at him. “It’s Lieutenant Hoffman, correct?”

“Yessir.”

“Well, that's Prince Frederick to you, Lieutenant, and I am giving you a direct order. All of you! Go home now!”

“But sir –”

“Scram!”

The kids each gave him a look, the girl and her brother shared a giggle and then the lot of them took off.

Frederick shook his head exasperatedly. “Teenagers.”

“Hell of a storm out there!” Granny shouted as she came around the corner, her voice muffled by a thick woollen scarf. She and Tinkerbell, each covered up to the eyes in winter clothing that still had tags on, dragged a blonde curse victim by the arms towards the diner. “Give us a hand with this, won’t you?”

Frederick rushed ahead to get the door for them, then sidestepped a sweeping kick from Princess Ella.
“Let me go! Let me go!”

“Sit down!”

The storm slammed the door shut behind Frederick, making the bell jingle violently. There was no snow yet, but he’d weathered enough storms in the Southern Isles to know that it wasn’t far away. And thunder, and lightning, and *hail* …

Ella aimed another kick at Tink, who’d been trying to tie the young princess’ feet together. When she tried again, striking Tink in the shoulder, Granny pointed the crossbow between her eyes.

“Sit. Down. *Now.*”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Ella snarled with uncharacteristic malice.

Granny released the safety catch.

“Where’d you find her?” asked Hans, emerging from the back room with Anita and a flashlight.

“She tried to shoot her stepmother,” said Tink, dumping the offending shotgun on the counter.

“Is that all?”

Frederick finally managed to get the door shut and locked once more, returning the roar of the wind back to an inane whistling drone.

“You’re sure that’s going to work?” he asked Anita.

The nurse drew up a dose of strong sedative into a hypodermic needle. “Best that I could get from the pharmacy at short notice,” she said, flicking the needle to remove air bubbles. “It’s worth a try. Hold her still.”

Frederick grimaced as he hopped into the other side of the booth and held Ella by the shoulders, Tink grabbed her legs and Anita awkwardly tried to roll up the young princess’ sleeve. Granny kept her compliant with the threat of a crossbow bolt between the eyes. Twice Ella wriggled at just the wrong moment; on the third go Anita managed to jab the needle into her upper arm.

“*Ow!* That freaking hurt!”

“You’ll thank me in about two minutes,” said Anita.

“Explain to me again how this is supposed to reverse the curse?” asked Tink, rubbing her arm where Ella had kicked her.

“Well, it should –” Hans started, but was cut off by the sound of the door crashing open once more.

“Shut the door! Shut the door!”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry!” Much Miller gasped as he, Alan a’ Dale and Frederick wrested the door shut again. It had started to snow as well; the two outlaws stamped their feet, shivered and shook snowflakes out of their coats and hair.

“What the bloody hell is going on?!” exclaimed Alan, staring wide-eyed at Granny and Ella. “Has this entire town gone bonkers?”

“Cursed, actually,” said Frederick.
Alan made a face. “Well, that ain’t good.”

Meanwhile, Ella had begun to fade; her eyelids drooped, and her head dropped against her chest, jerking her awake.

“Is that good enough?” asked Anita, watching the young princess fight the effects of the sedative. “I really don’t want to give her any more.”

“It’ll have to do,” said Hans. “Fred?”

Frederick grumbled to himself. “I really don’t like doing this,” he said, grasping Ella by the shoulders once more and forcefully tilting her head back.

“I don’t like it either, but it’s the only plan I’ve got.”

Ella was still fighting despite the sedative. Frederick pulled his scarf over his face and held her as still as he could while Hans checked her eyes with a penlight torch, a pair of tweezers in his other hand. His brother frowned and shone the light in Ella’s eyes twice more.

“Damn it!”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“There’s no shard.” Hans sighed and stepped away; Frederick did the same.

“Shard?” said Alan. “What’s he talking about?”

“The way the curse takes hold is by a shard of glass lodging in the victim’s eye,” Frederick explained with a shiver, remembered his short stint under the curse all too clearly. “Remove the shard and you stop the curse.”

“Except there’s no shard,” said Hans, groaning. “They must have found a way around it.”

“O-kay,” said Alan. “So how are we s’posed to break the curse then?”

Hans gave Frederick a look and shook his head despondently. “I don’t know.”

At first, Ernest had thought it was the wind causing some of his soldiers to behave strangely. Unusually aggressive, picking fights with every second person, talking back to their generals – or in one case, attempting to strangle them – and refusing to obey orders. After a Dacian corporal shot a Gaulish sergeant during a dispute over the ownership of a discarded frying pan, it became clear that something was very, very wrong. And whatever it was, it was travelling quickly.

Ernest had to kick down his own front door because his hands were occupied pinning Thomas’ arms to his sides while he dragged his son, kicking and screaming, into the house.

“Let me go! Let me go!”

“Get. In. Side,” Ernest grunted through gritted teeth. He shoved Thomas into the closet, slammed the door, then leaned heavily against the wall and panted from the exertion. He was getting too old for this.

“What the bloody hell was that?” asked Richard.
“You try to tell me what to do, what not to do!” Thomas shouted, rattling the closet door. Ernest threw his own body weight behind it to keep his son from bursting out. “Well, I’ve had it!”

“I’ve got no idea,” said Ernest. “Grab a chair.”

Richard did (dragging the piece of furniture one-handed); together, he and Ernest managed to wedge it underneath the door handle. Thomas continued to rattle the closet, but the door held.

“I reckon we’ve got at least six other men who’ve gone off their rockers,” Ernest reported, collapsing into an armchair. “Thomas was just the only one I could catch. How’s the hand?”

“Small blessing that it wasn’t my right one,” said Richard. He held up his heavily bandaged limb; despite the doctor’s best efforts, it was already bleeding through the second layer of gauze.

“You bastard! You coward! You pig! Let me out right this second or I swear to God -!”

“What the hell is going on, Richard?” Ernest asked, desperate for an answer. “In the last hour, I’ve seen Emma Swan shoot Weselton at point-blank range; I watched Snow White slap the Dark One across the face; and now my own son is calling me by every name in the book. And where the hell did this storm come from –?”

“It’s Elsa,” said Richard with a glare at the window. “She’s the one causing this storm.”

“Well, then – wait, how the hell do you know that?”

Ernest felt his blood run dry when Richard didn’t answer.

“Wait a second. This is how that fae offered to help us? By trapping the whole town in a magical snowstorm and getting our own people to turn on us?”

Richard still didn’t reply. Not in words, anyway. He shut his eyes and grimaced.

“You fucking knew?” Ernest screamed, forgoing all propriety in the face of the situation.

“I didn’t know the damn curse would affect our people, too!” Richard shouted in reply. “He told me that it would get Regina, Emma and Snow out of the way long enough for us to take over!”

“And you believed him? You know as well as I do what the cost of dabbling in magic is, Richard! What the hell were you thinking?!”

Richard thumped him in the chest.

“Look,” Richard snapped while Ernest doubled over, winded. “We don’t have time for this. Yes, I made a bad decision and I own it! But right now, we’ve got a sorceress on the loose and a snowstorm on the way. We need to deal with them. You can yell at me later.”

“I’m not going to yell at you, Dick,” said Ernest. “I’m going to fucking deck you.”

Richard just grunted. “Fine. Let’s go.”

“What about my son?”

“When I find Jonathan, I’ll ask him,” said Richard. “And if he doesn’t undo what he did, you get to take the first shot at him. Deal?”

“I’m still going to deck you,” Ernest grumbled.
In the last few hours, the town hall had become packed with people. Everybody was scared, panicked and cold; they crowded into the auditorium like lambs in a pen, huddled into whatever free space they could find. At least the cramped situation meant the town hall remained reasonably warm despite the lack of power. The kerosene lamp lighting didn’t do much to ease Frederick’s concerns, though.

“Everyone! Everyone! If I could have your attention, please!” Abigail attempted to shout above the din. She managed it rather well; Frederick could hear her from halfway down the hall, somewhat muted by the many, many, many arguments and whispered discussions going on in various corners. “Everyone! Excuse me!”

“OI!” shouted the dwarf named Leroy, standing on a box so he’d be seen over the crowd. “SHUT IT!”

It took a minute before the whispers completely stopped, but every frightened face eventually turned to Abigail and Leroy.

“Thanks, Leroy. Alright, look, I’m sorry that this address took so long but I’m afraid the situation is much more dire than it looks –”

“Hey,” said Hans, squeezing his way through the crowd to Frederick’s side. Alan a’Dale and Tinkerbell were close behind. “No luck. Nobody’s seen or heard from Regina at all.”

“That’s probably not a bad sign,” added Tink. “If Regina had been cursed too, I think it’s safe to say we’d all know about it by now.”

He didn’t like to admit it, but Frederick knew she had a point. If the Evil Queen was back, Storybrooke would be a cinder – or at least the parts with Richard’s army in it would be. He wasn’t sure about the rest of them. Maybe they’d be lucky and get away with their hearts still in their chests.

“Alan, you said the last time you saw her was in the woods?” Frederick asked.

“Yeah, near that ice wall thingamabob I told you about,” said the outlaw, running a hand through his hair. “She took down some bloody great snow monster that just popped out of the wall and attacked us; then she, Robin and Baelfire followed Emma into the tunnel.”

“You didn’t go after them?” asked Tink with a frown.

“No, ‘cos me and the rest of the lads got chased into the woods by the fae what’s been hanging around the Wicked Witch,” Alan explained. “I rugby-tackled him, so he socked me in the jaw and took off. I’ve no idea where he would’ve gone.”

“Well, then what about –” Frederick started, but was cut off by the rising of several nearby voices.

“Where the hell is the sheriff?” shouted one person.

“Why isn’t Queen Regina doing anything about King Richard?” cried another.

“Where did this storm come from?” added a third.

“What do you mean, there’s another curse?” a fourth person panicked.
“I’ve got no power and a freezer full of salmon that’s about to go off!” shouted a fifth, whose priorities were apparently a bit skewed.

“Everyone!” Abigail raised her hands for quiet, and was granted it by the crowd. “Look, I know you’re scared, but honestly, we’re not actually sure what’s going on. Please understand when we say that we’ll aim to answer all your questions just as soon as we’ve got them – yes, Mr Russell?”

“Has this got anything to do with the Wicked Witch?” called Peter Russell, the pumpkin farmer.

“I don’t know, sir.”

Another hand shot up. “I heard someone say that the Pridelanders have gone to war with King Richard for control of Storybrooke. Is that true?”

“As far as I’m aware, Mr Thomm. Now, does anyone else –”

“What the hell is he doing here?”

That call wasn’t addressed to Abigail. A ripple of deathly silence parted the crowd, with the caller at one end – a tall, military-looking fellow with the large, fluffy type of moustache that was popular in the Arendellian courts – and his white-gloved finger aimed like the point of an arrow at Hans on the other end.

“I know him,” the man continued. Frederick’s brotherly protectiveness reared its head, and he sidestepped so he was in front of his little brother. The Arendellian, sadly, did not get the message. “He’s that Southern Isles prince who attempted to murder Queen Elsa. What is he doing here?”

“Your Grace, please stand down,” Abigail requested.

“What are you talking about?” added Tinkerbell, sharing a confused look with Alan. “He’s the one who warned us about the curse.”

“He’s a thief and a liar!” added a woman’s voice, one that made Hans wince. Frederick scanned the crowd until he found Princess Anna. He’d never actually seen her before, but the look on her face was more than enough to identify her. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he was somehow the one behind this.”

The whispers had started again. Damn it, thought Frederick. And this had been going so well.

“Is that true?” called a few nervous voices from the crowd.

“Of course not!” Frederick snapped in reply. “That storm is the curse, and Hans is the one who’s been trying to stop it from the start!”

“You know he tried to kill me?” said Anna.

The whispers turned into wide-eyed stares, followed by the nearest people attempting to back away as much as they could. Off to the side, Frederick noticed even Tink and Alan had become uneasy.

“Look, I’ll vouch for my brother –”

“And who the hell are you?!” thundered the Arendellian lord.

“I’m Prince Frederick, twelfth son of King Christian and heir consort to the throne of Hellas! If you won’t take my word for it, then take my wife’s!” Frederick made a wild gesture in Abigail’s direction. “Look, this is ridiculous! I know what happened in Arendelle three years ago and I can
tell you we’ve got a much bigger problem right now! You want a fight, sir, take it outside – there’s plenty of it going on out there! But if you’ve got even half a brain, might I suggest we put the past aside for now and work together to fix the current problem?!”

The Arendelle lord’s moustache twinged, and he looked to Anna. She slowly shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Prince Frederick. But in my sister’s absence, the armies of Arendelle answer to me. And, no offence intended, but I don’t trust you. Lord Stendahl, gather your men. We’re going up to the foothills. Grand Pabbie will know what to do about the curse.”

Frederick caught Abigail’s eye. *Oh, no,* was the message exchanged on both sides. He should have known shouting wasn’t going to work.

But before he could change tactics, Hans scurried out from his hiding spot and called, “Anna, wait.”

She ignored him.

“Anna, please don’t go to the trolls. I’m begging you,” he pleaded earnestly. Frederick held his brother from running after her. *They’re* the ones behind this. Anna, I swear to God and on my soul that it’s the truth!”

Blue eyes flashed. Now it was Frederick’s turn to wince.

“Let’s go,” was all Anna said, throwing Hans a venomous glare as she did.

Frederick put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, all that he could do to offer some comfort. Meanwhile, at least thirty members of the crowd – not all of them from Arendelle – packed up whatever they had and followed Princess Anna. Deep down, Frederick couldn’t fault them. People were scared and terrified; all they wanted was somebody to tell them what to do, and they would follow whomever looked as if they knew what they were doing. Which, right now, was not him and Abigail.

“That didn’t go so well,” Abigail muttered, appearing at his side. She took his hand, and Frederick gratefully squeezed it.

“Hans,” called Tinkerbell, shyly and cautiously. She and Alan stood warily off to the side, looking like they were prepared to run the moment things went pear-shaped. “Is what she said … was that true?”

“Yes,” Hans said without hesitation. He was watching Anna take her troops away, not paying the fairy and the outlaw much attention. “Yes, it’s true.”

Frederick saw the wheels turning in Tink’s brain, trying to make sense of it. Unfortunately, he was not much of a wordsmith – Abigail did the talking, and it was much better for all of them if he kept it that way.

“Look, believe me or don’t,” Hans added suddenly, turning around to face Alan and Tink. “But believe this: I’m going out there and I’m going to break this curse. You can hang me for it later.”

And with that, he slunk off. Tink eyed Frederick warily.

“Do you believe him?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation.
“You believe him because he’s your brother or –?” asked Alan.

“I believe him because he’s telling the truth. Yeah, he tried to kill Elsa – and he did it under the influence of the same curse that’s going to get Belle, Snow, Emma and a lot of other people killed if we don’t find a way to stop it now.”

Neither of them looked convinced. Eventually, Alan let out a heavy sigh.

“Well, I’ve gotta admit, his plan still sounds a hell of a lot better than mine.”

Tink raised an eyebrow. “Why; what’s your plan?”

“I ain’t bloody got one.”

“So you’re with us?” asked Abigail.

Fairy and outlaw both shrugged. Frederick supposed it was probably the best they could hope for, given the circumstances.

“Father? Father, wake up!”

Faílinis groaned. Everything hurt in one way or another; he felt grazes on his elbows and jaw, and his head throbbed where he had hit the ground. An overpowering stench of forest floor filled his nose. In fact, so did the forest floor, something he only realised after sneezing and coughing up a mouthful of wintry undergrowth.

“Ah! Curse de na seacht dilléachtaí salach ar ort!”

Zelena looked at him, confused. “What?”

Faílinis shook his head and hauled himself up. “Something my grandfather used to say. Where did the children go?”

“They were gone when I got here,” said Zelena.

“You’re hurt,” he observed, noticing for the first time her torn and bloodied sleeve.

“Oh. That’s nothing. Just a scratch.”

He extended a hand; she gently pushed it away.

“It’s fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Too tired for an argument, Faílinis let it drop. “Alright.”

“Who attacked you, Father?”

“Well, judging from the sickening stench of apple, I’m guessing it was your sister. The curse must have driven her to seek out her child.”

Faílinis could’ve kicked himself. He should have known that might happen, or at least prepared for the possibility. Instead, he’d let himself be caught off guard like a common fairy. Idiot.

“Well, we can still track her, right?” asked Zelena, pulling up her bloodstained sleeve. He stopped
her.

“No need; I already know where she is. She’ll have wanted to put her child in the safest place possible. Her vault.”

Zelena frowned at him. “How do you know that?”

“I just do,” Faílinis answered softly.

Henry just couldn’t see that Regina wanted what was best for him. He’d been running around a dark forest without supervision, for goodness sakes! And with two even younger children in his care, to boot! What the hell had Neal been thinking, leaving him out there all alone?

“Mom! Mom, stop!” Henry cried, fighting against Regina’s hold as she dropped the three children into the mirror room of her vault. “Mom!”

“Oh, just stop moving, kid!”

She grabbed him by the shoulders so he’d be forced to look at her.

“There is a very dangerous man in town,” she told him firmly. “You’ll be safe here until I take care of him.”

“Mom, what is wrong with you?!” Henry shouted, throwing her arms off. Charlotte cowered in the corner, clutching a crying Roland like a ragdoll. “Why are you doing this?”

Regina sighed and shook her head. “I have to keep you safe.”

“Mom –”

“Stay here,” she ordered, pointing a finger at Henry, Roland and Charlotte in turn. “Be good children. I’ll be back soon.”

“Mom, no. Mom!”

It’s for your own good, she promised him quietly as she sealed the door behind her. She heard him hit the wall and pound on it, shout her name and demand to be let out.

Of course she couldn’t let him out; why couldn’t he see that? Jonathan had already come close to hurting him once – what kind of parent would she be to let that demon have a second chance at her baby?

“It’s for his own good,” Regina whispered, embedding another layer of protection spells in the wall for good measure.

Clunk.

“What the hell?”

She rushed to the antechamber, a dozen deadly curses ready to fire at the demon who had spawned her half-sister –
“Robin? What are you doing here?”

She didn’t have a clue what he was doing, but her boyfriend had made a mess of her potions collection. Empty vials and equipment lay scattered all over the table, and it looked like he’d tossed most of her books off the shelves after a cursory glance. She stopped him just before he reached for a decorated ceramic pot.

“Careful!” she shouted, clasping his hands and the pot in both of hers. “Inside this is a potion that will fill this whole chamber with a deadly gas if it’s exposed to the air.”

“Ah,” said Robin with a grimace. He let go of the pot and went back to rummaging through her potion supplies.

Regina frowned. He had what looked like half the forest stuck in his hair, and he had soot all over his face and arms. With a mental note to burn that ugly jacket later, she asked, “What are you looking for?”

“I am looking for something to help me kill King Richard.”

“What?!”

“Have you got anything in here that I could use to get past his guards? Incapacitates or kills them, I don’t bloody care –”

“What are you doing?!”

He continued to rummage. “I told you; I’m going to kill Richard.”

No!

“Robin, listen to me – this is a bad idea.”

“I let that bastard go once before, Regina. Why, I don’t bloody know –”

“It was five years ago! Why can’t you just let it go? Robin!”

She grabbed his arm. He fought her off, then held her by the arms instead.

“I have to do this, Gina,” he growled. “The man doesn’t deserve to live. If you really love me, you’ll help me.”

“No! You’re going to get yourself killed. I cannot let you do this!”

He clenched his jaw, fingers digging into her arms hard enough she could feel his nails through her shirt.

“Fine,” he eventually growled. “I’ll do it on my own.”

“Robin!”

She couldn’t let him do this. Richard would shoot him on sight, or capture him and torture him – maybe even use him to force her to give over control of the town –

Hell, no.

“Robin –”
“Gina, I told you – oofff”

She cut him off by grabbing his lapels and kissing him, hard. Caught off guard, he stumbled back and hit the wall. He still tried to wriggle free, however.

“Gina –”

She kissed him again.

“Goddamn it,” he growled against her lips before kissing her back with equal fervour, spinning them around so that she was the one against the wall. She sunk her hands into his hair and moaned as his tongue skirted hers, clutching him as close as she could.

At least he was off the Richard crap.

Archie could remember having plenty of difficult patients under the curse. Bashful with his social anxiety, Leroy with his alcohol abuse, Happy’s depression, all those nursery characters with their various forms of OCD, ADHD, bipolar disorders … but hell if these two didn’t take the cake.

Emma rhythmically kicked the wall while standing in the corner of the cell with her arms crossed and a fiery expression on her face that Archie truly believed could burn through solid concrete if given the chance. Neal had finally quietened down, an hour and a half after the dwarves had dragged him into the station, half conscious thanks to a handy blow from the blunt end of Dopey’s pickaxe. Apparently, they found him in the mines attempting to break into their dynamite supplies. Dorothy had wrangled Emma on her way to tackle Richard’s army single-handedly – both women were going to have some nasty bruises the next morning.

If they survived that long.

“Okay, it’s clear that you two are obviously not in the mood to do any talking right now so –”

“What the hell do you know?” snapped Emma. “You got your doctorate from a curse.”

“Alright, but can I suggest that –”

“Yeah, no offence, buddy, but I’m not interested in taking life advice from somebody who used to be a cricket,” said Neal, reclining on his cot and humming a tune to himself. “You’re like the worst conscience ever, you know that?”

“Gee, thanks,” Archie muttered under his breath.

“It’s not personal, doc,” said Hans, who had just entered the station with his brother, Tink and Alan. “Take it from me – they have no idea what they’re saying right now.”

“That’s good to know,” said Emma with a smirk, “Prince Lackland.”

Hans rolled his eyes. “Great.”

“How did it go at the town hall?” asked Archie.

“Not great,” said Frederick, instantly dashing all of Archie’s hopes. “Princess Anna didn’t believe us when we told her about the curse, so she’s taken all of the Arendellians up into the foothills. There’s still about fifty or so who stayed behind, but I’m not convinced they believe us.”
“Happy and Leroy are out at the camp now,” said Granny, holding up the walkie-talkie they’d found in Emma’s office. With all the cell phones down, it was their only means of communication. “Not a lot of people left – apparently Simba and Nala ordered an evacuation to the school before the battle broke out. They’re just rounding up the stragglers.”

Archie sighed. “Tink, any luck reaching the convent?”

The fairy shook her head. “Sorry, no. They’re a fair way out of town, though; with the storm, I’d be surprised if Blue had even realised there was anything wrong.”

“We’ve got to break this curse,” said Frederick, eying Emma and Neal warily.

“What ideas?” asked Tink.

Alan clicked his fingers. “True Love’s Kiss.”

“Ha!” Emma snorted. “I’ll kiss him when he shaves off that stupid goatee!”

“Oh! So a goatee is disgusting,” said Neal, sitting up on the cot, “but three-day-old scruff is fine on a guy who stinks like a sewer and has a hook for a hand? Kinky, Emma, real kinky!”

“At least he didn’t leave me pregnant and in jail!”

“How many times do I have to tell you – THAT WAS AUGUST! In fact, where the hell is he? I oughta break his neck –!”

Emma huffed and rolled her eyes. “Look, if you’re not gonna give me my gun back, the least you could do is shoot him for me!”

As said gun happened to be sitting next to him on the desk – and he wasn’t convinced Emma wouldn’t eventually manage to break out of the cell – Archie discreetly pretended to slip the weapon into the top drawer. Then jumped when a splash of cold water hit him in the face, thrown by Neal.

“Good grief!”

“Don’t think I didn’t see you sneak something into that!” Neal bellowed, crushing the white plastic cup in his fist. “And I know you’ve got that gun in your left hand right now.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Alan, shaking water off his own sleeves. “This is hell of a curse.”

“Yeah,” Archie agreed. “We need to figure out where Belle and Snow went.”

“You’re sure they’re together?” asked Hans.

“Positive. I saw them take off down Main Street.”

The young prince nodded. “Okay, okay, okay,” he muttered, tapping his fingers against the side of his head. “Uh, is there anybody you can think of that the two of them might have unfinished business with? Maybe somebody that they would try to hurt if they weren’t thinking clearly?”

Now that you mention it –

Gut rolling, Archie shared a queasy look with Granny.

Granny sighed. “Regina.”

In the foothills, the high winds had ceased, replaced instead by a steady rain of fresh snow. What remained of the breeze kicked up the particles in an eerie, hypnotic dance like ghosts waltzing on the white hillside. The creek cracked and frosted as the water defied the freezing temperatures and kept flowing; likely the fight wouldn’t last for much longer, though none of that mattered to the two women huddled in a rocky crag above the trolls’ valley.

“They’re down there,” said Belle, peering through the binoculars she’d nicked from the refugee camp on the way into the hills.

“Can you see how many?” Snow asked. She pulled the heavy woollen overcoat tighter around her and Jesse as the wind shifted, blowing cold air straight into the crag. Jesse grumbled and snuggled deeper into the warmth.

“’Course I bloody can’t. There’s a freak storm in the way.”

“Alright, alright, no need to get snippy!”

Belle muttered something under her breath that Snow chose to ignore. She needed to get her son out of the cold, sooner rather than later –

But they had to find Zelena first.

“I don’t think the Witch is here, though,” said Belle with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you’ve had any experience interrogating trolls before, have you?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s a great plan!” Snow shook her head. Amateur bookworm, she thought. Out loud, she said: “We march in there, demand to know where Zelena is, what do you think they’re going to do? Huh? They’ll get her out here to rip out both of our hearts. Or worse, they’ll put us under that curse Hans warned us about! Gods!”

“Well, we’re not going to find her if we just sit here,” said Belle. “Regina summoned her into a trap using a drop of her blood. What if we gave that a try?”

“That’s actually not a bad idea, thought Snow. Why didn’t I think of that?

She glanced at the librarian out of the corner of her eye. Probably just comes from reading too many books.

“Only one problem with that plan,” Snow informed her smugly. “Where are we going to get a drop of Regina’s blood?”

“Easy; we’ll find Regina,” said Belle. “Besides, it couldn’t hurt to have a bit more magic on our side.”

Snow blinked at her. “What kind of plan is that?”

The librarian rolled her eyes, then pulled up the cowl of her cloak and left the cave. Snow groaned and followed her.

“Do we really have to go to Regina?” she complained, kicking up the frost as she tried not to tumble down the hill. “Why can’t we ask Rumplestiltskin for help?”
“No!” Belle snapped and stopped in her tracks so that Snow almost ran straight into her. The little bookworm’s eyes flashed with an emotion Snow couldn’t identify, then she huffed and kept walking. “He’ll only do something stupid and get himself hurt.”

“So?” said Snow.

Belle didn’t seem to hear, and kept walking. In Snow’s arms, Jesse grumbled and turned once more.

“Oh, I’m sorry, boy,” Snow murmured, pulling the coat closed once more. “You’re alright.”

That Witch was not going to lay hands on her son again if it was the last thing Snow did.

It seemed that her father was correct, and her sister had indeed hidden herself in her vault. Zelena stood outside the ugly stone monolith that was Regina’s idea of a memorial for Prince Henry, the cretin, and snorted.

*So predictable, little sister.*

The wards on her vault weren’t even that complex. Oh, a lesser magician may have been thwarted by the network of hexes and protective charms, but Zelena was a *fae* and –

“Sorry, love,” snarled a male voice while cold metal wrapped around her throat. Zelena gagged at the treacle-thick stink of rum.

“Well, this is an interesting turn of events, my dear captain,” she said, wincing as the cool steel burned her skin. “Did my sister make you another offer? Perhaps employment as a bodyguard? Quite the stoop, even for you.”

“Shut up,” Hook growled. Zelena laughed as grass crunched nearby, signalling the arrival of another person; then the laughter died when that person wasn’t who she expected.

“You’re working for the *Dark One*?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Rumplestiltskin replied coolly, striding confidently up the drive. A month ago, Zelena might have found that interesting to watch; now she just scoffed haughtily and tried to ignore the steel around her neck. “Where’s Faílinis?”

Zelena shrugged. “I’m sorry, who?”

Rumplestiltskin scowled, then made a motion to Hook. His namesake prosthetic bit deeper into Zelena’s skin, and she let out an involuntary gasp.

“Call for him.”

“No.”

“Call – for – him.”

“Turn around.”

Zelena chuckled to herself as Rumplestiltskin scowled, then his face went carefully blank at the sound of metal scraping in a scabbard. Hesitantly, the Dark One turned.
“Hello, Rumplestiltskin,” said Faflinis with a grin.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 25: Smash the Mirror, Part 2, in which Belle and Snow catch up to Regina, Anna and Kristoff face Grand Pabbie, and Rumplestiltskin finds he has a connection to Faflinis (one that is not a blood relation).
Chapter 25: Smash the Mirror, Part 2

“Hello, Rumplestiltskin.”

In the darkness, Faílinis emerged from behind a black marble angel, casually swinging a sword. The voices in Rumplestiltskin’s head had gone strangely quiet at the fae’s arrival; all except one.

“Hauteclare.”

Rumplestiltskin squinted at the sword in the fae’s hand. That was the weapon of Olivier de Vienne, Sir Roland’s right-hand man? He’d been looking for that for centuries; how did Faílinis get it?

“I’ve been wanting to meet the most infamous of the Dark Ones for a long time,” said Faílinis, crunching frost underfoot as he strode forwards. Off to the side, Rumplestiltskin could just imagine Zelena’s smirk, even with the pirate’s hook pressed to her throat. Faílinis had the same malicious grin. “Funny. I expected somebody taller.”

“Well, I’m not sorry to disappoint.”

Faílinis’ eyes flashed as he looked Rumplestiltskin up and down. “I don’t suppose anybody has ever told you how much you look like your grandfather?”

Rumplestiltskin’s response died in his throat, the last word echoing a few times before he heard it properly. “How did you know my grandfather?”

“Simple, really. I’m the one who killed him,” said the fae with a broad grin. “And now I’m going to kill you.”

Metal flashed in front of Rumplestiltskin; only the Dark One’s reflexes prevented him from being run through. He held up a hand; the blade stopped less than an inch from his face, caught there by the protective bubble he had hurried conjured. Faílinis recoiled before Rumplestiltskin could retaliate and aimed a second blow at his side. Rumplestiltskin hastily called Hook’s sword to his hand to block it; at the moment of impact, a tremor – much stronger than it should have been – ran up his arm.

Not now! he snarled, spinning around to catch the next blow.

“Here’s only about a dozen or so people left,” Leroy called over the walkie-talkie, static crackling in time with the deep boom of approaching thunder. Alan shivered and pulled his hood over his head. He couldn’t feel his ears. “From what I can gather, Nala told them all to leave before the storm hit. Me and the boys are just convincing the last of them to go. Shouldn’t be much longer; we’re starting to get a lot of snow out here.”

“Here too,” said Frederick with a glance out of the station window. The glass was frosted over. Alan traced a line with a finger and jumped back with a yelp. It was so cold that it stung.
“Ask him if there’s any sign of the trolls or –” Hans started, but he was cut off by the station door slamming open.

“John?” Alan exclaimed while he watched his old friend stumble in, grasping his head like he had been on a three-day bender. Little John had frost in his beard and he shivered like crazy. Granny straightaway pulled the big man aside and threw a blanket around his shoulders. “Are you alright? What happened? Where are the kids?”


“What?”

“He hit me with sommat from behind. I couldn’t find the kids.”

_He took Charley?_ Alan couldn’t breathe. His daughter was in the hands of that maniac, and possibly the Witch too –

“Oh, no. No, no, no – we gotta go find ‘em. Much, you still got that map of the tunnels –”

Much hit him.

“Ow!”

“Get a grip, man!” Much snapped, shaking Alan viciously. “We’ll find ‘em, okay?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Frederick. Only then did Alan remember that they weren’t alone.


“Where?”

John shook his head.

“They’ll probably have gone up to the trolls’ fortress,” said Hans.

“I don’t get it; what do they want with the kids?” asked Alan.

“No idea; I’m guessing as it is,” Hans admitted, and Alan resisted the urge to hit something. “But the foothills are our best chance at finding a way to break this curse anyway. I could use a thief.”

Since Alan’s only other idea was to panic, he nodded.

_I guess it’s just that kind of day, he thought. Panic, or trust somebody who may or may not be a murderous lunatic about a bunch of talking rocks._

“You lot do that,” said Granny, hefting her bow onto her shoulder. “I’ll round up the dwarves. We’ll find Regina.”

“How are you going to do that?” asked Frederick.

“Easy; if he’s right –” Granny gestured to Hans – “then Belle and Snow should lead us straight to her.”
Well, that was … different.

Regina couldn’t quite keep herself from grinning while she located her shoes. They’d wound up wedged behind the bookcase, and she couldn’t exactly remember how. Or when.

She felt a twinge as she did up the last of the straps, smoothed down her shirt and gently kissed Robin on the cheek. He muttered something incomprehensible, stretched out across the bed with the sheets tangled around his legs, and returned to a peaceful state of sleep.

“I’m sorry, Robin,” she whispered, stroking his hair with a finger. “I can’t let you face Richard. You’ll be safe here. And I promise, when I come back you’ll never have to worry about him ever again.”

“Mmphffuf,” he mumbled into the pillow.

For good measure, she kissed him once more. Robin had started to snore by the time Regina shut the door, allowing herself one glance back before sealing the room. Nobody would be able to open the door until she returned with Richard’s heart in her hands.

But first, she had to deal with the trespassers in her house.

Oh, Regina knew straightaway it was nobody more important than her big-mouthed stepdaughter and Rumple’s infuriating little bookworm, but one trespass could easily beget another.

“What the hell do you two think you’re doing?” she demanded the moment she landed in her kitchen, where Belle was invading her pantry for a packet of dill, and Snow had found the ceremonial dagger that Regina kept on the mantelpiece for emergencies.

Neither of them looked at all shocked to see Regina appear in front of them (which was disgraceful – when had she become so predictable?).

“We’re going to kill your sister,” Belle answered sharply, flicking her wrist. The pantry door shut on its own. Regina filed that information away for future use and almost missed the librarian’s next words. “Either you help us, or I’m going to put a bullet through you too.”

“Ha!” Regina snorted. “With that little peashooter?” she said, gesturing apathetically at the pistol she was willing to bet Belle had no idea how to use. “I hate to break it to you, dearie, but lumps of copper won’t hurt my sister.”

“Where the hell have you been?” asked Snow.

“I’ve been off enjoying my happy ending. Something you’ll never have now.”

“Oh, you –”

Rage boiled over at the sight of her stepdaughter’s insipid little face. “Now you finally know how it feels!” Regina shouted, no small amount of pleasure exacted from the way Snow flinched and cradled something that looked like a pillow – oh, it was her baby. Oh, well. “And how poetic too – your precious Charming, killed in the same way Daniel was. All because you couldn’t keep a damn secret!”

“I was TEN!” Snow shrieked back.

“Whoa!”
Regina couldn’t remember raising her hand nor Snow getting so close, but it must have happened as Belle jumped between them and grabbed Regina’s raised wrist while keeping Snow back with an outstretched arm.

“Both of you get a grip!” Belle snapped. “Zelena, remember? We’ve got a witch to catch, and this is not getting that done!”

Regina laughed. “What’s this? Has the scared little bookworm finally grown a backbone?”

Blue eyes flashed, and the next thing Regina knew, the barrel of a gun appeared beneath her chin. The safety was off. Ah. So Belle did know how to use that thing.

“Just be grateful I’m saving this for your sister,” said Belle between gritted teeth. Then she turned on her heels and marched to the door.

Regina couldn’t help herself. “I’m surprised you didn’t rope Rumple into doing it for you,” she jeered, smiling when the bookworm halted suddenly and stiffened. “Or are you doing this to prove something? Maybe that you’re capable of standing up for yourself without the big, bad Dark One by your side?”

“Regina!” said Snow. “Leave her alone!”

“You know he only loves you because you’re weak and easily manipulated,” said Regina, ignoring her stepdaughter entirely.

A second passed. Belle’s grip on her pistol noticeably tightened as she turned back and glared, icy fire burning in her eyes.

“Like I said, be grateful I’m saving this for your sister,” she snarled, then shoved the kitchen door open with unnecessary force.

Regina rolled her eyes. What had Rumplestiltskin ever seen in her?

“Brrr.” Anna shivered and stamped her feet at the entrance to the trolls’ caverns while Kristoff shook snowflakes out of his hair and coat. They had made good time up to the foothills despite the heavy snowfall and still-unfamiliar terrain, and their troops had found a safe haven in another cave.

“That’s odd,” Kristoff remarked, scanning the dark cavern with a flashlight. There was nothing but dark walls and an even darker tunnel mouth. “Kinda surprised there’s nobody here.”

“Maybe they thought with the storm, there wasn’t any point in keeping guard,” Anna suggested. Kristoff looked queasy and shrugged.

“Maybe. Still weird.”

Anna squeezed his hand. “Come on.”

The walk to the antechamber wasn’t long, but it felt much farther – Anna and Kristoff’s footsteps echoed along the tunnel and the flashlight reflected off shiny rocks, giving the impression of a million tiny shadows floating around them. Highly disconcerting. Anna had no idea how Kristoff lived with it for so long.

“Shouldn’t be too much farther,” Kristoff murmured, stooping to duck a jutting piece of rock. “Still
not sure why –"

“Kristoff?” called a nearby voice. Anna jumped; she’d gotten too used to the silence. “Anna? Is that you?”

“Halstein?” Kristoff called back, shining the flashlight around. The young troll blinked and held up a hand, blinded by the light. “Sorry. Where is everybody?”

“They’re in the mirror room,” said Halstein hesistantly, scratching a growth of mushrooms behind his ear. “What are you doing here?”

“We were looking for Grand Pabbie.”

“Elsa’s on the run and there’s another storm bearing down on Storybrooke,” Anna explained. “We were hoping Grand Pabbie could help us.”

“Oh, yeah, well – he’s not – he’s not here right now so –”

“That’s okay, we can wait for him,” said Kristoff. “You said they’re in the mirror room?”

“Yeah, but –”

“There’s no time; Prince Hans is telling everybody that you’re the ones behind this,” said Anna. “And people are actually listening to him – we’ve got to prove you’re innocent.”

“Well –”

“Come on,” said Kristoff, heading further up the tunnel. “I know where the mirror room is.”

“Kristoff?”

The sound of a great commotion tumbled out of the antechamber. Anna hurried to keep up with Kristoff’s long strides, Halstein toddling behind them both. Glow-worms lit most of the way, and there was a lot of noise coming out of the mirror room –

“Kristoff, stop!” Halstein cried. He rolled and came to a stop at Kristoff’s feet, nearly tripping him. “You can’t go in there.”

“What? Why not?”

“What’s going on?” asked Anna.

“Look, you weren’t supposed to be up here –”

“Hal, what is going on?” Kristoff demanded.

The young troll sighed. “I’m sorry. I can’t let you in.”

“What?”

Halstein didn’t answer except for stony silence – and as a troll, he knew how to do that. Kristoff went pale, then shoved Halstein out of the way and barged into the mirror room before Anna could stop him.

“Kristoff, wait –!”
She ran straight into him; he’d stopped in the entrance, still as a stalagmite. Inside the chamber, the High Council of Trolls had gathered, and each one of them turned to face Kristoff with unblinking grey eyes. Grand Pabbie himself was in the centre, facing the old antique mirror that the trolls used in Arendelle to keep an eye on their territory – it was their forewarning of trespassers on their lands, so they knew to go rock or tunnel underground at the first sign of trouble. But the mirror didn’t show a picture of the foothills. Instead, four different images played at once on the reflective surface. Anna recognised the sheriff’s station, Emma Swan and her fiancé locked in the cells, in one square; another showed a picture of Queen Regina arguing with Snow White and a brown-haired woman Anna didn’t know; a third showed a bearded man asleep in a bed; and the fourth was of a blonde man locked in what looked like a closet. Each one was surrounded by a glowing blue aura; Anna instantly felt a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold.

“What the hell is going on?” Kristoff demanded.

Grand Pabbie blinked once and looked past Anna. “Halstein?”

“I’m sorry, Pabbie; they ran right past me.”

“Grand Pabbie,” said Kristoff slowly, his voice trembling. Anna instinctively reached for his hand. “What is going on? What is that?”

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” said Pabbie gravely.

“Hans – Hans said there was a curse in the town –”

“We know.”

Anna stared. She felt Kristoff squeeze her hand, and a glow-worm flickered briefly. Her heart thumped in her throat.

“You – you did this?” Kristoff asked quietly.

“I’m sorry, Kristoff,” said Pabbie. “You were a good boy. But others aren’t.”

“Hans was telling the truth?” Anna gasped.

Pabbie nodded. “I am truly sorry, Princess Anna. But this is the way it has to be.”

The storm was getting worse.

Elsa huddled in the corner of somebody’s abandoned house. She didn’t know where she was – she’d just run from the forest and didn’t stop until she saw armed soldiers marching the streets. It was happening again – she’d lost control and now they were going to hunt her down and kill her.

She cried. She didn’t know how long she’d been crying. The storm was just so bad, so overwhelming, that she couldn’t focus on anything else. Like a great darkness inside that threatened to swallow her whole and spit out her bones. If she could just control it –

But she couldn’t. She’d never been able to.

It was so cold.
“Get the boy!” Faílinis shouted over the clang of metal as he and Rumplestiltskin continued to spar. Rumplestiltskin didn’t hear Zelena’s reply, too busy ducking a stone angel that had just flown past his crown.

“Tree branch!” said a voice in his head. Rumplestiltskin felt a tug somewhere near his ear; a moment later the branch above snapped and crashed on top of the fae. “Shield!”

Faílinis hit an opaque wall and flew backwards into a marble headstone.

While the other Dark Ones laughed, Rumplestiltskin touched the heart in his pocket. He could feel Hook’s resistance, but the pirate had no choice but to obey. Faílinis was on his feet much quicker than Rumplestiltskin had thought. He squinted; Rumplestiltskin turned to see at what, only to catch a faceful of broken pottery.

“Curse you, Captain!” he heard the fae cry as he lay winded on his back, too many sore spots to count.

“Get up, you fool!” shouted the voice, and almost unwilling, Rumplestiltskin did so. The fae was nowhere to be seen, but there was a baboon perched atop a headstone.

“An improvement, don’t you think?”

Rumplestiltskin swung around again, just in time to see Faílinis leap down from the tree.

“I’m inclined to agree,” Rumplestiltskin answered.

“Don’t stand there exchanging pleasantries! Attack the bastard!”

Lunge, parry, riposte, repeat. Hauteclare was a blur of silver in Faílinis’ hand that Rumplestiltskin could barely catch, let alone slip through. The darkness within him began to boil, the roar becoming louder and louder with each clang of the sword –

“Not now!”

Too late.

“But – but why?” said Anna, unable to believe her own ears. This had to be a joke, right? A really, really complex prank. Yeah, that had to be it.

She pinched her arm, hard, the way her father had taught her to wake up from nightmares. “Ow!”

No, it was real.

Hans.

He was telling the truth, said a little voice at the back of her mind.

Hans had told the truth. Grand Pabbie had lied.

Hans told the truth.
“Why would you do this?!” Anna sobbed. “I thought you were helping us!”

“We are helping you,” replied Grand Pabbie gravely. Or it could’ve been his usual tone of voice; it was difficult to tell with trolls. “We couldn’t take the chance.”

“The chance of what?”

Instead of answering, Grand Pabbie slowly trudged from one end of the chamber to the other until he stood beneath the mirror. The images continued; Anna could barely stand to watch them. They radiated anger and hatred and pain and selfish desires. 

Lady, what have I done?

She reached for Kristoff and grasped his hand. He said nothing and made no movement; instead he continued to stare at his feet, still as a statue. He even felt cold.

“Humans were never meant to wield magic, Princess Anna,” said Grand Pabbie, still watching the scenes in the mirror. “Your kind are simply too susceptible to darkness to handle the weight of such power.”

“Is that why you tricked Hans into trying to kill Elsa?” asked Anna. “You were afraid she’d turn to evil like Queen Regina?”

“I never intended for Hans to succeed in murdering Elsa, my dear,” said Pabbie. “No, Elsa was never a threat. Too shy, too timid, too … afraid. She has the makings of a true evil queen no more than you do. No, the danger was in your relationship with the young prince.”

“Me and Hans?”

“True Love.”

Anna gaped. “What?” she and Kristoff said at the same time.

“You had the potential for it, yes,” Pabbie explained. “And had you gone through with the marriage … had a child been born from your union … and had Elsa remained in exile and you had assumed the throne of Arendelle … then a child of True Love would have one day sat on the throne. It was a threat we could not allow.”

“I don’t understand!” Anna exclaimed. “Isn’t True Love the greatest power in all the realms? The greatest good? You help people to find love –”

“We help those whom we choose to share love,” said Pabbie. “The bond of True Love is great, but what it creates is even greater. And where there is potential for light, there is also potential for great darkness. A brief flicker of light, even the brightest light there is, is not worth the tragedy that comes after it. You are human, Princess, and so bound by short life. You would not understand.”

“You’re right; I don’t! Why –”

But she was cut off by the thundering arrival of a pig-sized grey rock, which rolled to Grand Pabbie’s side and popped into the shape of Halstein.

“Concerns, sir!” the youngling reported. “South-east tunnel, coming this way!”

“Deal with them!” barked an elder troll perched on the ridge above Pabbie. Immediately, all the younger trolls in the room saluted, turned to rock, and tumbled out of the chamber in the direction
opposite the one Anna and Kristoff had come.

“You won’t get away with this,” said Anna, defiantly lifting her chin even though she didn’t feel very defiant at all. “They will find a way to break your curse.”

“They will not,” said Pabbie with a shake of his head. “The Spell of Shattered Sight was designed to break the bonds of True Love. Therefore, it cannot be broken by True Love’s Kiss. The only way to break it would be to destroy the source of the curse. But by the time they find it, it will be too late.”

“You mean this?!” shouted Kristoff, who was no longer by Anna’s side. Instead, he stood by the mirror with a rock clasped in both hands. Before anybody had moved, he hefted the rock and, with all the strength of an ice farmer, smashed it straight into the mirror’s surface.

Belle was sorely tempted to put a bullet straight through Regina’s eyes. If she knew how many she had left, she might well have. The thing was, while she knew how to take the safety off and how to fire, she didn’t know much else about handguns. A mistake she’d have to fix soon.

The door slammed open behind her. “You think you’re so damn smart,” she heard Regina snarl, but Belle kept walking.

_Zelena first. Her sister later._

“Do you even have a plan?” Regina continued, her heels _click-click-clicking_ on the sidewalk. Irritating sound. “What are you going to do when you find my sister? Whack her over the head with a book?”

Belle snapped, “You think you know me so well.”

“What? Do I?”

“Yeah! You think I’m weak!” Belle shouted, whirling around so she faced her former jailer. “You think he chose me because I’m gullible!”

“You are gullible!” Regina thundered back. “You’re a foolish little bookworm with a schoolgirl crush on the most powerful sorcerer who ever lived. You think he’s good? He’s not. He’s far, far darker than you could ever imagine.”

Belle squared her jaw and looked Regina in the eye. “You don’t understand a single thing about him.”

“I understand him better than you do,” said Regina with a sneer.

“GUYS!” Snow shouted, running after them – a task made awkward by the baby in her arms. Belle ignored her.

“You’re the monster,” she spat in Regina’s face. “I was wrong. You never changed.”

“I never claimed that I had.”

Belle’s finger itched. It would be so easy …

“Go ahead,” snarled the queen. “Do it. Pull the trigger.”
She couldn’t think of a reason not to. Why had she hesitated this long?

Then there was a great thunderclap, and a flash of blue light right in front of Belle’s eyes.

She blinked once.

Then again.

Her first thought was: Why is it so cold?

Her second thought said: Why do I have a gun?

She had a gun. Where did she get that?

“What the hell just happened?” asked Regina, who looked about as sick as Belle felt. Snow was right behind her, equally as shocked and queasy.

I was about to shoot Regina – oh, God.

Belle dropped the gun. It clattered on the pavement, followed by a roll of thunder. The streetlight flickered. She felt cold on her hands and realised it was snowing. When had it started to snow? The last thing she remembered was being in Rumple’s shop, and Bae had been there – oh, God.

There was anger, and pain. So, so much anger.

God, what did I do?

“Oh, thank gods!”

Belle wheeled around again. Two figures she eventually realised were Granny and Leroy – recognised only by the bow and Leroy’s dirty old beanie – ran towards them and stopped about a foot away. Granny raised her bow and Leroy hefted his pickaxe. Belle couldn’t figure what was going on but raised her hands anyway. Regina and Snow did the same.

“Granny?” said Snow, with one hand up and the other cradling Jesse. “Leroy? What – what’s going on?”

Granny frowned. She hesitated a second. “It’s you?” she asked, voice muffled by her scarf.

“What?”

Leroy pulled his own shawl from around his face. “The curse? It’s broken?”

“What? What curse?” Regina demanded. “What the hell is going on?”

Leroy and Granny looked at each other; some unspoken communication passed between them. “There’s no time to explain,” said Granny, lowering her scarf. “Richard and Simba are duking it out and there’s a storm bearing down on Storybrooke. We think Elsa’s the one causing it.”

“What?” all three of them said at once.

“Come on,” said Leroy, darting forwards to grab Belle’s hand. “We’ve gotta stop them before they destroy the town.”

Belle still didn’t understand what was going on, but she let Leroy drag her along regardless. She had a feeling that hesitation would cost time they could not afford.
It turned out that her sister did know a thing or two about protection spells. Too distracted
dismantling a charm intended to give an intruder a painful set of warts in an embarrassing area,
Zelena didn’t notice the underlying hex until after it picked her up, threw her around and then
tossed her out of the crypt and into the graveyard. The doors swung shut, if Zelena wasn’t
mistaken, with the sound one made after spitting out a disgusting article of food.

“Clever, little sister,” she remarked, only then noticing that a side effect of the hex involved
covering the intruder’s clothes with a layer of sticky purple slime.

Obviously Regina didn’t intend for her charms to cause permanent damage. How pathetic.

Zelena quickly rendered herself slime-free, got to her feet and brushed herself down. Then she
jumped back with a fright.

Why was there a baboon sitting at the crypt door? More to the point, why did it only have one front
paw?

The animal screeched, pointing with its good hand at something behind Zelena. She understood its
fright straight away.

She had seen magical battles before, but not one like this. A giant dome of pure magical energy
had appeared in the middle of the graveyard; green bolts of lightning speared from it and hit
headstones, trees, anything that got in the way. Inside, darkness swirled like two battling tornadoes.
And in the centre was her father and the Dark One.

As a lightning bolt hit the crypt, Zelena began to run. “Father!” she shouted, summoning power to
her own hands right as Rumplestiltskin beat down Faílinis’ defences. The darkness, no longer held
back, converged on her father. “No!”

There was a pause in which the darkness seemed to hesitate, torn between two targets.
Rumplestiltskin’s head slowly turned, and Zelena came to a sudden halt when his eyes found her.
They were pitch black, soulless and empty, just as they had been the day she met him in his shop.
His face bore no expression, betrayed no emotion. Terror gripped her as it never had before.

For the first time, she truly saw the Dark One.

And the darkness lunged for her.

Zelena tried to flee, but her magic whimpered and flickered out in her hands. Rumplestiltskin – or
whatever he was now – seemed to float towards her, black eyes never blinking or looking away.
He raised both hands, raw power like a maelstrom circling him –

A flash of green. Centuries of darkness lunged, tore into soft flesh and fed on the magic beneath –

Zelena hit the headstone with a thud, bright lights bursting behind her eyes. As she lay stunned, she
became vaguely aware of somebody nearby, and a crack of thunder –

_Father._

“No!” she screamed, forcing herself up despite the pain. Faílinis lay on the grass, his limbs bent at
impossible angles and dark blood seeping from the wound in his chest –
“You beast!” she screeched at Rumplestiltskin. Magic tore out of her and raced towards her former mentor. What good it did, she had no idea. She just grabbed her father and got out of there.

Tink’s green magic pulsed through the tunnel, knocking down the first wave of guard trolls and, unfortunately, Hans. He reached for a stalagmite as he fell and sliced his palm on the sharp rock.

He should have ducked.

“Come on, kid!” shouted Much, who jumped over a wriggling troll and hauled Hans to his feet. Three others lay still on the ground courtesy of Tink, and Alan kicked a fourth’s feet out from underneath it.

“I think I broke my toe!” Alan complained, hopping on one foot while hurrying to catch up.

Hans ignored him and tore a strip of fabric from his shirt to wrap around his hand. “Where was this mirror room you told me about?”

“Over here,” said Much, leading the way.

It was just a hunch, but it was the only thing Hans could think of at this point – Rumble.

“Run!” shouted Tink, shoving Much in front of her as the floor of the tunnel began to shake. Hans could see light – some sort of chamber up ahead – and heard voices, an angry cry –

Then a pulse of brilliant, rainbow-coloured light rocked the tunnel. Hans’ feet gave way beneath him and he hit the ground, hard; judging from the shouts and clatter behind him, his companions and the guard trolls hadn’t received much better treatment.

“Did you do that, Tink?” he shouted back, but she merely shook her head in confusion. So Hans scrambled to his feet before the trolls did and ran into the chamber.

Headfirst into Princess Anna.

“Hans?” she murmured once they had both recovered, knocked to the ground. Hans pressed a hand to his forehead, where an egg had started to form. He was probably going to have a decent concussion later. “What – where did you come from?”

“Get them!” shouted an angry voice. Hans looked up. Eight rocky creatures he recognised as the High Council of Trolls had gathered on a ledge high above the chamber while Grand Pabbie remained on ground level, not two feet from the Mirror of Shattered Sight. Only the mirror lay on the floor, smashed to a thousand pieces, and Kristoff stood in the middle of the carnage.

“What the hell –?”

He got no further, blinded by a wave of green light that struck Grand Pabbie and sent him flying into the wall.

“Kristoff!” he heard Anna shouted, and later remembered her running to her motionless fiancé and dragging him away from the glass. Hans remembered running to her, grabbing her hand, and then somebody else grabbing hold of him a moment before all the air seemed to disappear from the world, and his form was compressed into something minute and invisible that then reappeared with
a pop in the middle of the forest.

It took another second before Hans regained enough control of his senses to realise what had happened. Tink was on the ground next to him, pale and breathing heavily. He grabbed her before she collapsed entirely.

“Sorry,” she said once she had thrown up, and then got her breathing under control. “I couldn’t take on that many trolls at once. We’ll have to find another way.”

“I don’t think we have to,” said Hans, looking over at Kristoff. The man was pale-faced and shaking, leaning against a tree and staring, unseeing, at the forest floor. Anna sat by him. “You broke the curse?”

“I think so,” Kristoff replied without an ounce of emotion.

“Huh.”

Then thunder rolled through the clouds, causing each of them to look up. It wasn’t over yet, Hans realised.

“Anna.” He scrambled over and knelt in front of her. For the first time in three years, she didn’t pull away from him in disgust. Or hit him. Or curse him.

“You were telling the truth all along,” she murmured.

“Yes.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

Hans shook his head. “No time for that now. Listen – Elsa is somewhere in town. She’s scared and alone and it’s feeding that storm.”

Anna sniffled. “I don’t think I can –”

“Yes, you can. You’re the only one who can get through to her. You have to, or this whole town is going to be frozen over in a matter of hours.”

She shut her eyes and didn’t reply. Hans clenched his fists and fought down a wave of impatience.

“Anna,” he murmured gently, “do you trust me?”

He caught sight of Kristoff eyeing him in his peripheral vision but Hans ignored him. Whatever lingering issues Anna’s fiancé had with him, he was happy to settle later. Preferably over a pint. Or two.

“Do you know where she is?” Anna then asked, opening her eyes.

Hans shook his head. “No. But you can find her. You did it once; you’ll do it again.”

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 26: A Royal Pursuit, in which four different groups converge to stop the storm and save the town
A Royal Pursuit

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay in getting this chapter up, guys! It's been a busy and a rough couple of weeks

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The blast hit the sheriff’s station right as Emma was in the middle of overturning the metal cot. Archie was on the verge of calling the dwarves to wrangle the prisoners when he noticed that they had both gone pale and were staring at him through the bars. The cot legs clanged and kicked up a cloud of dust when Emma let it drop to the floor.


He and Emma then caught each others’ eyes and somehow turned even paler. They looked away, red blotches forming on both of their faces.

“You’re awake?” Archie hesitantly stepped closer to the cells. Just because they looked back to normal didn’t mean that they were.

“Awake?” Emma frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Archie watched them carefully. He didn’t fully understand how this curse was supposed to work, but that blast had to mean something …

“If I let you out,” he said slowly, picking up the keys from the desk, “do you promise not to hit me?”

“Hit you?” said Neal. “Archie, what are you talking about? What the hell is going on?”

Good enough, Archie decided. He turned the key the wrong way and, when there was no violent outburst from either of them, turned it the right way to unlock the cell.

“Come on. I’ll fill you in on the way,” he said, making sure to grab the walkie-talkie. Hopefully Granny and Leroy already knew about this, and didn’t accidentally shoot Belle, Snow or Regina when they found them.

The storm got incrementally worse the closer they got to town. Hans raced around the corner to Anderson Street. He was still learning all the ins and outs of Storybrooke, but he was pretty sure that if he followed the barricade and then went up Short Street, he could find the main road again –

“What the hell?” exclaimed Kristoff, who skidded to a stop. Hans and Anna followed suit, as did Alan.

There had been a barricade on Anderson Street, one Hans and the others had to dodge when they snuck out to the foothills. Some of the construction remained, but the centre was now a gaping hole
fringed with glowing blue ice.

“Elsa,” breathed Anna.

Hans nodded agreement. So he’d been right about Elsa running to town, and the storm following her.

**Raaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrggggggghhhhhhh!**

“Duck!” he shouted, diving behind what was left of the barricade. A colossal ball of sparkling white snow pierced the spot where he had been only a second ago, hit the building opposite and burst into a cloud of icicles.

“Bloody hell!” shouted Alan. He’d made it to safety on the other side with Anna, and Kristoff stood up next to Hans. “There’s another one of those snow monster things! And it’s chasing the soldiers!”

“She’s scared!” Hans shouted back. “She’s just trying to protect herself!”

“Great!” said Alan. “So how’re we supposed to get her to stop protecting herself?”

_Good question_, thought Hans. The last time he tried this it hadn’t exactly gone well, and now she thought he was out to kill her. That wasn’t exactly conducive to calming anybody down.

“Wait, _what_ happened?” Belle asked as Leroy turned his van down another winding suburban street. The main road would have been quicker, but it seemed he was avoiding it. The reason became apparent when Belle glanced in the passenger-side mirror and realised there was a barricade blocking the street.

“Something about a shattered curse, and an ice queen gone nuts – WHOA!”

Leroy pulled the steering wheel so the whole van tipped precariously to one side and missed the boulder-sized flying ball of snow by mere inches, then skidded to a stop.

“What the hell was that?!” Regina demanded from the back seat. Snow was pale and wide-eyed next to her, clutching Jesse tight in his sling.

“Giant snow monster,” Leroy barked tersely. He wrenched his pickaxe out of the gap next to the driver’s seat, kicked the door open and jumped out. “Oh, damn – _get out right now!_”

Belle didn’t wait for an explanation. She dived from the passenger seat, hit the ground and tripped so she landed on her hands next to Regina. Ignoring the sharp pains in her elbows, she got up to run.

“Stay down!” she heard Regina shout right before Belle hit the ground again, this time pulled down by a heavy weight on her arm. The snowball grazed her crown before crashing into Leroy’s van, tipping it over and spraying them with a cloud of fluffy white flecks.

Then another voice shouted, “Fire!”

Belle screamed and held her hands over her head, trying to flatten herself as much as possible while bullets ripped through the air above.
“Whoa! Whoa! Hold your fire!”

The shots silenced. Even so, Belle remained where she was, too frightened to move, until somebody knelt next to her and asked, “Belle? Are you alright?”

“Mulan?” Belle pushed herself unsteadily to her knees. Mulan helped her the rest of the way. “What just happened?”

“Sorry, m’lady,” said another voice. It belonged to Prince Ernest, who joined them with a shotgun slung over his shoulder. “Are you hurt?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Then something roared, so loud and deep that the buildings shook. Mulan nocked an arrow and hardened her jaw.

“He’s circling from the north,” she said after a moment. “Gather your men. Have them block off Anderson Street. We may be able to force him into a corner.”

Ernest nodded and ran off. Snow gave Mulan an odd look.

“He’s taking orders from you?”

“Jack and I ran into him an hour ago,” Mulan explained. “He surrendered to us straight away and explained the situation.”

The monster roared again.

“Can you do anything about that?” the warrior woman asked Regina.

Belle frowned; an unusual look crossed Regina’s face, one she hadn’t seen before. Uncertainty, Belle realised after a moment.

“I think so,” Regina answered.

“We can tackle the monster,” said Mulan with a nod. Then she turned to Snow and Belle. “You two need to find Queen Elsa. From what we’ve been able to gather, she’s holed up in a house on Anderson Street. The monster is guarding her.”

Belle swallowed heavily.

You can do this, she told herself firmly. The fate of the town depended on it.

“Elsa?” Anna called, peeking her head cautiously around the backyard fence they used as a hiding spot. Hans stayed behind. Better that Elsa saw her sister before him. “Elsa, it’s me. It’s Anna.”

“Can you see her?” he whispered urgently. The wind speed had picked up again, and they had limited time until the snow monster realised somebody had slipped into its territory.

“No, not yet.” Anna bit her lip and stepped out into full view. “Elsa!”

“Stay back!” was the frantic reply.
Anna was running before Hans or Kristoff could stop her. “Elsa!”

“Anna, Anna, whoa!” said Kristoff. He caught his fiancée’s sleeve and pulled her behind a car with some effort just as the snow monster appeared on the street. While Kristoff put a hand over Anna’s mouth to keep her quiet, Hans risked a look past the rear wheel and watched the creature look around the street, then continue to lumber on its way.

“I can’t hear any soldiers,” said Kristoff. “Do you think it killed them all?”

“Or there could be more than one,” Hans suggested. Kristoff made a face.

“I don’t think I like either of those possibilities.”

Anna gulped. “Is it gone?” she whispered.

“Hang on. Alright, now go.”

They crept out of hiding. Hans brought up the rear and signalled Alan, who had climbed onto somebody’s roof to keep a lookout. If the monster came back, hopefully the outlaw could warn them in time.

“Elsa!” Anna shouted again, stopping every few metres to check around corners and into the windows of homes. “I know you’re scared, but it’s all okay now. I promise! Nobody’s going to hurt you! Elsa –!”

“What are you doing with him?”

Hans started, as did Kristoff and Anna. Elsa stood in the middle of the street with her arm raised and finger pointed straight between Hans’ eyes. He could feel the cold radiating off of her even from ten yards away.

“Elsa,” said Anna, slowly and calmly. She approached her sister with outwards palms like a trainer attempting to calm an angry dog. “He was telling the truth. It was the trolls. They did this to you. To me.”

Elsa frowned. “What?”

“He only tried to kill you because the trolls cursed him,” Anna continued. Hans swallowed heavily and prayed.

Keep talking, Anna, he encouraged her silently. It was working.

“The same curse that they used to try and kill everybody in town,” Kristoff added. “I swear I didn’t know. But it’s broken now.”

“It’s over,” said Anna. “Elsa, you can stop the storm now. You can come home.”

Elsa’s hand shook. Hans remained still, afraid of making any sudden movements –

An arrow thudded into the ground next to Hans’ foot. A moment later, there was a loud roar. A burst of pale blue magic left Elsa’s hands and hit the roof where Alan was, while the whole street shook from the impact of the snow monster’s running feet.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” said Kristoff, jumping back while Anna reached for her sister. Hans stood up.
“It’s over, Elsa,” he said evenly. He kept his hands in plain sight and took one step forwards. Another time Elsa didn’t react, and Anna gently took her hand. “It’s alright now. Just stop the storm. And we can all go home.”

She inhaled sharply. “I can’t,” she whimpered, pulling away from her sister. “I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

“No! Stay away!”

“COMPANY!”

The snow monster roared again as it barrelled down the street, its icy breath a cold front that froze everything in its path. Hans dodged it by diving behind somebody’s bins and watched it charge past him to the end of the street. Rather than wait for it to come back, he jumped up and prepared to run, only to find the other exit of Anderson Street blocked as well.

“No, don’t shoot!”

King Richard, of course, took no notice of the minor prince from a lesser kingdom and shouted, “Aim!” at the four battered soldiers behind him. Hans knew there was no way he could clear the distance between himself, Elsa and the soldiers beyond in time.

“Fire!”

Five guns discharged, five bullets flew, and five bullets lodged into a thick wall of ice that spontaneously appeared between Elsa and Richard. She ran while the unfortunate men tried to figure out what had happened. And to add further confusion, Kristoff launched himself from the garden bed in which he had taken shelter and tackled Richard from the side.

“Anna!” Hans called, running up to her and hauling her to her feet. “Come on!”

The barricade on Anderson Street had a gaping hole in the middle of it. Soldiers stood at the mouth. There was a lot of chaos. A lot of shouting, smoke and gunshots. Belle covered her ears as she ran to what was left of the barricade and fell against it.

“Simba!” Snow shouted to the leader of the forces. She had to shout twice more until the Pridelander king finally heard her over the noise. “What’s going on?!”

“Giant snow monster!” Simba replied. He got no further, interrupted by a barrage of snowballs that whizzed over his head. One hit a soldier, who went down with a scream.

Belle grabbed Snow by the arm. “Elsa must have gone that way!”

Snow nodded agreement. “On three?”

“FIRE!”

Belle ducked as the soldiers rained another volley of bullets, arrows and rocks into the neighbouring street. It was answered with a roar, one that shook the ground and knocked icicles off the barricade.

“DUCK!”
More snowballs shot through the gap in the wall. Snow and Belle were up the moment it ended, racing through the barricade before the next volley began. On the other side, they ducked behind a line of hedges for shelter. The monster was so close that the street jumped with each impact of its feet.

“Elsa! Elsa!” somebody in the distance cried.

“That sounds like Princess Anna,” said Snow.

Belle would have voiced her agreement, but she was too busy protecting her ears from the monster’s roars. They came quicker and louder now. She risked a glance out from the hedges and saw tendrils of purple magic attacking the snow monster like whips. Regina was obviously busy.

“Come on!” said Snow, grabbing Belle’s sleeve. “While it’s distracted!”

“Did Mulan say which house?” Belle asked as they ran.

“No!”

“Well, then –”

“FIRE!” somebody shouted nearby. Snow shoved Belle behind a car and the shots discharged, but they weren’t the target. Belle left the safety of the car and ran in the direction of the gunfire.

Her questions were answered when she rounded the corner to see two men wrestling on the ground – a second look informed her that one of them was King Richard, and she didn’t know the blonde – one man unconscious in a driveway on the right, and three soldiers running off down the street after two redheads, a man and a woman. Hans and Anna, Belle realised with a jolt. Ignoring Richard for now, she set off after the prince and princess.

“Elsa!” Anna was shouting.

The soldiers were gaining on them too fast, Belle thought. Hans stopped so that one of them collided with him. He wrested their weapon away and used it to deflect the attack from the second soldier. The third got in a lucky blow, clubbing him in the jaw. Belle was too far away to do anything, but somebody else was closer and had the third and second soldiers moaning on the ground by the time she caught up.

“Thanks for that,” Hans puffed to Alan, who dropped his broken bow and picked up a soldier’s abandoned short sword. “Belle? Where did you come from?”

“Long story. Listen –”

She screamed. A bolt of pale blue light shot out of the nearest house and hit the fence opposite. The pickets froze over in an instant, enclosed in a wall of solid ice.

Anna stood at the foot of the driveway with her hands held out in front of her. Elsa was in the doorway, one hand raised and entire arm shaking.

“Elsa,” Anna was saying gently, like a trainer to a spooked horse. “It’s okay now. It’s all okay.”

Elsa sobbed. “They’re going to kill me.”

“No, they won’t.”

“They think I’m a monster!”
“You’re not a monster, Elsa,” said Hans.

Elsa paused. Her arm shook and tears ran down her cheeks. Anna took a step forwards. A gun cocked.

Belle wouldn’t make any sense of the next few moments until much later, over a warm cup of tea on the rug next to the fireplace. She remembered turning to see the hardened old veteran – who had probably fought in the Ogres’ War by the look of him – aim the gun and pull the trigger. She remembered that Hans ran and pulled Elsa to the ground while the gunshot sounded, muffling the rest of the world as it did. The strangest instinct took hold in Belle’s body, and she remembered that she grabbed the gun and shoved it upwards so that it clubbed the old soldier in the chin, which made him let go and left her holding the weapon. And that was the condition in which she found herself when Snow, Richard, Simba and the blonde man arrived, followed by the ragtag armies.

“Nobody shoot!” Belle shouted. Snow gave her an odd look, and Belle realised she still had the gun. She held onto it for now, just in case old men listened more to the barrel of a gun than the words of a twenty-eight-year-old librarian. “Just – just wait!”

“You are not in charge here, Lady Belle!” shouted Richard.

“Neither are you, Richard!” Simba bellowed back.

“We’ll see about that!”

They both drew their swords.

“STOP IT!”

The crowd went quiet. All eyes turned to Snow, who looked about as angry and wild as Belle had ever seen her. Her eyes were wide and flaming, her hair was a tangled mess and she still had Jesse encased in his makeshift sling. And he was still asleep.

“Both of you order your men to stand down, now!”

“Queen Snow –” Simba started.

“I’m afraid –” said Richard at the same time, but Snow cut them both off.

“I – don’t – care!” she thundered. “It’s over! This – ends – now!”

Belle looked from one king to the other, watching each of them think through the situation and their options. Her heart thudded in her throat. She felt like she should say something, but what to say that wouldn’t set the whole thing off again –

In the end, she didn’t have to say anything. Simba growled and threw his sword to the ground with a clang. Richard hesitated a moment longer, but after a deadly glare from Snow and a threatening snarl from Nala, he did the same.

It was over.

The moment that realisation struck, Belle tossed the shotgun aside and ran into the house.

“Don’t try to move,” said Anna. She had a hand pressed into Hans’ side, where a copious amount of blood seeped. He moaned in pain. “Belle, do you have –?”

“I think so.”
She tore the bandage off her arm. It was all she had. Anna grimaced but let Belle take over putting pressure on the wound.

“I think it’s just a cut, but I can’t be sure –”

“That’s okay,” Belle interrupted. “See if the people here have a first aid kit. Or a towel. That’ll do the trick.”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll do that.”

“You’re gonna be okay,” Belle told Hans. He nodded, then looked at Elsa, who was crouched by his head.

“You saved my life,” she murmured with evident shock.

Hans breathed heavily and groaned. “We’ll call it even.”

It was cold. That was the first thing Rumplestiltskin became aware of. So cold. There was no wind, just a constant cold. Like the kind that came from inside a refrigerator or a deep freezer.

He groaned and tried to move, as his neck pained from being bent at an awkward angle. That was when he realised he was lying face-down on the ground.

It hurt to move, but he knew he had to. Something sharp poked him in the belly – a stick. A stick with leaves on it.

He was in the woods. How the hell had he gotten to the woods?

Slowly and painfully, with ice crystals in his joints, Rumplestiltskin pushed himself to his knees, then into a sitting position. He looked around. He was in the woods. The sky overhead was a deep, dark purple, with the faintest rings of dark orange just visible above the tops of the trees. It was twilight.

He wracked his brains. The last thing he remembered was sitting in Granny’s diner. He had been laughing with Belle, waiting for a hamburger. She had refilled her water by magic, and he remembered her intense look of concentration, the way her eyes lit up with joy when she realised she had succeeded –

That had been around lunchtime. Rumplestiltskin looked at his wristwatch. Well past nine o’clock.

Oh, gods.

Crunch, crunch.

Somebody was coming. Rumplestiltskin jumped to his feet and teleported away before anybody saw him.

“Well, I’m happy to report that there is no actual damage to the powerlines,” Leroy told the assembly in Granny’s, and Snow breathed a huge sigh of relief. “The cold caused a bit of short circuiting, but nothing the power company can’t fix. They reckon they should have it all back on in
a few hours.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” said Snow. “What about the telephones?”

“That’s going to take a while longer,” said Happy. “The storm did some damage. Early estimates say it’s gonna take at least a week to get it straightened out. We’ll just have to make do with landlines for a while.”

Snow nodded. “We’ll live. What’s the news from the hospital?”

“Oh, well –” Happy quickly thumbed through his papers. “Last headcount we had forty people injured. Twenty-eight of them were soldiers counting Josef, Weselton and Hans. Plus seven kids who got hurt when the camp’s water tower blew over, four cases of hypothermia and one man whose dog spooked and bit him on the arm. Josef was the worst of it but Whale says he’ll live.”

“Yeah, when he comes to, you better tell him he owes Anita a medal,” grunted Leroy. “She saved his life.”

Snow frowned. “That’s it? No fatalities?”

“Impossibly, miraculously, somehow – none,” said Happy with a nod.

Snow could hardly believe her ears. She put her elbow on the table and cupped her chin in one hand, silently offering thanks for the numerous miracles they’d had that day. The snow monster had vanished of its own accord – although, as Snow understood it, Elsa had been able to quell the storm with Anna and Belle’s help once the fighting stopped, and the monster was a part of that spell. Then Ernest’s surrender had robbed Richard of the bulk of his army, which meant the Gaulish king had laid down his weapons without a fight. Weselton and George had been harder to quieten, but even they cowed in the face of a dozen angry Pridelanders.

“Okay,” said Alan, who had just joined them with Regina, Granny, Belle and Archie. “Now that’s sorted, any chance we can get going?”

“Going?” asked Belle. “Going where?”

“The Witch’s friend took my daughter,” said Alan. “Roland and Henry too. I don’t know where the hell he took ‘em but I’ll be damned if –”

“Jonathan didn’t take the kids,” Regina interrupted. “I did.”

Snow looked at her in surprise, as did everyone else. Alan’s mouth opened and shut a few times before he finally managed to say, “Huh?”

“I took the kids, Alan,” said Regina. “They’re safe. They’re in my vault. Robin’s there too. You should probably … let them out.”

“You got keys?”

They appeared in a puff of purple smoke in Alan’s hand.

“Thanks.”

As he hurried out, letting the door slam shut behind him, Snow frowned. “Regina, maybe you should go with him,” she suggested.

“Yeah, maybe,” Regina murmured.
Snow put a hand on her arm. She had no idea what was wrong, but she could guess—after all, they had all done things they regretted under the curse. “Go.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Regina left.

“I should go too,” said Belle. “I need to find Rumple.”

“Okay. We’ll send for you if we need you.”

“Thanks.”

And she was gone as well. A second after Belle left, the diner door opened again and Ernest appeared, followed by a whole lot of shouting that made Snow jump up.

“What’s going on out there?”

“It seems your son-in-law has set up a soccer match on Main Street,” Ernest remarked with curiosity, standing half-in and half-out of the diner so he could watch the spectacle. Snow joined him and stood on her toes for a look.

“Who’s winning?”

“Hard to tell. Oooh.”

Snow cringed as she watched three teenage boys tackle two others, causing a large pile-up outside the teashop. A whistle blasted, and then Neal came running, shouted something incomprehensible and the boys disentangled themselves from the pile. They each dusted themselves off, gave the others friendly slaps on the back, and tossed Neal the ball before racing onto the field in hopes of getting the ball when Neal threw it in from the sidelines. The game resumed.

Snow laughed. Everything had to be alright with the world if something this ridiculous was real.

“Did Midas get everything sorted?”

“Yes. Richard, George and the rest of the rebel leaders are under house arrest at various locations. Most of them came quietly.”

“Yeah. I can imagine.”

“Actually, Richard was the most cooperative of the lot,” said Ernest, which made Snow frown in surprise. “He’s the one who talked George down.”

“Really?”

Ernest nodded. “Seems all we needed to get over our petty differences was to nearly get frozen off the face of the Earth.”

Then he sighed. “Snow, I wanted to apologise—”

“No, don’t,” she insisted with a shake of her head. “I understand your point of view. Apparently Simba and Nala were having the same problems.”

Too much royalty in one space, Snow thought with a huff. She smiled sadly when she realised it was something David had once told her.

“Nevertheless,” Ernest went on, “I am sorry. I was a fool for throwing in my lot with Richard. I
should’ve known better than to trust the word of a fae.”

“Well, that’s something we can both agree on,” said Snow, throwing him a smile. “It’s a start.”

Ernest nodded slowly. “So. What happens now?”

“We all get some rest.”

“Well, there are some issues that should be attended to –”

“It can wait one day,” Snow insisted. “After we’ve had a decent night’s sleep.”

One second passed, and then Ernest nodded again. “In that case, I’ll bid you goodnight. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“I look forward to it.”

Once he was gone, Snow let out a breath and rubbed her eyes. She was exhausted, hungry and her breasts were aching. She was dying to both sleep and shower.

A long, hot bubble bath, she thought dreamily as she checked on Jesse in the carrier that Bashful had been kind enough to fetch from the loft. He stared at her with big, green eyes and let out a whine, so Snow picked him up. She had no idea how, but he had slept through the entire battle.

Tomorrow, she decided was going to ask Granny to babysit, and then she was going to have that bath.

Killian ran through the forest. He didn’t know where he was going or why, just that he had to get as far away from the graveyard as possible. His short stint as a baboon had been the final straw. And the worst part of it was, his rum-soaked brain was screaming at him for fruit.

As he ran, he was painfully aware of the hollowness in his chest where his heart should have been. His breath came in short pants and his vision blurred as his head swirled in a wave of dizziness.

What the hell had he been thinking? He was in no condition for this.

He came to a stop in a dark clearing and braced his hands on his knees, trying to suck in as much air as he could.

“Damn it,” he muttered to himself.

Any minute now, whatever the bloody Crocodile had become was surely going to call for him. Killian looked around at the shadowy trees, trying to find any landmarks. Where was he? How far away was the town line? Could he get there before the Crocodile called for him?

Most importantly, could the Crocodile still control him in the Land Without Magic?

There was no time to wonder. Killian had to take the chance while he still could –

Tug.

Bloody hell.
Killian trudged forwards, following the call. He searched the shadows for the Crocodile’s crooked mug, fully prepared to take whatever backlash would come when he finally told Rumplestiltskin exactly what he thought of him –

“Where are you, you damn reptile?” he shouted into the forest when the call stopped. He was in another clearing, just as dark and as full of shadows as the first, and there was no sign of the Dark One. There was, however, an old well. Killian turned the handle experimentally. Nothing happened.

Fantastic. What game was Rumplestiltskin playing with him now?

*Thump, thump.*

Killian looked down. He blinked a few times as his eyes adjusted to the sudden glow, dark red set against grey shadows –

*Thump, thump.*

He bent down and picked up his own heart. It continued to beat in his hand, the red crystal swirling with black streaks.

Well, then. That changed things.

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Rumple wasn’t in the shop or the library. He didn’t pick up the phone when Belle called. She trudged down the library stairs and locked the back door, trying to swallow her panic. It had been hours, and there had been a lot going on, which meant he could have gone anywhere –

A thought struck her. There was one place she hadn’t checked.

She set off down Main Street at a jog. Never before had she seen Storybrooke so empty, she thought as she ran. At least it was quiet, because that meant the fighting was over. Somewhere in the back of her mind she wondered if the football game was still ongoing under Bae’s refereeing. Probably not, Snow had to have sorted something out by now. Even just a temporary truce –

“Rumple!”

Her hunch had been right. Belle laughed when she saw him raise his head and look at her, half from relief and half from total exhaustion. She sprinted up the drive and into the burnt-out remains of the manor, breaking a floorboard in half underneath her feet when she landed too heavily.

“Ow!” she shouted when a splinter pierced her hand. She ignored its sting and all but jumped on him when Rumple reached for her. She wrapped her arms around him and threaded her fingers through his hair, holding him close and breathing in the smell of him, to convince herself that he was real.

“Sweetheart …”

“You’re okay,” Belle whispered breathlessly into his ear, afraid to let him go for fear he would disappear. “You’re alive.”

“Of course I am. Belle –”

“I was so worried. I thought the darkness had gotten you; that you were gone –”
“No, no,” he interrupted. He took her hands and gently pushed her away, then pressed his forehead to hers. “I’m still me. I’m fine.”

“I’m so sorry!” She burst into tears, the memory of her words and actions under the curse flooding her mind like a broken dam. “I’m sorry. For everything. Everything I said, what I did –”

“You were cursed, sweetheart.”

Belle sobbed. “It wasn’t all the curse,” she whispered, echoing Hans’ own recollection of the curse. “I called you –”

“Things I know you don’t truly believe.”

She wiped her eyes and finally looked him in the eyes. *Do you?* she asked quietly, but said nothing as she feared the answer.

“What – what happened to you?” she asked, looking him over for any clues. It was hard to tell given the darkness, but she thought she felt dirt on his jacket sleeves and he seemed to have stains on his face and knees. Worst of all, he gulped at the question, and Belle felt her stomach fall.

“I – I don’t know,” he admitted. “I can’t remember anything.”

She gasped. “You blacked out again?”

He nodded. “You need to take this.”

Rumple reached into his jacket and drew out the Dark One’s dagger. “Take it.”

Belle stepped back. “No!”

“He took control of me.”

“Please. Belle, I can’t trust myself anymore. Please, you have to take it.”

She held his arms firmly, careful not to touch the blade. “Having somebody else control you isn’t going to solve anything.”

*Especially not me,* she added silently.

“Belle –”

“No!” She sniffled and wiped her face again. “I can’t.”

Rumple watched her with wide, pleading eyes. A moment passed; Belle stood her ground. Finally, he nodded, and slipped the dagger back into its hiding place.

“I think – I think we need help,” she admitted slowly, eying the dent in Rumple’s jacket warily. “Both of us. This – this is too much. I can’t do this alone anymore.”

Rumple’s brow creased. “Belle, what are you saying?”

“Will you come with me to talk to Archie?” she suggested. “I’m not saying that he can solve everything, but maybe – maybe it’s a place to start.”

“Belle, I know he’s your friend but what good can he do for –?”

“Please!” she begged. “I need help. We both do.”
He went silent again. She waited a second, then collapsed into his arms as the wall she had been holding up gave way, and she broke down crying.

“I – I can try,” Rumple murmured. Belle could only just hear him over her own sobs. “For you.”

“Thank – thank you,” she said between cries.

They remained in the darkness for a long time. Eventually, Belle’s crying came to a stop, and they stood there a little while longer. Exhausted as she was, Belle wasn’t up to walking anywhere, so Rumple picked her up and carried her home to the apartment above the library. She was asleep moments after he laid her in bed and covered her with a blanket. Rumple lay next to her, unable to sleep a wink, for fear that his mind would not be his own when he awoke.

There was too much blood. Zelena’s hands and shirt were drenched in the foul-smelling red liquid. She could hear it splosh underneath her feet as she dragged her father to the sofa at 81 Grimm Road. The cushions were soaked through in an instant.

“Piss off!” she screamed at the ginger cat, who had come out of hiding to sniff Faflinis’ feet. The animal hissed at her, so she hit it with a hex that made it scurry off screeching. She didn’t give a damn. The thing could die on the streets for all she cared. Her father …

“Zelena …”

Bandages, wound dressings, towels, ointment – she summoned everything she could think of, then grabbed the nearest piece of fabric and pressed it into the wound on her father’s chest. Blood continued to ooze out.

“Zelena …” Faflinis coughed.

“Don’t try to talk,” she urged, reaching for another bandage.

“Zelena …”

It wasn’t enough. Zelena screamed in frustration. The magic was there in her fingers, in her hands and it was getting through, so why weren’t the wounds closing? She shut her eyes and concentrated, pushing back against the curse that held him until she felt a surge of raw power leave her and pour into her father. Green tendrils spread from her hands into Faflinis’ chest, targeting the areas that needed repairs most urgently… then travelled along the cuts and fizzled out.

“Won’t … work,” Faflinis gasped, then coughed violently. Red droplets splattered the floor and the couch beneath his head. “Feeds on … feeds on power.”

“Then tell me what to do!” Zelena cried.

He was gasping for air now. She could feel tears sting her eyes and blinked them away. She didn’t have time to cry. She had to fix this –

“Zelena.”

His hand came up to brush her cheek. Zelena let out a sob. With the bandages in place, the flow of blood had slowed. But not enough.

“Papa,” she murmured between sobs, as the tears flowed freely now. Faflinis smiled, an honest and
gentle smile, as he pressed his thumb lightly to her cheek. He let out a breath, watching her with eyes identical to her own –

Then his hand dropped.

“No!” Zelena cried. “Papa! Papa, no!”

She screamed and shook his body as if that would return the spark of life to his misted eyes, as if by some grace of power above there was anything left, anything that anybody could do –

Somewhere in the darkened apartment, the ginger cat meowed. A dog barked in the street, and a car drove by. Its headlights briefly lit up the room, but Zelena took no notice. He was gone.

Gone.

“Papa,” she murmured once more. When there was no answer, she bent over so her head rested in the crook of his arm and cried until she ran dry.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 27: Rocky Road, in which apologies and reparations are made
Hi guys! I’m gonna take a summer hiatus to finish my RSS story and (hopefully) Intervention. There’s still another half to go in this story, however, which will resume in 2018. Thank you so much for all your kind words and encouragement, they’ve kept me going through some really rough times.

Three days later: 3 March, 2014

It was so early in the morning that stars weren’t even yawning yet, and Belle was asleep. Rumplestiltskin stayed by her side, watching her breathe in and out, listening to the crackle of the dying embers in the fireplace. Once, he would have found peace here, in the quiet of the night, cocooned in soft cotton sheets, and Belle’s touch to keep the Dark Ones and the nightmares at bay. Now, all Rumplestiltskin felt was turmoil.

Sighing heavily, he threw the covers off. He quietly padded out of the master bedroom and shut the door as gently as possible to avoid waking her. Forgoing shaving or dressing, he transported himself to the pawnshop’s back room while still in his pyjamas and undid the glamour charm that concealed the box containing Merlin’s Hat, tucked behind an old book of maps on the shelf.

He had been so sure that potion would work. At the very least, as a stopgap measure, to buy time until he could find a way to separate himself from the darkness altogether. Now, it seemed as though the Hat was his only chance.

It had been ten years since Neal slept in the backseat of a car, and the ache in his back reminded him painfully of the reasons why.

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes before he shoved the quilt blanket back into the bug along with the pillow that had fallen onto the road. While he was tying his shoelaces, he heard somebody laugh.

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Punch. Neal looked up. His neighbour scowled at him from the street, red-faced and his lopsided bowler hat wobbling on his head. “I’ve heard of husbands being relegated to the doghouse, but this is a first.”

“What do you want, Punch?” Neal grumbled, his neighbour’s squawking doing nothing to improve his foul mood.

“Actually, I was just about to pop ‘round to the pharmacy to fill a prescription – what the hell is the matter with you?”

“Nothing.”

Punch raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. “You and the wife have a fight?”
“It’s none of your business.”

“It have anything to do with that bloody ‘Shattered Sight Curse’ everyone keeps harping on about?”

“I said it’s none of your business!”

Punch sighed and groaned at the same time. “Oi. Alright, come on. Get your arse upstairs.”

“What?”

He was gone, already trundling up the stairs to the loft before Neal fully registered what had just happened. He remained seated with one shoe half-untied on his knee, and found his gaze slowly drifted upwards to the window of Snow’s loft.

“Screw it,” he decided. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do.

“Oi, you stinking heap of trash!” Judy was screaming at her husband when Neal got to the landing. If Punch hadn’t grabbed him, he would have run straight back down the stairs. “Are you gonna stand there lollygagging all day or –”

“Not now, darling,” said Punch, cutting off Judy’s rant with a wave. “Mr Cassidy here has been sleeping in the backseat of his car and is in desperate need of a beer.”

“Oh.” Judy returned her rolling pin to its drawer and dusted flour off her hands. She had been baking brownies, Neal realised from the smell of the apartment. “The backseat of the car, you say?”

“Yep.”

She whistled, impressed. “You poor thing.”

“Have a seat,” said Punch, gesturing to a comfortable-looking sofa in a surprisingly tidy living room. There was a bookshelf that had law books, counselling books and picture books lined up on the higher shelves, and baby toys on the lower ones; an old-fashioned box television from the 80’s complete with antenna and VCR; and framed photographs of the Italian landscape hanging everywhere.

Neal gave the sofa a quick look-over for loose springs or other painful traps, deemed it safe and sat down. The baby squealed happily in his playpen and tossed a Duplo brick over the fence. Neal picked it up and turned it over in his hands until Punch returned with two beers.

“So,” Punch started conversationally, sitting down in the armchair opposite and lounging comfortably. The baby crawled over and handed him a toy alligator. “Aw. Thanks, son. So what did you and the missus get into a toss about?”

Neal swallowed a mouthful of the beer. It was pretty good. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Was it something you said to her or something she said to you –?”

“Punch, I appreciate it,” Neal cut him off, “but I mean it. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Alright.” Punch swigged his own drink. “How’s the beer?”

“We were cursed!” Neal suddenly exclaimed. Three days’ worth of bottled-up anger and frustration rolled over him all at once. And Punch just looked at him with a smarmy, self-satisfied
expression that made Neal want to hit something. “Friggin’ hell.”

“Yeah, I knew about that,” said Punch. “But what did you say?”

Neal shook his head and looked at the floor.

“The curse worked, in part, by digging up buried memories and unfinished businesses, correct?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Punch sighed. “Look, Neal, I want to help you. But I can’t do that unless you tell me what happened.”

Neal had another drink. The whole experience had been like a dream – both real and not real at the same time. Horrible, awful things he never meant to say, rolling off his tongue and not a damn thing he could do to stop them. Not that he’d even wanted to make them stop –

“I accused her of having an affair.”

Punch grunted in satisfaction. “I see. And is she?”

“Of course not,” Neal said with a laugh. “I know Emma. She can be stubborn and pig-headed like nobody else, but she’s always been loyal to a fault.”

“Uh-huh. Then why did –?”

“Because I’ve got mommy issues, alright?” Neal snapped. He looked up and glared, almost begging Punch to say something that would start a fight and get the attention off him … but the man remained unfazed. Punch lounged in the armchair with one knee crossed over the other and the stuffed alligator on his lap, tapping his finger on the top of his beer.

Almost against his will, Neal realised he was still talking. “My … my mother abandoned me and my father when I was five years old. For Captain Hook.”

“I’m assuming that’s a rather long story I shall have to hear another time,” said Punch, taking a swig. “And …”

“And now Hook likes Emma.”

“And you’re worried he’s going to steal her away as he did your mother.”

Neal waved a hand in a pathetic gesture. No sense in denying the truth.

“Does she like him?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

Punch nodded. Putting his beer aside for now, he reached into his pocket, took out his phone and dialed a number. “Sheriff Swan? Hi, it’s Mr Punch …”

The Duke’s Head pub slowly filled up for the lunch hour. As patrons lined up to place their orders, some of them frowned and glanced sideways at the man and woman underneath the painting of an English landscape, who laughed uproariously. Others stared completely. After all, it wasn’t
everyday you saw Robin Hood and Lady Belle of Avonlea drinking in a pub.

“Where the bloody hell did you learn to play this game?” Robin exclaimed, laughing as Belle bounced a silver coin on the table and straight into Robin’s ale.

“You sound surprised,” said Belle indignantly. “I will have you know that I was the champion of coin bouncing in Avonlea three straight years!”

“Dumb luck, huh?”

“Entirely.”

Robin laughed. He sloshed a good deal of the ale over his face as a result, then chugged the rest in one go before he turned the glass upside down so the quarter dropped into his hand. He puffed out his cheeks and took a breath. Then, holding the coin between thumb and forefinger, he carefully calculated the line of travel between his hand and the glass, and determined the point at which the coin needed to make contact with the table in order to produce a sufficient amount of bounce … All of which would have been much easier if he weren’t already sloshed.

“Ah, bloody hell!” he shouted as he failed the shot yet again, the coin having bounced off the rim of Belle’s glass and onto the pizza tray instead. He picked up her glass – which really might as well have been his by now – and declared, “You’re just trying to get me drunk.”

“And succeeding,” she said between hysterics. “What’s that now? Three?”

“Four.” Robin shivered as he finished the drink. He’d made his first shot, and one since, whereas Belle had gotten all six of hers in. “Alan can never know of this, understood?”

“Countrymen’s honour,” Belle swore with two fingers pressed to her forehead in salute. “Come on; let’s have another round. I’m buying.”

“Nah,” said Robin around a yawn. “I’ve done the piss drunk at two o’clock thing. It’s Emma’s first day back – I couldn’t do that to her.”

Leaving her to chuckle, Robin got up and stumbled to the bar. Aaron gave him an amused look as he ordered a pitcher of water.

“Having fun there, Locksley?”

“Don’t start, Tumble.” Robin grabbed the pitcher and glasses and returned to the table, somehow without dropping anything.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Belle asked, looking pensive.

“Sure.”

She bit her lip and pulled at her fingers. “When – when you were under the curse, did you … I mean, did you ever feel that –” She trailed off and let out a sigh.

“Belle, what’s wrong?”

“I was going to kill Zelena,” she admitted heavily. “I nearly shot Regina. I’d have done it too, if the curse hadn’t broken. And the thing is, I don’t … I don’t regret it. I don’t know how to feel about that.”
Robin shrugged. “Do you have to do anything about it?”

“I don’t know,” Belle murmured. “I guess there was – there was always a small part of me that thought I’d never resort to violence if I could find any other way. Maybe I was even a little proud of it. But now …”

“I guess we’ve all got a little more darkness inside us than we like to think.” Robin looked down. “My first action was to try and kill Richard.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Yeah, it is. I thought I’d gotten over it years ago, but … I guess not.” He snorted to himself. “Maybe I was lucky. I spent most of the curse unconscious. Dunno what I might’ve done otherwise. Weird thing to be thankful for.”

*If Regina hadn’t locked me in her vault after we –*

Then why hadn’t she spoken to him in two days?

“I think I need to find Regina,” Robin said suddenly.

“Yeah. I think I need to talk to her, too,” Belle agreed.

Robin stood up and downed the whole glass of water. Belle did the same.

They continued to laugh as they left the pub arm-in-arm, the alcohol-induced fog making both of them giddy. They drew a lot of strange looks from the public, but neither cared. When they turned to cross the street, Belle tripped on the gutter and dropped her book. Giggling like mad, she bent down to pick it up, but somebody beat her to it.

Richard straightened up with Belle’s book in his good hand. The other was still in a sling. Robin gulped and tried not to remember too vividly that he was the one to inflict that wound. He’d heard from Dr Whale it was a decent flesh wound, but Richard should only lose a bit of function in two fingers. Still, he couldn’t imagine that his former king would take it lightly.

He held Richard’s gaze and waited for the inevitable, but the man simply handed Belle her book. She took it from him hesitantly. Then he grunted, nodded at Robin and walked away.

“Was that an apology?” Belle asked incredulously.

“The closest his ego would allow,” Robin said.

It was probably the closest thing either of them would ever get.

“Hey, young man,” Granny said with a smile as Henry sat down on a stool. “How come you’re not at school?”

“Snow day,” Henry explained. “Everybody’s got the day off.”

Granny looked out the window. “It’s not snowing.”

Henry shrugged. “I guess the school thought that, since we got so much on the weekend, it was due.”
“Oh, fair enough. What’ll you have?”

“Grilled cheese and a hot cocoa with cinnamon, please.”

Granny tore off the order sheet. “Coming right up.”

Sighing, Henry slouched in his chair and began to count out his pocket money, making sure he had enough. He could put it on any of his parents’ tabs if he didn’t, but he was trying to be more independent lately.

The diner door opened with a jingle and Roland walked in. He had a toy bow slung across his shoulders and three arrows in his pocket.

“Hi, Henry!” the little boy exclaimed happily, jumping onto the stool beside Henry’s with a big, dimpled grin.

“Hey, Roland. What’s with the bow?”

“I ain’t ever been out on my own before.”

Henry frowned. “Where’s your dad?”

“Dunno. We was staying at Uncle Alan’s and Daddy said he was going out for a bit and he’d be back later. He didn’t come back. So Uncle Alan and Aunty Evy said we get lunch from Granny’s. They’re just at the farm-cy now.” Roland smiled brightly at Granny, returning from the kitchen with Henry’s cocoa. “Hi, Granny!”

“Hi, Roland. What’ll you have?”

“Um, can I have pasghetti with toast please?”

“Absolutely.”

“Hey, Henry, is your mummy okay?”

Henry swallowed his mouthful of cocoa. “Which one?”

“Sheriff Emma.”

“I think so. Why?”

“I seen her driving in the whee-whee car past Aunty Evy’s ‘partment this morning. I wave hello, but she didn’t wave back. She looked kinda grumpy.”

“Grumpy?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know which way she went?”

Roland frowned as he thought. “The woods, I think?”

The town line. Henry frowned. That couldn’t mean anything good.

“Hey, I’ll be back in a second, okay?”

“Okay.”
Henry slid off the stool and picked his phone out of his pocket. When he was outside, he quickly punched in Grandma Snow’s number. She answered on the third ring.

“Hey, Grandma. Listen, any chance you could give me a lift out to the woods? I think Emma’s in trouble.”

The park was full of people, just going about their ordinary, workaday lives as if the town hadn’t been on the verge of destruction three days ago. Parents with happy, chubby little children; teenagers sneaking off where they thought they couldn’t be seen; even an elderly couple sitting on a bench near the swingset with a dog the colour of a golden sunset. Kristoff watched them all from the bottom of a tall spruce, unsure of what to make of any of it.

He sat with his back against the tree, his knees drawn up to his chest and his mittened hands tucked inside his jacket. Elsa’s storm may have been vanquished, but this world could still produce a decent cold to rival Arendelle’s. Every once in a while Kristoff let his gaze wander to the dog. Maybe he should adopt one, he wondered. He’d always wanted a dog. But a hardy mountaineering dog, one that didn’t mind reindeer and could plough through ten feet of snow if needed.

He had to stay focused on things like that, or he feared his whole world may just come crashing down around his ears.

The dog barked at a passing jogger. The white-haired lady with lovely features – despite, or perhaps enhanced by, her age – patted him gently on the head and said something that made her gentlemanly husband laugh and kiss her sweetly on the cheek. Kristoff shut his eyes and let his head fall back so it hit the tree.

“Gods above.”

“Kristoff?”

He kept his eyes shut but waved to let Anna know that he did hear her. Even once she sat down, he kept his eyes closed. He wanted so badly to stay where he was, to not go back to what the world had become –

“You missed breakfast,” said Anna. He could smell her perfume. Gods, he wanted to hug her. “I was – I was getting a bit worried.”

“I’m fine,” Kristoff grunted.

“Are you?”

“No.” He groaned and finally looked at her. Anna was watching him with big, sad blue eyes that made him want to crumble and cry in her arms. “They were my family, Anna. The only family that ever mattered to me. How could they do this? How could they –?”

He broke off with a gulp, unable to continue. He cupped his head in his hands and tugged on his hair. Anna reached out and gently prised his hand away. She held it in her own, her fingers so small and petite compared to his.

“What am I supposed to do now?” he asked. “Who the hell am I?”

“What does that even mean?” he grunted.

She looked pensive, brow wrinkling so slightly. “I guess I don’t know.”

He let out a breath and looked at the ground so he didn’t have to meet her eyes, caressing the back of her hand with his thumb. “Look, if you want to give back the ring, I won’t – I won’t push anything.”

“What?”

“I’m just saying, if you’re gonna get back together with Hans or whatever, then –”

“No!” Anna exclaimed, which made Kristoff start. The jogger gave them a funny look. “Sorry. What gave you that idea?”

“Well, you’re True Love, aren’t you? Pabbie said so. So if you want to marry him instead of me, I get it –”

She kissed him.

Taken completely by surprise, Kristoff froze. By the time he had gotten his head together and kissed her back, she had already begun to pull away.

“I don’t care who anybody says I should love,” Anna said, as firmly and confidently as he had ever known. Granted, she did that a lot. But it was usually worth listening to, he found. “Maybe I did have feelings for Hans once, but I don’t now. I love you.”

“Yeah, but –” Kristoff swallowed, afraid to hear the answer. “Doesn’t it bother you that our … that the whole reason we fell in love was because somebody else pushed us into it, just so you wouldn’t marry someone else?”

“No,” she stated, and he couldn’t help but smile. “Does it bother you?”

He thought for a moment and shrugged. “Maybe not so much anymore.”

She laughed and kissed him again. “Do you still want to marry me?” she asked once they broke apart.

“Yes,” he answered. It was the one thing in the world he still knew for sure. “Do you still want to marry me?”

She smiled and nodded. “Yes.”

They kissed a third time. Then Anna pushed Kristoff so he lay against the tree with her at his side, head on his chest and hands intertwined. They stayed like that for some time. Kristoff would have happily stayed there forever.

Regina felt the tingle that came with her protection spells being disturbed and she sighed. She had been avoiding this for three days. She knew that sooner or later she was going to face the consequences of her actions, cursed or not, but a part of her just kept putting it off, and off, and off …

Then again, she couldn’t hide in her vault forever, either.
The intruder knocked on the wall to the inner sanctum, the room Regina kept liveable in case she needed somewhere to hide for a few hours. Or a safe place to lock her son in, she thought shamefully.

“Regina?”

It was Robin.

Regina groaned and, after a moment’s hesitation, lifted the glamour on the door. “It’s open.”

He entered and caught her eyes. It was instantly awkward. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

Robin stumbled against the floor-length mirror and rubbed his eyes, which were ringed red and watery. Regina frowned in concern. “Have you been drinking?”

“I come from northern Gaul. Of course I’ve been drinking. Piece of advice, don’t ever challenge Belle to a pub game. Turns out she’s bloody good at them.” Robin grunted and stood up straight, shoving his hands in his pockets to stabilise himself. “Look, I feel like I should apologise for – for some things I said –”

“No,” Regina stood up. “You aren’t the one who needs to apologise. I am. Robin, I’m –”

“Yeah, but I’m sorry, too –”

“You’re not the one who tricked me into sex and then locked me in here.”

“Well,” Robin started, a coy grin breaking out, “if it makes you feel any better, it didn’t take a lot of trickery.”

They both laughed. Regina let him wrap his arms around her and rested her head on his chest. “That doesn’t make me feel better.”

“No? Then how ‘bout this?”

He bent down and kissed her intensely. Regina sank into it, kissing him back just as intently, and let out an irritated groan when he pulled away far too soon.

“And I’m sorry I used our love against you,” he murmured. “If that ever happens again, promise me that you’ll kick my arse.”

She chuckled in spite of herself. “I will.”

“Hey.” Robin stood back to look at her fully. “You know I knew what I was getting myself into, right? I’m not going anyway.”

“A part of me knows that,” Regina admitted. “But there’s the part of me that’s … that’s scared to lose you.”

“That’s a normal way to feel.”

“Not like this.”

He looked confused. Regina took a breath and tried to explain.
“I – I don’t know how to love very well. In the past, people only stayed because … well, because I forced them to. This, this is – this is something I’m still getting used to.”

Robin dropped his head and took her hands, holding them up to her shoulders. “In my experience, you love extremely well.”

He leant in to kiss her again.

“Wait,” said Regina. She gave him a gentle push backwards. “There’s – there’s something else you need to know.”

He waited expectantly. She gulped.

Now or never.

“I – I can’t have children.”

He frowned. “How come?”

“I – I just can’t,” she murmured, looking at the floor. “It’s a long story. I – I know you wanted another one, and so do I, but you have a right to know. I can’t.”

“Gina.”

He put a finger under her chin. She didn’t resist when he lifted her head.

“It’s okay,” he said. Though she could see disappointment clear in his eyes, there was acceptance there as well. “It’s not something we need to worry about right away. And, well, we both know there are other ways to have a child.”

“You’d be okay with that?”

He slid his arms around her waist. “What I want is you, and everything that comes with you.”

“You’re a terrible romantic. And your breath could kill an ogre.”

“Ah, but you still love me.”

“Hmm.” That part was very true.

“You know what?” he said, suddenly pulling her closer. “I reckon we could make some better memories of this place. What’d you think?”

“I’m not kissing you again until you brush your teeth.”

His eyes sparkled with an idea. “Is there a bath in this place?”

The woods were quiet and peaceful. A delicate layer of frost covered the evergreens, and trickled onto the road. The orange line that marked Storybrooke’s boundary was stark against the black asphalt. The squad car’s engine purred in neutral, the only noise for miles around. Alone in the world, Emma finally felt like she could think.

She stared at the town line through the windscreen without really seeing it. She wasn’t sure why
she was there. Mr Punch’s phone call played over again and again in her head as if she had unwittingly recorded the whole conversation.

It would be so easy just to go … just to run away …

There was a knock on the driver’s door. Emma almost jumped through the roof. “Emma?”

Once Emma had recovered, she rolled down the window. Archie watched her with an innocent, boyish look of expectation and held up an offering of cocoa and muffins.

“Granny only had blueberry. I hope that’s okay.”

“Yeah, that’s –” Emma shook herself. “Archie, how the hell –?”

“Henry called me. He was worried,” said the psychiatrist. Emma glanced in the side mirror. His car sat behind the squad car. She hadn’t even heard it pull up. She spluttered as Archie walked around to the passenger side and let himself in. “Muffin?”

“Archie, what are you doing here?”

He took the time to chew and swallow a mouthful of blueberry muffin before answering. “What are you doing here, Emma?”

She sighed and fell back against the seat with a thud. “I don’t know.”

“Are you running away?”

“No.”

To be fair, it wasn’t like she hadn’t thought about it. But it was an honest answer. Emma knew from the moment she got out of town that she was coming back. She just needed a chance to think.

“Then why –?”

“Do you like living in Storybrooke?”

He chewed thoughtfully and then said, “Yeah, I guess so. Why?”

“I don’t know.” Emma groaned and looked up at the roof. “I’ve just been thinking about New York and living there with Neal and Henry and … it was all so much simpler. None of this eleventh-hour saving-the-world stuff.”

“On the plus side, we get to live a real-life fairytale,” said Archie with a grin.

She looked at him and smiled. “You know, somehow you make that sound like a good thing.”

As they shared a laugh, she took the takeout cocoa and had a taste. It needed more cinnamon, but at least it was warm.

“I’m thinking of stepping down.”

There was a pause. Archie froze, the muffin halfway to his mouth, and he stared at her like she had grown an extra head.

“What are you talking about?”
“I think I should step down, and let someone else be sheriff,” Emma finally admitted out loud. It had been nagging at her for days, and once it started, she couldn’t make it stop. “Jack could do it. He’s a good guy. Or even somebody else –”


Emma sighed. “Because Henry brought me to Storybrooke the first time so I could save everyone from an evil curse. Lately, I … I guess I feel like I haven’t really lived up to the hype.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t be sheriff.”

“Doesn’t it? I could’ve done more to stop Richard before it all went to crap. I could’ve rescued Elsa. I could’ve stopped the trolls before they even cast the curse –”

“Could you have?” Archie asked softly, which made Emma stop and think. “Could anybody have?”

Emma frowned. *Maybe not.*

“We still need you,” said Archie.

She looked at him and felt a smile break out on her face.

“How do you deal with this crap all day?”

“Oh, I know. I should increase my fares,” said Archie with a laugh. Emma couldn’t help but laugh too. “Come on. Let’s get back to town before we freeze our tailcoats off.”

“You know I was never really going to leave, right?” she asked as he opened the door.

Archie grinned wickedly. “I know.”

Neal was remarkably calm as he watched the squad car park beside the bug on the street below Snow’s loft. He leant casually against the brickwork with his hands in his pockets and his scarf blowing gently in the breeze. Only when Emma climbed out of the car did he begin to feel jitters.

He met her eyes and swallowed heavily. He rehearsed one more time.

*I’m sorry I was such a big jerk. I’m sorry I was a coward and listened to August when I should’ve stayed with you. I’m sorry I accused you of sleeping with Hook when I know you didn’t. If you don’t want to marry me, I get it. But I just want you to know that I love you. I always have and I always will, even if you don’t love me back.*

The words were on the tip of his tongue when Emma stepped onto the sidewalk. The first syllable was almost out of his mouth when she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight, like she was trying to squeeze all the air from his lungs. Scarcely able to believe what was happening, Neal lifted his arms. When nothing changed, he hugged her as well, burying his nose into her hair and breathing in the smell. They held each other, swaying gently from side to side. Everything was right with the world again.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “For everything.”

She let out a noise that was half-sob, half-laugh. “I’m sorry, too.”
They would have stayed that way for a long time had Henry not cleared his throat. Suddenly remembering they weren’t alone, Neal and Emma broke apart. She looked about as close to crying as Neal felt.

“Aw,” said Judy, standing off to the side with her husband and the baby in his stroller, gnawing on a plastic keyring. “I love an argument with a happy ending. Actually, I just love an argument.”

“Me too, darling,” agreed Punch, sliding an arm around his wife’s waist. “Well, we’re off,” he declared suddenly. “Afternoon tea, hospital reservations, all that lovely stuff you get to do when you’re happy and in love.”

Neal frowned.

“Hospital reservations?” Emma asked, voicing Neal’s question for him.

Judy shrugged. “Just a precaution. Have a good day, won’t you? Call on us anytime you need.”

“Hey,” said Neal before they could leave. “The phone call. How did you know what to say?”

Punch and Judy grinned and looked at each other proudly. “We’re marriage counsellors,” said Punch.

And with that, they cheerfully waved goodbye and strolled down the street, sharing a good joke that made them both laugh. Neal and Emma watched them leave. He didn’t have to ask to know she felt as incredulous as he did.

“So,” said Henry, in that awkward way one does when attempting to break the tension, “lunch?”

Neal and Emma shared a look, then a chuckle. Neal ruffled his son’s hair fondly. “Sure, kid. Sounds great.”

The Next Day

Unlike the last time the Council of Royals was held in Regina’s office, there was remarkably little shouting. Rapunzel got a little annoyed when Weselton attempted to downplay the fact that King Josef got shot on his order, but a word from King Richard ended the duke’s tirade surprisingly quickly. All in all, Regina thought she had attended worse council meetings.

“So, if everyone is in agreement,” she said, glancing sideways at Snow. Her daughter-in-law shot her a smile of encouragement and Regina continued, “We’ll establish a new town council, consisting of two representatives from each royal household present in this room. King Midas will chair the Council for the first years of its existence, after which a general election will be held with all members given an equal voice. All in favour?”

‘Ayes’ went up around the room.

“Motion passed at eleven thirty-six on March fourth, 2014,” Abigail recited as she took down the minutes.

Regina had a quick glance around the table. There was still obvious tension with Richard seated at one end of the table next to his brother, and Simba and Nala far down the other end.

Princess Rapunzel held her father’s proxy in addition to her own vote, and eyed Weselton with a
mix of wariness and distrust.

Weselton, in turn, had seated himself between Prince Philip and King Midas, perhaps the two remaining people in the room unlikely to lunge for his throat at the first opportunity. He even seemed to be avoiding Richard.

Queen Elsa remained close to her sister and looked as though she had no idea why she was there.

King George, to nobody’s surprised, had failed to show up, and Prince Ernest stood in his place.

“A new town charter will be drawn up, authored by Princess Abigail and Prince Ernest and to be approved by general vote,” Regina went on. “Each member of the Council will be allowed a say, and the document will be presented to the general public for approval before its publication. Any and all disputes will be given hearing and to be settled by majority vote.”

“Do we really have to involve the peasants in this?” Weselton groaned.

“The word is public, Weselton,” said Nala.

“Just because it’s how the Pridelanders do things –”

“All in favour of a general public vote?” Midas interrupted, raising a hand. Regina and Snow joined, followed quickly by Abigail, Elsa, Philip, Simba and Nala. Ernest and John were a bit slower. Richard tapped his fingers on the table, then raised his hand. Weselton looked around the room.

“The vote doesn’t have to be unanimous,” said Regina.

Weselton grudgingly raised his hand.

“Right, then last order of business.” Regina flipped open the final folder. “While we have received a suggestion to dismantle the current system of government and to allow the Council of Royals to rule in the place of an elected mayor, it has also been made apparent that such a move would be costly and likely to cause considerable chaos given the current state of the town. I’ve given it some thought, and I’d like to make a proposal; I will stay on as mayor for the remainder of my term, which ends in October of this year. After that, we will run general elections, with each royal household running a candidate if they so choose. I will be running again, yes, but I’ll stand by the wishes of the general public.”

“And if we ever find a way to get home?” asked Richard.

“We’ll continue to work towards that,” Regina replied. “We’ll keep you all informed, but right now our priority is to make sure that everyone is safe and settled in this town.”

There was a pause. Richard nodded. “Well, for now, that’s good enough for me. I’ll second the motion. All in favour?”

Once again, hands went up around the room. Regina waited until Weselton once again grudgingly agreed, pressured by his peers, and then turned to Richard and Ernest.

“I take it that George’s absence here is meant to show his disagreement?”

“I think his exact words were, ‘when hell fucking freezes over’,,” said Ernest. To Abigail, he added, “I’d like it on record that the profanity was for the purposes of historical accuracy only.”
“We can handle George if it comes down to it,” said Richard. “He’s disgraced. Without Gaul and Carolingia to back him, I highly doubt he’ll be able to field any significant resistance to the council.”

Regina nodded. “Good. Thank you, everyone. We’ll resume council on Saturday to go over the first draft of the proposed new town charter.”

Chairs scraped on the floor and there was a buzz of chatter in the small room as the royals filed out. Richard remained, and waited until everyone except Snow had left.

“Is this the part where you tell me you have conditions about me staying on as mayor?” Regina asked.

“No,” he said.

Regina blinked in surprise. So did Snow.

Richard shrugged. “Let’s just say recent experience has opened my eyes.”

“You allied yourself with a known villain in order to overthrow me,” Regina retorted.

“Jonathan played me as much as he did you with the curse,” replied Richard coolly. “I never intended for any unnecessary casualties. No, I came to apologise.”

“You did?” said Snow with surprise.

“I did.” Richard sighed. “I’m sorry for the part I played in Jonathan’s curse. The ... demon is unscrupulous and without honour. And I intend to bring him to justice if it’s the last thing I do.”

There was a pause. Regina cleared her throat. “Is that everything?”

“It is.” He bowed politely to each of them in turn. “Good day, Your Majesties.”

And with that, he turned and left, allowing the door to swing shut behind him.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Snow remarked. “Do you believe him?”

“Yes. I do. He’s not the underhanded type,” said Regina. No, if Richard went to war with somebody, he made damn well sure they knew it.

Silently, Regina thought that Jonathan had better watch his back.

Belle was alone when Hans limped into the library foyer, leaning heavily on a crutch. He’d been discharged from the hospital only that morning. The little white pills that Dr Whale had given him for pain relief certainly packed a punch. He only felt the slightest twinge in his side.

She didn’t seem to realise he was there, too busy arranging books in the colourful boxes that ringed the children’s corner, and sneaking frequent glances at the clock. Hans knocked on the top of the returns desk to get her attention.

“Hans!”

“Hey, Belle.” He limped to her and gave her a one-armed hug. “How are you?”
“I’m well enough. How about you?”

“Oh, a fractured rib and some decent bruising. I’ve had worse falling off horses. Dr Whale says I should make a full recovery provided I don’t go jumping in front of any hunters.”

“That’s good advice,” said Belle with a laugh. “So, uh, what about your petition?”

“Well, the new Council of Royals has granted a blanket pardon for any and all actions committed while under the Spell of Shattered Sight, which Elsa has graciously extended to include me, so …”

He smiled broadly. Belle grinned too. “Congratulations. You’re a free man.”

“Thanks. I have to say, it feels rather strange. I mean, I’ve the last three years chasing rock trolls, trying to clear my name. Now I, uh, I don’t really know what to do with myself.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find your feet.”

“Yeah. Hey, uh, look – I, uh –” He stumbled on the words and laughed at himself. “I wanted to thank you.”

“What for?”

“For believing me when nobody else did. It, uh, it meant a lot.”

Belle blushed. “Well, I … I have been told I have something of a forgiving nature.”

“It’s not a bad quality to have,” said Hans. “Anyway, that’s all I really wanted to say. That and, uh, to see if maybe that librarian’s job was still available?”

He waited hopefully. Belle grinned and pointed to the trolley. “You can start with the shelving over there.”

He couldn’t keep the smile off his face. “Thank you!” he said, hugging her again before wheeling the trolley to the section marked – ‘Young Adults’.

“The books are shelved alphabetically by author, then by series!”

“Got it!”

“Oh, and if you – oh.” There was a pregnant pause. “Hi.”

“Hi,” said a voice that made Hans’ throat clench. He steeled himself and stepped out from behind the shelf. Yep, it was Princess Anna. She caught his eye. “Hi. Uh, could we – could we talk? For just a minute?”

“Uh, sure,” said Hans sheepishly.

Anna nodded, then looked at Belle. “Um, in private? Please?”

“Oh, of course. I’ll, uh, I’ll just be in the kids’ corner.”

“Thanks.”

She left them alone. Hans limped to the desk while Anna pulled at her fingers awkwardly.

“Hi,” he repeated awkwardly, unable to think of anything better to say.
“Hi,” she said, apparently at an equal loss for words.

_Couldn’t cut this salmon with a knife_, Hans thought to himself.

He cleared his throat. “You, uh … You look well.”

“Thank you.”

“How’s, uh … _ahem_ … How’s Kristoff?”

“He’s … adjusting.” Anna fidgeted with her fingers and huffed. “It’s not easy, learning that the people who raised you planned all along to wipe out your entire race.”

“I can imagine.” Hans snorted. “Actually, no. I can’t imagine.”

Anna chuckled. “No, neither can I.”

A little of the tension lifted.

“Actually,” she said, “the reason I came to find you was to apologise. If I’d believed you –”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Hans interrupted. Anna looked down shyly. “You said it yourself, Kristoff trusted Grand Pabbie with his life. And from your point of view, I tried to murder your sister. Any sane person would’ve taken his word over mine.”

“Yeah. Perhaps,” Anna murmured. In a louder voice, she went on; “But I do owe you a thank-you. For everything you did do. Exposing the trolls. Saving my sister. Saving the whole town.”

Hans shook his head. “I didn’t do it for you.”

She paused a moment, her face blank. Then she nodded. “I know. Thanks anyway.”

It was his turn to pause. “You’re welcome.”

“Anyway, I should – I should go. You’ve got work to do and I have –”

“Yeah, of course –”

“– waiting for me, so I should –”

“Anna.”

She stopped and turned back to face him.

“Kristoff’s going to be okay,” said Hans confidently. “Elsa, too. I know you. You won’t let them give up.”

Anna took a moment. “I know. Thanks. So I guess we’ll … see you around.”

“Yeah. Of course.”

She paused again, then surprised him by standing on her toes and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Bye, Hans.”

The door swung shut slowly behind her. He knew she turned back to look, saw her shadowy reflection in the opaque glass of the door. He could imagine her, standing in the wind, her fringe fluttering about her face and green eyes wide, maybe wondering – just as he was – how things
could have been different.

“Goodbye, Anna.”

“I’m sorry, Hans,” called Belle from the returns desk, interrupting his daydreams.

He smiled sadly, the image of his once-fiancée still fresh in his mind and thinking of the one-thousand-and-one things anybody could have done that things turned out differently. What he wouldn’t give to go back ….

“You know what? Don’t be,” he said finally. He turned around, awkwardly because of the crutch, and let Belle see his sad smile. There was no shame in it. “I guess it just wasn’t meant to be.”

And with that, he went back to shelving. A book sat open on the top of the pile. Hans paused a moment, and then, with a soft smile, shut the book.

“Wow. What’s that smell?” said Neal, breathing in deeply after Robin opened the front door of the mayor’s house.

“Lasagne,” said the outlaw with a grin. “Come on in.”

For all the time he’d been in Storybrooke, Neal hadn’t ever been in Regina’s house. It was actually rather nice, if a bit ostentatious. She was royalty, though. Neal had never had much luck understanding rich people.

“Mom’s on her way. She got held up at the hospital. Where do you want this?” asked Emma. She held up the caesar salad that she and Henry had spent the afternoon making. It had taken all afternoon because Emma first tried to cook a potato bake and somehow managed to set the oven on fire. It was funny in hindsight.

“Uh, kitchen, I suppose.” Robin frowned at the bottle in Neal’s hand. “Is that wine?”

“Oh, yeah. Best I could find on short notice.” He cleared his throat and attempted to read the label. “I don’t know. Something in Spanish, I guess.”

“I think it’s French, Dad,” said Henry.

Neal frowned at him. “How would you know?”

His son shrugged. “What? I read.”

“Oh. You’re here,” said Regina, hurriedly clearing a space on the kitchen counter for Neal to plant the salad. He did a double-take at first, having never seen her in such casual clothing before. Or in such a domestic setting either. “Hey, Henry.”

“Hi, Mom!” Henry engulfed her in a big hug. “Did you make a pie?”

“I did. Apple cinnamon, your favourite.”

“Wow, you remembered!”

“I’ll never understand the cinnamon thing,” said Neal, chuckling to himself as he thought of Emma and Snow’s shared taste for the spice.
“No, me neither. Actually, I remember – Henry!”

Like a deer caught in headlights, Henry froze with two fingers in his mouth and other arm holding the bowl with apple mixture still coating the sides. “What?”

Regina just rolled her eyes and sighed. “Alright. Go on, then. But remember to wash your hands!”

“Yes, Mom!”

“Cheeky bugger,” Neal remarked with nothing but fondness.

“That part, he gets from you.”

“Hey!”

It was true. Neal couldn’t deny that, and Regina certainly knew it. She threw the dishcloth into the sink and leant against the counter with her hands on her hips, looking pensive. Neal suddenly felt the need to fidget. It was the first time he’d faced his son’s other mother since the curse broke, during which he had definitely said some things he should apologise for.

“Hey, listen –”

“Listen –”

They shared an awkward laugh and gestured for the other to talk first. Neal eventually won, and Regina cleared her throat.

“Listen, uh … what I said about you being a – a deadbeat parent –”

“Much better than I deserve,” said Neal. “Believe me.”

“No, it isn’t.” Regina gave a small smile. “I want you to know, I mean it sincerely when I say that you’re the best father I could have hoped for my – for our son.”

“Huh.” Neal ran a hand through his hair. “Uh, thanks, I – I guess.”

“It’s no problem.”

“Well, uh, on my part, I was going to say thanks. Thanks, uh, for being there for Henry when I – when I wasn’t.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Regina.

“No, and it wasn’t Emma’s either,” said Neal. “And all things considered, he turned out a pretty good kid. That’s as much on you as it is on us. So, uh –”

“Knock, knock!” said a new voice, and Neal breathed a sigh of relief. He could only take so many awkward apologies in one week. It was Belle and Rumplestiltskin, each carrying a plastic bag. “Need any help in here?”

“Sure, if you’d like,” said Regina.

It could have been Neal’s imagination, but he was pretty sure he saw an exchange pass between Regina and Belle when the latter set the bag down and began to help clean up the flour. He remembered Rumplestiltskin mention something about the two of them talking in the library last night. Obviously, he wasn’t the only one with an awkward apology to make.
He smiled to himself. Maybe the curse hadn’t been such a bad idea after all.

“Bae,” he heard his father murmur. Neal turned around. Rumplestiltskin looked apprehensive. Another person he’d barely spoken to since the curse broke.

Neal gulped and grit his teeth together. “Hey, Pop.”

“How are you?”

“Good. Uh, listen –”

Neal glanced quickly at the ladies – they were preoccupied, chattering animatedly – and pulled his father into the hallway.

“Um, we should … probably talk …”

“Bae.” Rumplestiltskin cut him off. He held up both hands, then seemed to move to put them down before deciding to keep them up. “I – I think I know what you’re going to say –”

“No, you don’t.”

Rumplestiltskin’s face fell. “Bae, I –”

Neal hugged him.

He couldn’t remember how long it had been since he’d hugged his father like this. Rumplestiltskin stumbled, taken by surprise, and seemed to be frozen by shock until Neal felt him raise his arms after several seconds of the hug had passed. On Neal’s part, he felt salt sting his eyes and he sniffled.

“I love you, Papa,” he finally managed to say. “Always have.”

Rumplestiltskin let out a sob. “I love you too, Bae.”

A few more seconds passed before Neal let his father go. He hurried wiped his face, and caught a glimpse of Rumplestiltskin doing the same.

“So … did you still want to talk?”

Neal grunted. “Can it wait until I’ve got a couple of beers in me?”

“Of course,” Rumplestiltskin agreed with a smile.

“Hey!” Henry called from the living room. Once again, Neal was grateful for the interruption. “Anyone up for a game of Monopoly?”

“Monopoly?” asked Robin. “What’s that?”

“Oh, you poor bastard,” said Neal, he and Rumplestiltskin having joined the others in the living room. Emma had already broken into the wine. He shot her a grin. *Looks like Snow is gonna have to drive everyone home tonight.* “You are so gonna get smashed.”

“Is that a challenge, Baelfire?” Robin posed.

“No, not at all.”
Zelena tipped the whisky bottle over the shot glass, but there was nothing left except droplets. After a few seconds of fruitless shaking, she slammed the bottle onto the table with a frustrated growl. Then she cupped her forehead in her hands and tried not to cry.

Her father’s body remained on the sofa, preserved by a simple spell. Zelena couldn’t bring herself to move him. She knew she’d have to, sooner or later, but for now it was all she could do to remain afloat, ironically by drowning herself in alcohol –

The hair on the back of her neck prickled. Zelena jerked her head up.

Faílinis’ existing protection spells had ended the moment he died. On day two of her sombre new existence, Zelena had summoned enough functionality to replace them. She knew her sister had to be out looking for her, or perhaps had sent whatever Rumplestiltskin was now to finish the job. Whoever this visitor was, Zelena’s charms had let them through, so they didn’t intend any harm. Still, she was hardly in the mood for company.

“Get the hell out,” she grumbled when she heard footsteps in the living room.

“My apologies for intruding,” said a chirpy voice.

Zelena started and turned in her chair. The Blue Fairy stood by the back door in all her self-righteous reverence, with her hands folded innocently in front of her and the matronly blue frock buttoned to the top that fooled no-one. Next to her was Grand Pabbie, as stony as ever.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“We merely came to offer our condolences,” said Grand Pabbie. “Faílinis and I hardly ever saw eye-to-eye, but he was family.”

“Get out!” Zelena demanded. She shoved the chair backwards and it scraped the floor noisily. “What do you know about family? And I know you’re not really here just to offer your condolences, but whatever it is, I am not in the mood. Get out.”

Neither Blue nor Grand Pabbie moved. “What if I told you I was here to offer you a deal?” said Blue.

Zelena cackled. “Then I’d tell you I don’t want anything from Snow’s pet glow-worm. Did she send you here? Or was it Regina?”

“Neither of them knows about our presence here,” said Blue, annoyingly cool as always. “And they cannot know.”

Well, that was interesting. Zelena frowned. “What do you mean, ‘they cannot know’?”

Blue unfolded her hands and walked across the room to the table, where she sat down uninvited and made a gesture for Zelena to do the same.

“Your father told you of his plans to find my sister, the Black Fairy?”

“He might’ve mentioned it.”
“Believe me when I say that we are both much better off if Damhsa a’Deireadh remains in her prison,” said Blue. She waved her hand and a tea set appeared on the table. Amidst the stupor of whisky, Zelena caught the smell of strong Earl Grey tea. “But I have come here now because I may have a way for you to achieve everything you have ever wanted. Victory over your sister. The Dark One gone. Perhaps even a way for you to have your father returned to you.”

“Why now?” Zelena asked. “Why didn’t you make my father the same offer?”

“I did,” Blue answered. “Unfortunately, Faílinis was utterly convinced that his way was the better one. I am sorry that he died, but not surprised.”

“Why would you want to help me? You work for Snow White.”

Blue poured herself a cup of tea with a pensive look. “Snow White … was a means to an end. One that has surpassed its usefulness.”

“Yeah. I’ll believe that.”

“Tea?”

“No.”

Blue hmm’d and set the teapot down. She sipped from her cup with her pinkie finger pointed outwards. “You’re a fairy, Zelena. Snow White, Regina, Emma, young Henry – they are human. You are family. However much I may care for my goddaughter, she is not. I came here because I do not wish to see you spend the rest of your life in squalor, relentlessly pursuing a goal that is ultimately unattainable.”

“And you have an alternative?” Zelena sneered.

Blue nodded.


“I am.” Blue set her cup down and folded her hands together. She shared a look with Grand Pabbie, some communication passing between them that made Zelena uncomfortable. “It is time we took back our world.”

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