



Jefferson's Deal

Once Upon a Time (TV) · Not Rated · 2448 words

by Arukir

Contents

Jefferson's Deal 3

Jefferson's Deal

Fandom: Once Upon a Time (TV) Rating: Not Rated Category: Gen

Warnings: Creator chose not to add warnings

Relationships: Mad Hatter | Jefferson & Rumplestiltskin | Mr. Gold, Grace | Paige & Rumplestiltskin | Mr. Gold, Grace | Paige & Mad Hatter | Jefferson

Characters: Rumplestiltskin | Mr. Gold, Mad Hatter | Jefferson, Grace | Paige (Once Upon a Time)

Tags: Dark One's Dagger (Once Upon a Time), Friendship, Bullying, Ice Cream, Time Skips, Tags Are Hard, I'm pretty sure that nothing in canon technically contradicts this, Madness, Memory Magic, Memories, Identity Issues, I just need more moments of Rumple and Grace interacting okay?, Rumplestiltskin needs a friend and Jefferson is friend-shaped, anyone who says otherwise can fight me

Words: 2448 Chapters: 1 chapter Status: Complete Published: 2026-02-03

Jefferson is not an idiot. He knows the Dark One is planning something big. Something that Jefferson won't be able to escape from. Which would be fine, as the Hatter is always up for an adventure, if it wasn't for one little thing.

Grace.

"Give me back my Dagger, Hatter," Rumplestiltskin growled, making a swipe for the blade. Unfortunately, he couldn't use magic to retrieve it. Such were the rules of the Dark Ones.

Jefferson easily sidestepped him, flicking the Dagger from one hand to the other. "Hmmm... No, I don't think I will."

"This is a dangerous game you're playing, Dearie," Rumplestiltskin warned. He was surprised to discover that he was not particularly rageful and was barely afraid. He was more *annoyed* than anything.

It wasn't that he trusted the realm jumper, exactly, it was more that he *knew him*. Jefferson was content living in his cottage with his daughter, having tea parties and hunting for mushrooms, and then zipping off to other worlds to steal shiny trinkets that would only hold his interest for a day or two. He loved the challenge of a good heist and the joy on Grace's face when he brought her a toy from some far off realm.

So no, Rumplestiltskin did not trust Jefferson. What he trusted was that Jefferson had had many opportunities to seize all sorts of power before, and chose his silly little games and the freedom of lacking responsibility to anything but his daughter and his hat every single time. If he'd stolen the Dagger, it wasn't to enslave his sometimes-employer; it was to get *leverage*.

"Such a pretty little thing, this is," Jefferson commented, twirling the Dagger around. The madness in his eyes sparked up just a bit as he hummed and ran his fingers along the blade's many-curved edge, distracted for a moment by the glint of the metal.

Rumplestiltskin made another lunge for his Dagger, thinking to take it while the Hatter's mind was somewhere else. Jefferson took a step back without looking up, letting the Dark One stumble past him, sticking his foot out at the last moment to send Rumplestiltskin to the floor. He glanced at the imp, grinning. "Down, boy," he quipped.

"Very funny," Rumplestiltskin grumbled, finding himself unable to rise thanks to the command. He looked up at the portal maker, mentally detailing all the terrible things he would do to him once he had his Dagger back. It made him feel better, but still he had to accept this temporary defeat. He sighed. "What is it you want, Dearie?"

Jefferson crouched just out of Rumplestiltskin's reach, twirling the kris blade expertly with one hand. "Well, one, I'd like you not to kill me after I give you this pretty little bobble back. Ever. Or have someone else kill me, in any way, hiring or threatening or tricking or whatever. Or plan my demise. Or lure me to my death by any means. I didn't miss anything, did I?"

"No," Rumplestiltskin lied. He didn't actually intend to use any of the loopholes he saw to kill Jefferson, though, so the Dagger didn't try to make him confess. He giggled. "Is that it, Dearie? What, scared your usefulness has run out? Afraid I'll throw you away soon?"

"We both know that if you were ever going to throw me away, you would've taken my hat and left me to rot somewhere a long time ago, Rump," Jefferson countered, voice quiet. He was almost always deadpan, but this was one of the only times Rumplestiltskin had thought he really seemed to be acting seriously. It piqued his interest. "You're planning something, aren't you? Something big. I won't ask you what, because I'm pretty sure you'd actually hate me then."

Rumplestiltskin made a vague noise of agreement, tilting his head. They both knew he valued his secrets, and he especially valued this one. He didn't bother questioning how Jefferson knew he was planning anything — after all the times he'd stolen, spied, and otherwise done things on the imp's behalf, it wasn't surprising that the Hatter had put a few things together.

"I just want you to tell me one thing, entirely truthfully," Jefferson continued, his mad eyes meeting Rumplestiltskin's reptilian ones. Two strange men among a world of

strange things. "Where can I run where Grace and I won't be caught up in whatever it is that you're doing?"

"...nowhere," Rumplestiltskin answered, frowning.

"I have thousands of realms at my disposal, surely you can't mean that you'll be attacking them all?" Jefferson snorted in disbelief. "Even you aren't that powerful."

"I'm not attacking anything," Rumplestiltskin hissed. That little kernel of fear that he couldn't help feeling had grown, now. He knew Jefferson, and he knew how utterly brutal he could be in defending his Grace. It was something he liked about the other man. "And yes, Dearie, I admit I do have my limits. But... it's unavoidable that you'll be pulled along in the Curse, no matter where you go. I can't stop that," he added in a low voice, his normal mania and flamboyance entirely absent.

Rumplestiltskin did not often feel guilty. Over seven hundred years of being the Dark One had squeezed most of the sympathy out of him. But the mad little realm-jumping hatter had gotten to him, somehow. An outcast. A father. Someone who had seen far stranger things than Rumplestiltskin and never once even thought to flinch from his golden-green scales. Not a friend, of course, as the Dark One didn't have friends — but something rather close to one, maybe.

So Rumplestiltskin felt bad. Not enough to risk his chance to find Bae, of course, but enough to wish he had a way to spare the Hatter and his daughter from Regina's petty wrath.

Jefferson stilled, studying Rumplestiltskin for a minute. At last he sighed, hanging his head. "Fine. I get it. I don't know what you're planning, Rumple, but I know you've been working on it a long time. I'm not as stupid as you think, I can put the pieces of the things you've had me steal and do for you together. I doubt— no, I know I'm not important enough for you to trash it."

The Hatter looked back up, once again staring into Rumplestiltskin's eyes. A lesser man would flinch from his intense, unblinking, unnerving gaze. But the thought that his sometimes-employee could be considered creepy, the thought to flinch from him, never even crossed the imp's mind. "I'll give you back your Dagger, Dark One, if you promise me that Grace will be kept safe, no matter what's coming. Swear that you will protect her, and you will go free."

Technically, it was a command and Rumplestiltskin had no choice but to promise it. But the Dagger didn't get a chance to compel him before he opened his mouth to answer, "I swear I will protect her, Dearie, almost as if she was my own."

Because Jefferson's eyes held a lot within them at all times. Madness, curiosity, amusement. And the desperation of a father who knew that failing his child wasn't avoidable, but wanted to do his best anyways.

No-one would ever gain protection from Rumplestiltskin over Bae, Dagger be damned. But he could promise everything short of that. He could promise to protect the Hatter's child over everyone other than his own.

"Well then," the Hatter began with a smirk, his serious mood gone as he held out the Dagger for Rumplestiltskin to snatch, "pleasure dealing with you, I suppose."

"Yes, yes, whatever." Rumplestiltskin jumped up the moment the blade was in his hand, magicking it away to his bed chamber with a puff of smoke. He didn't like being so close to it long-term, normally, but under his mattress would have to do until he figured out a hiding place that the other truly couldn't reach. "Now, Dearie, let's discuss your punishment, shall we?" He giggled, clapping his hands, his own seriousness and guilt evaporating like the smoke of his spells.

Jefferson rolled his eyes with a deep sigh. Knowing Rumplestiltskin, he'd be doing free jobs for the imp for at least a year for this one. And he'd probably earned himself more than a few ultimately pointless trips to Wonderland, too. He shuddered at the very thought, but oh well — he'd gained Grace's safety and protection from one of the most powerful creatures alive, and that was worth just about anything, even having to deal with his utterly ridiculous birth realm.

Mr. Gold was on a walk. Despite the pain from his bad foot (*how did he injure it he couldn't remember it was important it wasn't don't remember can't-*), he quite enjoyed walks through the town park. It reminded him of... something. More pleasant times (*what times? Belle Bae woods remember remember don't think about it too long*) when he was younger, he supposed.

As he was walking, he saw some kids in the park. It was the one downside of the area, he thought, that it was filled with children. Mr. Gold didn't like children (*of course he liked children he loved children can't hurt a child no no NO Regina will pay for how mean he is to them she will she will she WILL*), but he'd long accepted that they were unavoidable in the small town.

There was a group of the things standing about, being loud about something. Strangely, instead of running around screeching as the brats were typically wont to do,

they seemed gathered closely around a small area. For some reason, Mr. Gold found himself walking towards them rather than away like he'd originally intended. He chalked it up to (compulsion) curiosity.

In the middle of the crowd was a blonde haired girl who looked as if she was blinking back tears. An ice cream cone was upsidedown in the grass in front of her.

"Aw, look, Paige Graceless dropped her ice cweam," a boy taunted. "Are you going to cry, Graceless?"

"Stop calling me that!" the girl yelled at him. Mr. Gold recognized her now, he vaguely remembered seeing her in the hall when he went to gather Mr. and Mrs. Grace's rent.

"Make me, Graceless—" the boy cut himself off, staring up as Mr. Gold walked up behind the girl.

"Boo," Mr. Gold said suddenly, slamming his cane against the earth. The children all screamed and ran.

Except for the blonde-haired girl, who turned and looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Are you alright, Dearie?" Mr. Gold asked, his voice gentle.

(Mr. Gold didn't like children. But that didn't matter, because he was barely even real and deep inside him the Spinner was screaming at him to be kind to this child. And for once the Dark One was in complete agreement with his host, if only because the Dagger had bound them to this particular girl's protection, so they were ganged up on him)

(His aversion to children didn't matter because Mr. Gold was a father, whether he remembered that or not)

"I dropped my ice cream cone," the girl — Paige, the boy had called her — answered slowly. Carefully. All knew that Mr. Gold was someone to fear, even if few could actually come up with a reason why.

"So you did." Mr. Gold looked to the ice cream and back to her. "Would you like another one?"

"What do you want for it?" Paige asked. Stranger danger wasn't really a concept in Storybrooke, it was too small (impossibly large) a town for that. But again, everyone knew to fear Mr. Gold.

"Who said I wanted anything?" Mr. Gold asked, huffing out a breath of air that could maybe pass for a low chuckle.

"You don't do anything for free," Paige said, squinting up at him. "Everybody knows that."

"Tell you what, love," Mr. Gold said, smiling to reassure her, "I'll buy you an ice cream, and you'll tell me a story. How does that sound?"

"What kind of story?"

"Any kind you want, Dearie," Mr. Gold answered, his cane clicking as he began to walk out of the park.

"Any kind?" she asked, following by his side.

"Any kind," he confirmed.

"...I hear stories in my dreams sometimes," she admitted quietly, looking strangely frightened at her own words.

"Well, why don't you tell me one of those, then?" Mr. Gold said, keeping his voice light so she wouldn't be so afraid.

"Once upon a time," she started nervously, glancing up at him uncertainly. He nodded his head encouragingly, and she continued on a bit steadier, "there was a rabbit who wanted a new petticoat..."

In a mansion he didn't want, had never wanted, a madman stared through a telescope at a little girl that was not his own and yet was his everything. He watched as she walked with a grumpy old pawnbroker that hated everyone and everything, especially children. He couldn't hear them, but he could see that they were smiling, even laughing, as they talked.

Jefferson smiled, softly.

His life wasn't great. He was madder than he'd ever been, truly mad rather than Wonderland mad, with two lives battling in his head. He was far apart from his child, and wasn't even entirely sure she was his child, though it was the only thing he was sure of at all. He was trapped, alone, unsure if magic that might not exist or his own madness was what was keeping him from walking out the door.

But Paige Grace his daughter the girl was happy, and cared for, and safe. She was protected. For eleven years now he had watched her deal with the cruelest sorts of children and been unable to comfort her, and he'd watched her bump into a cruel man who would speak to her gently and take her to get ice cream.

Rumplestiltskin had kept his promise. Mr. Gold saved Jefferson's world even as his curse destroyed it. He made the girl smile as she unwittingly repeated the stories her father Jefferson had maybe told her once, in another life. For that reason, and that reason only, the Hatter would not seek revenge seventeen years from then when the clock began chiming and he could go outside again.

He would, however, wheedle just about a thousand and one favors out of the imp for saving Belle. He adored the Dark One's bookish woman, sure, but nothing was free — especially not when he'd been trapped in a fucking curse for twenty-eight years.

Jefferson sighed to himself. He really should've just kept that blasted Dagger.

— end of "Jefferson's Deal" —