Alone, Until I Get Home

by phthalo

Summary

In Boston, Henry Swan's six-year-old brother Ian finds a book titled "Once Upon a Time" hidden beneath the seat in their mom's old yellow bug. As soon as Henry touches it, he remembers.

Season 3 Canon Divergence-Emma finds out she's pregnant a few weeks after she and Henry leave Storybrooke with new memories and new lives. Nearly seven years later, another Dark Curse puts her family in danger, and Emma must return to Storybrooke to help them.

Who's powerful enough to cast the Dark Curse? And how the hell is she going to tell Hook they have a son together?

Notes

You don't have to have read "I belong to you, you belong to me" to understand and/or enjoy this one, but this is basically a "what if Emma had gotten pregnant with Ian right after Neverland instead of in Camelot" sort of scenario, with a shit ton of other stuff (angst! adventure! fluff! confused pirate dad Killian!) thrown in. I hope you're ready for this new adventure because I AM REALLY FUCKING EXCITED!!!!!!!

Thank you to lostalongtheway for all your help editing and for listening to all my worries concerning this fic; you're incredible!!!
Chapter 1

Storybrooke, 7 years ago

"There's not a day will go by I won't think of you."

She could barely look at him before that, but she does now. Their eyes meet, and all Emma sees in Hook's blue gaze is a strange sort of desperation that she feels echoed in her own soul.

She wants to give him something, now, in their final moment together.

She thinks of their kiss in the jungle, the way it had ignited something deep inside her, something she'd kept smothered until weeks later, aboard the Jolly Roger, when she and Hook had found a moment alone below decks and, in a flash, that something had roared to life and overtaken her and she'd let it. Hook had responded in kind, and Emma had seen that same something burning in his eyes, making him flushed and breathless and her hot with need and want.

A shiver runs through her at the memory.

"Good," she tells him, and she actually means it because she realizes she's going to miss him.

She's going to miss his infuriating flirtiness (her treacherous inner voice whispers that it's only infuriating because she's annoyed at herself for how much she enjoys it, but she squashes that thought immediately). She's going to miss his smirk—the one that looks like it's about to jump off his face, scuttle across the floor, and hump her leg. She's going to miss the way his hand feels on her skin, the way his hips fit with hers and the way he fits inside her, the way he moans into her mouth when he comes...

But mostly, she's going to miss looking into his eyes and feeling like she understands him, like he understands her.

She opens herself up for the tiniest fraction of a second and smiles at him. It's a pathetic smile, she knows, but it's the best she can manage when her heart feels so heavy she thinks it might just drop right out of her chest.

She sees that he catches her meaning, and he returns her smile with a soft one of his own. It's delighted and miserable at the same time, and it somehow makes Emma feel worse.

The news that their apartment's burned down is devastating, but Emma's grateful that she was at work and Henry was in school when it happened.

They go to Maine and rent a cabin to get away for the weekend and decide what to do. It's too late in the season for leaf-peeping, but they make the most of it. The air's crisp, the woods are quiet, and although the pizza's pretty bad, their view of the oceanfront is fantastic, and hiking along it helps clear Emma's head.

They talk about moving and making a fresh start in another city—New York's an option—but in the end, they decide to stay. Boston's always been their home, after all, and they're happy there.

"Besides," Henry says, "I don't wanna be a Yankees fan."

They move across town instead, to a place near a park on a hill where you can see the ocean.
Emma finds out a few weeks later that she's pregnant.

She has hazy memories of a drunken hookup at a costume party on Halloween—she'd gotten frisky in the back room of some bar with a guy dressed like a pirate. She usually doesn't do that sort of thing—she really doesn't—but there'd been something about his smirk and his sad blue eyes and the way he'd gotten breathless when she'd kissed him that had gotten to her.

But she has no idea who he is. She can barely even remember what his face looked like.

And fuck she's an idiot. She should know better—she already has a kid, and her and Henry have a pretty good thing going, just the two of them.

But Emma knows what Henry would say, if she told him. He would say they could still have a pretty good thing going if it were just the three of them, too. And he would be right.

She decides to trust her heart again, and make space in her life for one more.

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Henry's thrilled, and, even better, he doesn't ask too many questions.

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The baby's born early, but Emma's happy because being pregnant in the summer is absolute hell and another three weeks might have killed her.

Her water breaks while she and Henry are out having burgers on a Friday night. She's pretty sure the only one excited about it is Henry—the restaurant manager definitely isn't. Emma apologizes and throws a few extra 20's on the table, then she and Henry rush to the car.

The parents of Henry's friend Avery were gracious enough to offer ahead of time to watch Henry whenever Emma went into labor, so Emma drops him off, then drives herself to the hospital.

The fact that she's alone doesn't hit her until she's checked in and lying in a hospital bed, clutching the railings, gritting her teeth against the pain from the contractions. It's harder now than it was before. Last time anger fueled her. This time she feels empty and let down, though for the life of her she can't think who she expects to be there.

As soon as she starts pushing, the lights begin flickering, and then somehow Emma doesn't feel alone anymore. For a moment, impossibly, there's a whiff of the sea and leather and the ghost of a cool breeze off the water against her sweat-soaked skin.

She's pretty sure it's just the meds, but it gives her the strength she needs, and less than ten minutes later, she's a mother again.

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It's a boy, and he's born at 12:02am on July 9th.

Emma's in love with him the moment the doctor puts him in her arms. She hasn't picked out a name yet, but as she clutches him tightly to her chest and kisses him for the first time, one bubbles to the surface.

_Killian._
It feels right.

Killian David, she decides, and somehow that feels right too.

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Henry's heart grows ten times the moment he meets the baby.

"What do you think, kid?" Emma asks. "Should we keep him?"

"Yea," Henry says, nodding vigorously, and there are tears sparkling in his eyes that Emma pretends she doesn't see.

Later, after Henry falls asleep, Emma talks to the baby.

"Things aren't always going to be easy, bud," she tells him, "but I promise you, you're always going to know you're loved."

He's awake and has a full belly, and he's watching her with only one eye cracked open like he's not sure yet about the whole being-out-of-the-womb thing. He doesn't look anything like Henry did, and it's not just his headful of fuzzy baby-duckling hair. He has a long mouth and his ears have an unusual fold at the top that makes them look almost pointed. Emma tries not to think about how they're probably inherited from his dad.

She wiggles one of her fingers into his tiny, balled-up fist, and he grips it hard.

"Me and your brother love you more than anything," she says. "We're always going to be there for you."

He gives her a little gurgling grunt then, as if in acknowledgement.

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They start calling him "Ian" for short almost right away, and it sticks. He keeps the blonde hair, and his eyes turn a bright blue that remind Emma of clear skies over the ocean. He has her smile, but he has a wicked smirk that never fails to bring her back to a certain Halloween night.

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Boston, Now

Emma's late. Walsh's car is already parked outside her apartment when she pulls up to the curb.

"Shit," she swears to herself. This whole thing was her idea, and here she is making him wait.

She gathers her things and meets him on the sidewalk.

"Hey," he greets her, grinning, and leans in to kiss her lightly on the cheek. He always smells strongly of wood and furniture polish, something she's still getting used to.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she says.

Walsh shrugs. "It's okay. I'm guessing that means you caught the guy, huh?"

"Yea," she says with a sigh. The latest perp had been the cause of a rough couple of days, and she's happy it's over. "You ready?"
"Sure," he says.

She leads him up the stairs to the third floor, but at the door, she hesitates.

She's never brought a guy she's seeing home to meet Henry and Ian before. She doesn't actually see a lot of guys, in general—she doesn't have the time to, really, and honestly, her boys are all she needs. But Walsh is an okay guy. She thinks (her insides squirm at the admission) that maybe he's a bit bland, but Ian and Henry already provide more than enough excitement in her life.

Bland is okay. All she wants is something stable.

Walsh catches her hesitation, and suddenly his hand is on the small of her back.

"Hey," he says gently. "It'll be fine. Don't worry."

He's been really great so far with the whole single-mom-to-two-sons-with-two-different-dads thing, in a way no other guy has been before.

She half-smiles. "I like your optimism," she says.

Maybe she's over-thinking it. Maybe everything will be okay and she's just worrying over nothing. Maybe this will work out.

She unlocks the door and pushes it open.

"Hey, guys," she calls. "I'm home."

Henry and Ian are playing on the carpet in the living room. She can see them over the back of the sofa, their heads bent together—brown beside pale gold—over a dog-pile of toy Ninja Turtles.

Henry, having been informed (by Emma) what to expect, looks up immediately. His eyes find hers, and then they slide over, to Walsh. Emma tries to read his expression, gauge his reaction, but she can't—she doesn't have time because Ian looks up too, and his smile slips from his face.

That's when Emma realizes she fucked up.

"NO!" Ian shouts, blue eyes flashing, face turning pink with anger.

"Kid, I-"

But he doesn't let her finish. He's running right past her and Walsh and out the apartment door, which he slams behind him. She hears his footsteps on the stairs and starts to go after him, but Henry's voice stops her.

"I'll get him," he says. He takes his and Ian's jackets—it's late May but the nights are still chilly—from the peg by the door and slips it on.

"Um, nice to meet you," he mumbles as he passes by Walsh.

He closes the door behind him—quietly because he's Henry and he's polite unlike someone—and then Emma and Walsh are alone in the apartment. Before Emma can speak, Walsh does.

"You know," he says, slipping his hands into the pockets of his jeans and hunching his shoulders. "You really shouldn't let Ian get away with acting like that."
Emma knows he's embarrassed by the way Ian reacted, knows he's annoyed...but she can't help that she's suddenly burning with fury.

"Do not," she warns him, "tell me how to raise my kid."

Emma knows she's not Mother of the Year. She knows she's busy, she knows she doesn't have as much free time to spend with her boys as she wishes she did, but she's trying her best—and she knows her best is still pretty damned good.

Walsh puts his hands up in supplication, and smiles his casual smile. "Okay, okay. Sorry," he says. "How about we order a pizza for the four of us, instead of you and me going out? Maybe a pizza will change Ian's mind about me."

Emma relaxes, lets her anger dissolve.

He's trying. He could have said hell no right then and there and walked out, but he'd stayed.

"That sounds nice," she says, and smiles at him so he knows she's not angry anymore. She takes off her coat and starts to slip out of her shoes. "And look, I'm sorry. About Ian. He's...he's actually a really good kid."

"I'm sure he is."

"He's smart—smart like Henry, not me. He's got a crazy imagination. You should see some of the things he draws. I don't even know how to describe them, it's just—it's impressive," she says, and she can't help the pride in her voice.

Walsh nods.

"It's just..." Emma trails off. "I don't know. I've never brought anyone home before. And I've been so busy with work, lately, I haven't been home as much as I should—"

"It's alright," he says. "I get it. I'm sure it's tough for both of them, you know, not having a dad around or anything."

There's something about the way he says it that has Emma's fury back instantly. Her whole body feels hot, as if her blood is boiling in her veins.

"Excuse me?" she says, and Walsh must be hard of hearing or stupid or both because he doesn't heed the warning in her voice and continues on.

"Yea, you know, they always say boys who grow up without their dads can be a little wild. Because they don't have male role models or aren't disciplined or whatever-"

"Leave," she says coldly.

He blinks at her, startled.

"Leave," she repeats.

He must see the threat in her eyes then, because he does without argument. Emma watches him go, glaring at his back, and knows she'll be perfectly happy if she never sees him again.

The door closes—for the third time in five minutes—and her anger breaks, leaving her feeling nothing but exhaustion.
Fucking Walsh.

She can't believe how terribly she'd misjudged that one. She had thought it might be nice to have another person around for Henry and Ian to spend time with, but she guesses she should have trusted her gut and gotten a dog instead.

She goes to the living room—nimbly picking her way through the battlefield of Ninja Turtles, Lego pirate ships, and plastic ocean creatures that littered the rug—and sits down heavily on the couch. She tilts her head back against the pillows, and stares blankly at the ceiling.

Her boys are everything—everything she does, she does for them—and right now, she feels like she's failed them.

Henry's starting college in the fall, and even though he should be going to a Harvard or a Yale, he's going to a state school because that's what Emma can afford. He wants to live on campus, but Emma doesn't think that's going to be possible, either. She gave him her old yellow bug as an early graduation gift, and so he'll be able to drive himself to and from class in September, but it felt like putting a band-aid on the gaping wound that is his disappointment—not that he'd ever let it show, and Emma wouldn't blame him if he did.

And then there's Ian, her little ray of sunshine. He wants to start playing hockey, which, aside from being expensive, is also a huge time commitment. And without Henry around to pick him up from school and watch him, he's going to need to go into an afterschool program, and Emma's going to need to hire a reliable babysitter.

More money, which means more time at work.

Emma closes her eyes. It's been a long month of working overtime, trying to save up, and already she's so tired. She feels a sob born of exhaustion and frustration bubble up her throat, and she lets it out. She falls sideways on the couch and buries her face in a pillow to stifle the sound of her crying.

After a while, she falls asleep.

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Henry finds Ian at the park on the hill, sitting on top of the monkey bars and looking out to the east, where the ocean is just visible in the distance past the Boston skyline. Henry climbs up and sits beside him.

"You cold?" Henry asks.

Ian doesn't answer, but when Henry offers him his jacket he takes it and puts it on.

"I don't want that guy to be our dad," Ian says.

"He isn't," Henry says. "He won't be."

Ian nods, like that settles it, and says, "Good."

He has the same stubborn frown of determination that their mom has, and Henry smiles even though, inside, his heart breaks a little. Their life's not perfect, he knows, but he and Ian have each other, and they've both got Emma, and that's enough.

Together they watch as the last pink and orange streaks of sunset are overtaken by the creeping purple-black of the night sky, until the only lights left are the lights of Boston. It's something they do
often, but suddenly Henry's struck by the thought that this time is probably one of the last times: once he starts at Northeastern in a few months, things are going to change, in a big way.

He wonders if Ian knows, and realizes he probably does.

"Hey," he says, and Ian looks at him. "Want to go get ice cream?"

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They take the yellow bug. It's old but it still runs, and Henry has a soft spot for it.

Halfway to the ice cream place Henry remembers he left his wallet back at the apartment. Keeping his eyes on the road, he reaches down and feels around beneath his seat for the 10-dollar bill he's pretty sure he lost somewhere in the car last week.

"What are you doing?" Ian asks, and Henry doesn't need to look to know he's doing that questioning thing with his eyebrow.

"I'm looking for some money so we can buy ice cream. Can you look under your seat? If we can't find any we need to go back."

Ian ducks down, and almost immediately exclaims, "Hey, my hat's here!"

He gleefully pulls a crumpled Red Sox hat from seemingly nowhere and stuffs it onto his head. "I've been looking for this forever!"


"Oh yea."

Ian dives back down. "There's a book here too."

"What?" Henry asks distractedly. The only person who's ever left books behind in the bug is Violet, and since she started going with Avery over a month ago...well, he hasn't seen her very much lately.

Ian struggles comically for a moment—leading Henry to believe the whole thing is a joke because what book can be that big—and finally manages to drag it free. He sits back and sets it on his lap, and out of the corner of his eye, Henry sees that it is, in fact, an enormous book.

"Cool!" Ian says as he flips it open. "I think it's all fairy tales. This one's about Neverland—wait! This lady looks like mom!"

All Henry can make out is an illustration of a woman with long blonde hair in a grey tank top next to a guy dressed all in black.

"Who's mom talking to?" Ian asks, wrinkling his nose at the page.

At a stop sign, Henry glances over, then does a double take.

"That's not mom," Henry says, even as he leans in for a closer look.

It does look like their mom.

Like, a lot.

"It is mom!" Ian says, nearly shouting. "It says 'Emma', look!"
"Let me see that," Henry says. He reaches out to grab the book, but as soon as his fingers touch the pages, he remembers.

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Henry blinks. He feels like two people at once. He's Henry Mills, who grew up in Storybrooke, never feeling like he belonged, never feeling like he was loved. But he's also Henry Swan, who grew up in Boston with Emma, where he'd always felt at home, always felt cherished, even when times were hard.

Which one is real?

Both?

*Both.*

He looks up at Ian, at a pair of blue eyes staring back curiously.

He's Henry Swan/Mills and he has a little brother, a little brother who was born roughly nine months after Henry and Emma left Storybrooke.

A little brother whose full name is *Killian.*

The car behind them beeps, and Henry startles. He quickly pulls the car around the corner and parks.

He needs to think, he needs to gather his thoughts.

"Henry?" Ian asks. "You okay?"

He takes the book from Ian, and examines the picture again. It's definitely Emma, and she's talking to Hook. Henry reads through the adjoining page quickly, and an idea—a *suspicion*—forms in his head.

"Henry?" Ian asks for a second time.

Henry looks at Ian again, and he sees *him.* He sees Hook.

Ian's a blonde, slightly freckled, 3-and-a-half-feet-tall version of Captain Hook.

"*Fuck,/*" is all Henry can say.

Ian grins. "Mom says you're not supposed to say that word," he says.

*Yea, well, I think I just found out mom had a baby with Captain Hook, so I'm allowed.*
Boston, 6 months ago

Henry glances up from his book—he's reading *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and he's not really into it, but he *wants* to be into it because Violet said it was her favorite—to check on his brother. Ian's sitting across the kitchen table from him. His cheek is resting on its surface, and his eyes are on the pencil he's pushing around listlessly with a finger.

"Ian," Henry says. "C'mon. You have to finish your homework before mom gets home."

"I did," Ian says dully.

"Where is it?"

"On the floor."

Henry closes his books and puts it down. "Any particular reason?" he asks.

Ian shrugs. "I don't like it."

Henry leans sideways to see around the table, and, sure enough, there's a drawing lying on the floor beneath Ian's chair. From what he can tell, it's a picture of three people labeled 'mom', 'Henry', and 'me'—a family portrait.

Henry straightens. "What's wrong with it?"

Ian sits up too only to slump in his seat, sliding downwards until his chin is on level with the edge of the table. All Henry can see are his eyes, and they're glaring at him.

"Why don't I have a dad?" Ian asks.

Before Henry can give his standard response, Ian growls, "I didn't hatch out of an egg, so don't say it! Enzo's dad is a doctor and he says that's not how babies are born."

*Enzo's a know-it-all and needs to keep his big mouth shut*, Henry thinks savagely, but the thought of one 5-year-old explaining—in graphic detail, judging by Ian's pink cheeks—to another 5-year-old where babies come from has him smiling.

That only insults Ian more. His blush flares red and spreads to his ears. He crosses his arms tightly
over his chest, and says, "Everyone's got a dad except us! Colette Carlyle has two dads. We don't even have one so how come she gets two?"

Henry wants to laugh at how dramatic Ian's being, but he knows better. He knows behind the sullen exterior Ian's terrified—that there's something wrong with him, that he doesn't deserve a dad, that he's somehow not good enough for a dad.

Henry wants to help him—he really does—but he can't. He doesn't have the answers Ian needs.

"Look," he says slowly, "I don't know who your dad is, I'm sorry. You have to ask mom-"

"Is my dad a bad guy? Like your dad?" Ian asks, and Henry can see in his eyes that he desperately wants some sort of answer, but he dreads what that answer might be.

"No, your dad's not a bad guy," Henry says, even though he has absolutely no clue who Ian's dad is. He's never asked their mom about it—it's not really any of his business—but he's pretty sure she doesn't know either. And that's fine. He doesn't need to know where Ian came from in order to love him.

Ian's watching him, waiting—waiting for a more satisfactory explanation, but Henry's got nothing left. He opens his book back up, shrugs, and says, "Whatever. We don't have dads, but we have mom. And mom's pretty awesome. I bet no one else in your class has an Emma."

His eyes are on the page in front of him, but he's not seeing the words. He can feel Ian staring at him.

Finally, Ian says quietly, "And you, right?"

"Huh?"

"I have you, too," Ian says.

"Yea," Henry says, grinning. "You have me. Can I see your drawing now?"

Ian picks his drawing up off the floor, and holds it up. "Look, this one's you," he says, pointing. "I drew you in your favorite shirt! Do you like it?"

"Yea, it looks good. I like how long you made mom's hair."

"She looks like Rapunzel, right?"

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**Boston, Now**

Henry and Ian are sitting at a picnic table outside J.P. Licks, and while Ian cheerfully slurps down a strawberry ice cream cone as large as his head, Henry flips through the story book, searching for clues.

He knows the only way the book can be back is if Storybrooke's back. What he doesn't know is, after nearly 7 years, why now? And how, exactly?

**What happened?**

He finds a partial answer at the back of the book. The final page is just a picture: Snow and Charming in a tower somewhere, watching, horror-struck, as a monstrous purple cloud approaches.

*The Dark Curse.*
But who cast it?

There's a conspicuous gap between that final page and the ones before it where Henry can tell that pages were removed. He runs his finger down the inside spine, feeling the jagged edges.

Someone ripped them out.

Furrowing his brow, he skips back to the part when his family arrives back in the Enchanted Forest.

Snow and Charming return to their castle to begin rebuilding their kingdom. Regina grudgingly accompanies them because she has nowhere else to go. Belle, heartbroken over Rumplestiltskin's death, and Neal, determined to find a way back to Emma and Henry, journey to the Dark One's castle. Hook, an outsider once more, departs in search of the Jolly Roger.

And then nothing, just missing pages.

"Henry?"

"What's up?" Henry asks reflexively, then looks up. Ian's finished with his ice cream, and he's watching Henry with big, intent blue eyes.

Henry braces himself.

*Here come the questions.*

"Is that guy my dad?"

*Fuck.*

Henry cannot—*should* not—answer. That's something their mom has to explain. Henry needs to deflect, throw Ian off, distract him, but he has no clue how and he knows if he hesitates too long it'll be suspicious, so he says the first brilliant thing that comes into his mind.

"Um..."

Ian's eyes narrow, just enough for Henry to know he's doomed.

"He is my dad, isn't he?" Ian says, then leans across the table, bats Henry's hands out of the way, and turns the pages of the book back to the one of Emma and Hook talking in Neverland. "Here! The book says his name's Killian. That's my name too."

"So?" Henry says. "People can have the same name and not be related."

Ian rolls his eyes. "Yea, but him and mom are kissing. See?" he says.

Henry does not want to see, so he just stares resolutely at Ian and remains silent.

"And," Ian continues, in a triumphant voice that tells Henry this is the grand finale, "he's looking at mom like Flynn Rider looks at Rapunzel."

"The smolder?" Henry scoffs. "I think that's just how Hook looks at every-"

"No, not the smolder!" Ian says, exasperated, and Henry knows that if Ian's arms were long enough he'd have grabbed Henry by the shirt and shaken him by now. "The other look! *The goo-goo eyes*!"

Henry makes one last attempt to escape. "Listen," he says calmly, "you should ask mom-"
Ian's face turns bright pink. "STOP TELLING ME TO ASK MOM! I DON'T WANNA ASK MOM! I'M ASKING YOU!" he yells, then yelps and jumps backwards as Henry snaps the book closed on his fingers.

"Yes!" Henry hisses, because he doesn't know how to deny it anymore. "Yes, that guy's your dad! Happy?"

Slowly, Ian sits down, hurt and confusion flashing across his face, making Henry feel like the biggest asshole in the universe for shouting at him.

"Hey, Ian, I'm sorry."

"You said you didn't know who my dad is," Ian says, and the tremble in his voice squeezes Henry's heart.

"I didn't. Not until I saw the book," he says, and Ian's just staring at him with that little crease between his eyebrows, so Henry sighs. He drags his hand through his hair, takes a deep breath, and begins.

"Ok, so, a long time ago..."

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Henry doesn't tell Ian everything—he leaves out Regina, for instance, and the fact that Henry spent the first ten years of his life separated from Emma—but he tells him enough. He isn't really surprised at how readily Ian believes him—he's 6 (well, almost 6) after all, and still believes in Santa and the Tooth Fairy and monsters under his bed, so the fact that fairy tales are real and their mom is the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming doesn't shock him too much.

What shocks him is-

"My dad's Captain Hook?" he asks in an awed voice, his blue eyes wide and round as quarters.

"Yea," says Henry, even as his insides squirm with guilt.

Ian glances critically at the book, then back at Henry. "Are you sure? He doesn't look like Captain Hook."

_Yea, lucky for you_, is what he thinks.

"I'm sure," is what he says.

"Isn't he a bad guy though?" Ian asks, and Henry hears the hesitation in his voice.

"He's...he's not," Henry says, hoping he sounds reassuring. "He used to be. But he became a good guy."

"Oh," Ian says, brightening. "Like Flynn Rider?"

"Yea, kinda like that."

Ian nods, accepting Henry's word as truth. Then he wrinkles up his nose in a grin that's half excited, half disgusted.

"Did he become a good guy because he loves mom?"
Henry bites his lip and makes a face. "I think so?"

"Does mom love him back?" Ian asks, more seriously.

"I don't know," Henry admits. "We have to help her get her memories back, and then we'll see. Maybe."

"Are you gonna show her the book?"

"No," Henry says. The book didn't make Emma believe the first time, and he knows it won't make her believe now. He hates what he's about to do, but he doesn't see another option.

"Ian, do you trust me?"

"Yea," Ian says, in the tone of voice that indicates he thinks Henry is an idiot for even asking.

"We have to go to Storybrooke."

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's the only way to get mom to go there too."

When Henry was ten he'd had leverage: he'd been a child; Emma had to escort him home. Now? Now Henry has zero leverage. They need to get their mom to Storybrooke fast, and the only way is to go themselves and make her chase them.

"Won't she be mad at us?" Ian asks.

"No," he lies.

There's no doubt in his mind that Emma will be wicked pissed, he just hopes she won't be once she gets her memories back.

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They take I-95 north to Maine. Henry silences his phone, but leaves it on so their mom can track them once she realizes they're gone. Ian falls asleep somewhere in New Hampshire, and then it's just Henry and his maelstrom of thoughts.

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It's nearly midnight when the "Welcome to Storybrooke" sign looms out of the shadows ahead, illuminated by the glow from the bug's headlights.

Henry's heart starts beating frantically in his chest.

*It's here. It's real.*

He holds his breath until they cross the town line, and then that's it, they're in.

Ian wakes with a little gasp and sits up. He rubs his eyes, looks around blearily, and asks, "Is this Storybrooke?"
"Sort of," Henry says. "We're still in the woods."

"Oh."

There are no streetlights on the road through the forest, and the darkness seems huge and oppressive. The farther in he drives, the more Henry feels like they're being watched. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Ian shiver and draw his legs up to his chest.

"Henry? Are there any monsters in the woods?"

"No," he says, even as he feels his own little shiver of fear. "There's nothing out there but trees."

He drives faster, and doesn't slow down again until they reach Main Street. The light-flooded avenue eases the knot of fear in his belly. He stares around in disbelief as he drives. Everything's in its place; it looks exactly the same, right down to the huge pothole in front of the Sheriff's station.

When he sees Granny's, he pulls over and parks.

Ian's looking around eagerly, sharp eyes taking in everything. "This is Storybrooke?" he asks.

"Yep."

"It's small."

Henry chuckles. "Not every place is as big as Boston, you know."

"Where is everyone?"

"I don't know," Henry says, and looks back out the window. The street's deserted.

"Are they sleeping?"

"Yea, probably," he replies slowly.

Ian settles back against his seat, and turns to Henry expectantly. "What do we do now?"

Henry's gut is telling him to wait, to hide. The creepy feeling from the drive through the forest seeps back inside him. He suddenly feels exposed and vulnerable. He realizes he has no idea what he's just dragged himself and Ian into. Even if Snow and Charming and Regina are here, do they have their real memories, or fake ones again?

"Um," Henry says. "I think we should just wait for mom."

Ian gives him a look that clearly says: You made us come all the way here and now you just want to sit around and wait? But what comes out of his mouth is, "That's dumb."

Henry stares flatly, the retort, "You're dumb," on the tip of his tongue, but then something in the passenger side mirror catches his eye.

It's a sign, lit up like a beacon. Gold's Pawn Shop.

Except Gold's dead. Which means no one will be inside the shop.

"C'mon," Henry says. "I know somewhere we can go."
The front door is locked, which Henry expected. They go around the building to the side door, and Henry pulls the set of lock picks from his pocket that Emma keeps stored in the bug’s glove compartment.

After two minutes of intense struggling with no results, Henry’s getting poked in the back with the story book, and Ian's voice is in his ear saying, "You're jigging it too much."

"It's a rake pick you're supposed to jiggle it."

"Yea, but not that much."

"Shut up," Henry says, but he knows Ian's right, and when he eases back on the rake pick, the lock springs open within seconds.

Annoyed, he turns to Ian. "How do you know how to pick a lock?"

Ian shrugs. "YouTube."

Henry rolls his eyes and starts carefully packing away the lock picks.

"Why didn't you just ask mom to teach you? That's what I did."

"I did ask mom. She said I had to wait until I'm sixteen."

Henry snorts. "And she didn't realize you used her phone to watch lock picking videos on YouTube?"

"I didn't use her phone. I used your iPad."

Henry pulls his head up, outraged, and while he gapes—how did Ian figure out his password?—Ian pushes past him, opens the door to the shop, and slips inside.

Henry jumps to his feet and follows him. It's pitch black, and he fumbles around, trying to locate the lamp from memory. When he finds it, he switches it on. The light is dim and soft and shouldn't attract attention from outside, as long as they keep the blinds drawn.

"Wow," Ian says, looking around. The shop is filled with its usual jumble of strange objects, each unique and alluring in their own way. Even here everything looks exactly as it did nearly 7 years ago—their's not even any dust to mark the passage of time. It's as if they left yesterday.

"Yea," Henry agrees. "Just...don't touch anything."

"Can I look?"

"Sure," he says, then catches the mischievous glint in Ian's eye and adds, "Seriously, Ian. Don't. Touch. Anything. Half this shit's probably really dangerous."

Looking put out, Ian sets the book on the counter by the cash register, and asks, "When's mom gonna get here?"

"I don't know," Henry says. "Soon."

"Then can we go find my dad?"

"Yea."
Henry waits until Ian's occupied with his self-tour of Gold's shop, then he opens the story book and flips to a page that shows Neal Cassidy. He gets a sinking feeling in his chest when he sees the picture of his dad. He's resisted thinking about it until now, but he can't avoid it any longer.

All those things Emma had told him about his dad...they aren't part of the fake memories Regina had given them. Those things are true: his dad really had run out on Emma and left her to take the fall for his crimes.

Neal Cassidy might not be a villain, but Henry isn't convinced he's a hero, either.

That knowledge is like a punch to the gut.

Ian's voice pulls him abruptly from his thoughts.

"Hey, Henry, check it out!"

Henry looks up. Ian's holding a silver necklace by the chain

"It's a snowflake," he says. "Do you think mom would like it? She likes the snow."

"Ian!" Henry splutters. "Put it back! What did I tell you? You can't touch anything in here. It might be dangerous."

"It's a snowflake," Ian says.

"Ian, c'mon," he says, and he can hear the whine in his own voice but he doesn't care. He loves his brother but 6-year-olds are definitely the worst. "You have to just chill out and wait. Mom will be here soon, okay? And then we can go find your dad."

Ian looks sullenly back at the necklace, and huffs, "I wish we could just go find my dad now."

The jewel at the center of the snowflake starts glowing with a blue-white light that grows brighter as Henry watches, eyes widening in horror. Before he can tell Ian to drop it and run, the light flashes, blinding him, and then his whole body is jerked violently upwards.

---

Henry's thrown hard to the ground. He lands on his feet, and although his knees buckle, he doesn't fall. Beside him, Ian sprawls onto the paving stones with a grunt of surprise.

It's still nighttime, but they're in a harbor that Henry's knows isn't Storybrooke's harbor. It's cold, the air smells salty, and Henry can hear seagulls and the deep, telltale creaking of tall ships.

"Shit," Henry swears. He grabs Ian by the arms, hauls him to his feet, and drags him into a nearby alley.

"What happened?" Ian asks.

"Magic," Henry says. "I think that necklace was magic. It transported us here."

"Where's here?"

"I don't-"

A tall figure strides by the mouth of the alleyway, and Henry freezes.
Hook.

He slams his hand over Ian's mouth, silencing him. Henry catches a glimpse of his long, black leather coat, the glint of metal, and then he's past.


They wait silently in the shadows for a long moment, listening to Hook's footsteps fade.

Ian leans into him. Henry's hands slide from Ian's mouth to rest on his shoulders.

"Was that really him?" Ian asks.

"Yea."

"Can we go say hi?" Ian asks, sounding exactly as if he were asking to go pet the neighbor's puppy.

Henry rolls his eyes, grateful it's too dark for Ian to see.

Yea, kid, let's just go say hi to Captain Hook—one of the most fearsome pirates to ever exist—and tell him he's your dad. No big deal.

Boston, 2 hours earlier

Emma wakes slowly and sits up. She feels way too groggy, and the apartment seems darker now than it did when she fell asleep. The clock on the microwave tells her that over two hours have passed.

Shit.

She blinks rapidly to clear her head. Why didn't the boys wake her up? They had to be starving by now.

Wait-

The apartment's empty. No one's home. She fumbles around for her phone, and finds it in between the couch cushions.

No calls. No texts.

She starts to panic.

She pulls up the GPS on Henry's phone, and squints at it.

Maine.

Maine, and still driving.

"What the fuck?" she asks the air.

She runs to the window and looks out onto the street. The yellow bug's missing.

Emma looks back at her phone, watching the little blinking red dot that's Henry and Ian travel further and further north.

Are they running away?
Heart in her throat, she snatches up her coat and her keys and sprints from the apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Yea, yea, I know. The Killian bit was only a tease, but next chapter's 100% him, I promise :)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Hopefully I'll have the next chapter finished by next Monday, but my students' art show is next Wednesday, so this week is sort of a last-minute-scramble-to-get-ready sort of week, so it may take a bit longer :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Storybrooke, 7 years ago

There are tears in her eyes and he can't stand it. He needs to see her smile one last time, to remember it for the rest of his days.

"There's not a day will go by I won't think of you."

He says it because he can't bring himself to say the other thing. The thing about how she changed him. The thing about how she saw Killian Jones where, for centuries, others had only seen Captain Hook. The thing about how she made him want to be a better man.

The thing about how he's fallen in love with her. And it doesn't matter if she feels the same or not, he wants her to know that she's in his heart, and nothing—curses, time, distance—will change that. He'll love Emma Swan until the day he dies, and probably after, as well.

"Good," she says. She smiles, and it's radiant. It's a smile just for him, and he drinks in the sight of her, trying to memorize every detail, etch this final vision of her into his mind forever. He knows she doesn't feel as he does, but she feels something, and that's all he needs.

He smiles back.

Then he's watching her leave. He watches her walk with her arm around her boy's shoulders and get into that yellow contraption she calls a vehicle. She drives away, and then...

---

And then they're in the Enchanted Forest.

"We're back," Snow says sadly, but the misery in her voice is no match for the misery sitting heavily in his chest.

---

8 months later

Killian's standing aboard the Jolly Roger. She's his again.

His crew is at a tavern, celebrating his victory and their return to the high seas. Killian Jones, on the other hand, doesn't feel much like celebrating. Killian Jones feels horrible.

He regrets what he did—not to Blackbeard, certainly, but to that mermaid. He'd been desperate. He
thought he could fill the emptiness inside him, but even a ship as fine as the Jolly Roger can’t make him forget Emma Swan. The void she left behind only feels larger now.

He's staring out at the sea, contemplating his next move. Maybe if he sails hard and fast, maybe if he goes farther away this time, to the ends of the earth, perhaps...

He realizes he's being foolish. There's no escaping his memories. Half the reason he'd wanted the Jolly Roger back in the first place is for the memories—the memories of his and Emma's dalliance below decks, when their bodies had joined, entwined. He can still feel her heat wrapped around him, the way her legs had gripped his waist and held him close, the way she'd raked her fingers through his chest hair, along his back, the way her teeth had grazed his lips.

He feels flushed despite the cool breeze off the water. The memory is bright and clear in his mind, as if it happened moments before.

And then Killian feels her presence beside him. He feels Emma. He thinks at first that it's just his imagination—fueled by desperate desire—but then he catches a glimpse of her shining blonde hair out of the corner of his eye. He whirls, her name on his lips, but there's no one.

Yet he still feels her—he can feel her as if she's standing right there. He can feel her warmth, he can smell the floral scent of her hair, and he swears any moment he'll hear her voice. He's afraid to move, afraid to break the spell.

He doesn't know for how long he stands there—minutes, hours—he just knows he doesn't want it to ever end.

Then a baby cries, somewhere in the night.

The sound pierces him, sends a jolt like lightning through his entire body. He turns his head, eyes scouring the darkness of the docks, searching for the source. The wails of a newborn fill his ears, drowning out everything—the snap of the sails, the creak of the ropes, the sloshing of the waves against the sides of his ship—and then the moment shatters, and when he comes back to himself, Emma's presence is gone.

Killian's alone again.

---

_The Enchanted Forest, Now_

Someone's following him.

Killian felt eyes on him when he passed that alleyway a few streets back, and since then he's had a pair of shadows. He walks slowly, feigning obliviousness.

He hasn't been in this part of the Enchanted Forest for ages—it's Blackbeard's territory now, after all, and it's too close to Snow White and Prince Charming's castle, besides. But he's heard rumors, and he needs answers.

His suspicion that his pursuers are agents of Blackbeard's is proven incorrect almost immediately—those trailing him are completely inept, and as he rounds a corner he catches a glimpse of them and sees that one is a child.

Thieves, then, and foolish ones at that—they picked the wrong mark.

But he doesn't have time to stop and demonstrate the depth of their mistake. Blackbeard will hear of
his arrival soon enough, and Killian would very much like to be gone by then. That is, unless the rumors are true. In which case, he needs Blackbeard—or, rather, he needs something from Blackbeard.

Killian reaches the tavern and goes inside. It's crowded but dimly lit, which suits him perfectly—he doesn't wish to be seen, he merely wishes to observe, and listen. He buys himself a drink and finds an open table against the wall.

He keeps his eyes down but his ears open, and sips his ale slowly. He hears talk of the wheat harvest, of the rat infestation at the docks that someone really needs to take care of, and he hears that a kraken was sighted less than a league to the south (Killian makes a mental note to steer well clear of that). He's halfway through his tankard when he hears 'Dark Curse', and he goes still.

"—came out of nowhere."

"The whole kingdom—gone! Again!"

"—happened last week."

"Who cast it?"

"No one knows."

"Think they left any of their gold behind?"

So, the rumors are true. Someone cast another Dark Curse.

His heart is beating frantically in his chest.

Does that mean...?

Blood's pounding in his ears. He's staring hard at the scarred wood beneath his fingers, thoughts racing, and he doesn't notice the boy slide onto the bench opposite him, until he says, "Hi!"

Killian jerks to attention. His hand immediately drops to the knife at his belt, but when he sees the face grinning at him, he relaxes his grip on its hilt.

"Who're you?" he asks gruffly.

His scowl does nothing to dissuade the boy or weaken his smile.

"My name's Ian—well, sort of," he says.

In spite of himself, Killian's amused. He draws his coat back into place, over the knife, and takes up his tankard once more.

He quirks one eyebrow and says, "Ian's your name, sort of?" before taking a long pull of ale. The child is undoubtedly one of his shadows from earlier. But where had he come from? What does he want?

"Yea, Ian's my nickname."

"Mmhm," Killian says, setting his drink down and dropping his chin into his hand. "Go on."

"My real name's Killian."
"What a coincidence: my name's Killian too."

"I know," the boy says matter-of-factly.

"And how do you know that, exactly?"

The boy grins hugely. He's about to answer, but Killian notices the gaping hole where his two front teeth should have been, and asks abruptly, "What happened to you?" and gestures towards the boy's mouth.

"Oh, they just fell out," the boy says, shrugging.

"They fell out? What'd they do that for?"

The boy's brow crinkles in confusion. "They just did."

"What, didn't they like you anymore? Were you mean to them?"

"No," he says. "They fell out on their own. That's what they do. Mom says bigger ones are gonna grow there now. Don't you know anything about kids? Weren't you one once?"

"That's up for debate," Killian mutters. He takes a swig of ale, and takes a moment to examine the boy again. There's something undeniably familiar about him. His clothes are strange, but Killian's certain he's seen their like before. Killian's eyes trail upwards, to the boy's hat. It's dark blue with a brim only in the front, and a large red 'B' on it.

"What's the 'B' stand for?" he asks.

"Boston," the boy says. "I live there."

Boston.

His blood freezes in his veins.

Boston.

Suddenly, it's as if he can barely speak. "You live in Boston?" he asks hoarsely. The boy nods. Killian peers at him more closely, trying to see through him, to the truth.

The shape and color of his eyes. The impish grin. The odd fold to his ears, even...

Something clicks into place.

_No, no that's foolish_, he chides himself. _You've finally cracked, old man._

He shouldn't have come back to the Enchanted Forest. Now he's imagining things—seeing ghosts.

But he can't help looking up and around the bar. He searches for a flash of blonde hair, a pair of green eyes sparkling at him from some dim corner. But he doesn't see her.

Instead, he sees someone else he knows.

_Henry._

Killian almost doesn't recognize him. He's older—nearly a man—but it's definitely him. He's at a table near the door, sitting by himself with his arms folded over his chest, watching them.
"Henry?" he says out loud.

"Yea!" Ian says, turning and pointing. "Henry's my brother."

He looks back at the boy, Ian—no, Killian. He can no longer deny it. The boy looks familiar because the boy looks like him. Except for the golden hair and the freckles on his nose. Those come from...

"Emma," Killian breathes.

"She's my mom," the boy says brightly.

Killian swallows hard.

"Tell me your name again, lad."

"Killian," the boy says, then he grins and adds, "I'm your son."

Killian's world slants sharply sideways. He feels as if he's standing aboard a capsizing ship, sliding down the deck into the tumultuous waters below. He plunges in, into his churning thoughts.

When he left Emma...she was pregnant. He let her go. He left her to raise their son on her own.

He left his son.

He has a son.

It's too much, there's too much-

"Are you okay?"

Henry's at the table, standing behind Ian with his hands loose at his sides but his shoulders squared and tense.

Killian looks up, at Henry. He can't breathe. He can't move. He can only stare.

Gods Henry looks so much different. He's taller—nearly Killian's height, certainly. His face has lost its boyish roundness; it's more angular, now, and Killian can see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw. He doesn't look much like Emma, but Killian sees a bit of Baelfire in him, and a bit of Charming.

And in his eyes is a wary look Killian recognizes.

Liam had worn that look often—it's the look of an older brother who'd shred a man with a spoon for hurting his younger brother.

Killian gives himself a little shake, and looks back at the boy—his boy. There's a crease between his brows and a wobbly little frown where before there'd been only confidence, and it's entirely Killian's fault.

"Aye, Henry. I'm fine. I just..." He pauses and licks his lips. "I didn't know."

He knows Henry hears the unspoken I wish I had, because Henry nods and takes a seat next to Ian. The boy looks at his brother, and something in Henry's expression makes him relax. His smile's back, and he turns it on Killian, Killian offers him one in return.

"Can you help us get home?" Henry asks.
Killian tears his eyes away from Ian—from the smile that reminds him of Emma's—and looks at Henry.

"Aye, I can-"

"Are you coming with us?" Ian asks.

"Yes, lad," he says without hesitation. "I'm coming with you."

"So?" Henry prompts, and Killian hears his impatience, hears the urgency in his voice, and suddenly he's worried.

"Are you alone?" he asks, even though he knows it's a foolish question—clearly they are. "Where's your mother? Did something happen-"

_The Dark Curse._

Emma could be in danger.

"Mom's fine," Henry says quickly. "But we have to get back to Storybrooke soon, otherwise she's going to be really not fine."

Killian gives a quick shake of his head, indicating his confusion.

"She doesn't have her memories back yet," Henry explains. "She's on her way to Storybrooke now, and if we're not there when she gets there..."

"Aye," Killian says, understanding. If Emma can't find her sons, she'll tear the town apart looking for them. He takes a deep breath. "Alright. Let's start from the beginning. How did you get here?"

Henry elbows Ian. Ian stuffs his hand into his coat pocket and digs around for a moment before pulling out a necklace. He offers it to Killian, and Killian takes it carefully. It's shaped like a snowflake, with a small jewel at the center. The jewel is dim and smudged, and the surrounding silver is blackened.

"Do you know what it is?" Henry asks.

"Aye, I do," Killian says. "It's called the Wishing Star. Legend says it will grant the wish of someone who's pure of heart. I'm assuming one of you used it?"

"Ian-"

"I wished that we could come find you!" Ian blurts, and somehow his words—the thought that this boy came _looking_ for him—have Killian's stomach doing backflips.

"It can get us back to Storybrooke, then, right?" Henry asks. "Ian just has to-"

"Unfortunately, no," he cuts in. "It only has one wish in it. And it seems you spent it to get here."

Henry's face falls. "Then how are we going to get home?"

"I know a way," he says. "But it's not going to be easy."

Henry and Ian exchange looks, and then Henry says, "What do we have to do?"

---
As they walk to the Jolly Roger, Henry fills Killian in on everything that happened from the moment he touched his old story book to the moment they landed in the Enchanted Forest. They're halfway to his ship when Killian notices that Ian's limping. He stops, and the boys stop too.

"Why are you walking like that?" he asks Ian.

"Oh, I fell," Ian says, and lifts his leg. There's a huge horizontal slice in one of the knees of his trousers, and through it Killian can see blood.

"Does it hurt?" he asks.

The boy shrugs. "I'm okay," he says.

Killian makes a harsh sound deep in his throat. Stubborn, like his mother.

"You'll get an infection," he says, then jerks his head towards an overturned barrel propped against the side of a building. "Over here. Hop up."

Ian scrambles on top of the barrel, and Killian kneels next to him. He takes his flask from his pocket and pulls the cork free with his teeth.

"Now, hold still," he says around the cork. "This will sting."

"What is that?" Henry asks.

"Rum," Killian says, and pours. Ian hisses and screws his face up, but he doesn't cry out.

Killian smiles to himself.

"You're a tough lad," he says softly.

Ian gives him an embarrassed smile.

When he's satisfied with Ian's knee, he raises an eyebrow and asks, "Any other wounds I need to know about?"

The boy turns his hands over, revealing scrapes on both palms.

Killian heaves a sigh, and douses the boy's hands as well.

Behind him, Henry snorts. "Mom's gonna be so pissed he smells like rum."

Killian looks at Ian's palms, at the pink and swollen flesh. "I think she'll understand," he says. He carefully re-corks his flask and stands. "Now, let's get back to my ship and we'll find something clean to wrap your hands with."

"Like a Band-Aid?" Ian asks.

"Erm," Killian says falteringly, "Aye, like a...whatever that is."

As his hand's occupied with his flask, he holds his hook out to help the boy up. He realizes his mistake immediately, but the boy grabs his hook without hesitation, and Killian pulls him to his feet.

---

He's still holding onto Killian's hook when they climb the gangplank and board the Jolly Roger.
Several of his crew, including Smee, throw him curious looks, but a glower has them ducking their heads and scurrying back to their tasks.

Killian doesn't miss the way Ian's staring at everything with eager eyes. Killian looks around too, because, if things go the way he thinks they will, this is likely the last time he'll ever see her.

"What do you think, lad?" he asks.

"It's awesome," Ian answers reverently.

"I'm glad you like her."

---

He takes them to the Captain's Quarters, where he searches the cabinets until he finds some fresh white linen. He tears it strips, then gives it to Henry.

"Sorry, kid," Henry says, tuning to Ian. "Guess they don't have Ninja Turtle Band-Aids here."

Ian shrugs, but he's smiling. It might be Killian's imagination, but he thinks the boy's palms look slightly less swollen.

While Killian rummages through his safe—tucking some things into his pockets, others into a small leather satchel—Henry and Ian sit on his bunk and Henry wraps Ian's hands. Ian's kicking his feet idly and looking around with the same curious expression he'd worn above deck. Something on the shelf behind the pillows catches his eye, and he leans forward, one freshly-bandaged hand reaching out.

"Ian," Henry says, and Ian freezes. "Remember what happened last time you touched something that didn't belong to you?"

Ian snaps his hand back into his lap.

Killian chuckles. "It's fine, Henry," he says, then to Ian, "Go ahead, lad. Touch whatever you'd like. There's nothing dangerous or magical here."

Ian smiles at him. "You have a lot of books," he says.

"Aye, I do," Killian answers, nodding. He glances at Ian over the door of his safe. "How about you? Do you have many books at home?"

"Yea, I've got lots!"

"Do you like to read?"

"Uh-huh. I can only read the little books though. Henry and mom read the big books. Mom does the voices good."

Mom.

As in Emma.

"Do you do good voices?"

"Er..." he says, completely caught off guard. "Truthfully, lad, I don't believe I've ever read aloud to anyone before."
"Oh," Ian says, and he sounds a bit surprised. "Well, you should try it. You'd probably be good at it."

Killian catches the amused twinkle in Henry's eye—likely at the thought of Captain Hook reading bedtime stories to a child—and feels a blush creeping up his neck. He turns back to the safe to hide his face.

He wants it, he realizes. He wants to read this boy bedtime stories and tuck him in at night. He wants to know everything about him, and he also wants to teach him everything he knows.

But he has to concentrate.

Killian bottles up everything he's feeling, and tucks it away. He needs to return these boys home. They need to get back to Emma. Killian needs to get back to Emma.

"Do you know who cast the Dark Curse this time?" Henry asks. He's finished with Ian's hands.

"No," Killian says. "It seems no one does."

"What about my dad? Have you seen him?"

Killian hears the guardedness in the boy's voice, and it breaks his heart.

"I haven't, lad, I'm sorry," he says, and he means it. "The last time I saw Baelfire was nearly 7 years ago."

Henry nods in resignation, like he expected it.

"Isn't he in Storybrooke?" Killian asks.

"I don't know. We didn't have a chance to look around yet. We were sort of waiting for mom to get there."

"Wise choice, given the circumstances," Killian says, and closes his safe. He hefts the bulging leather satchel for a moment—all his wealth in the palm of his hand—then ties it to his belt. "Are you to ready?"

Henry's eyeing him. "Not until I know what your plan is."

He sounds exactly like Emma.

Killian grins. "We're going to get ourselves a magic bean."

"A magic bean?" Henry asks, brow furrowing. "I thought there weren't any more."

Killian tilts his head side-to-side thoughtfully. "There are a few," he says. "You just have to know where to look, and it just so happens that one lies right under our very noses."

"Okay," Henry says slowly. "And how exactly are we going to get it?"

With a flourish, Killian produces a deck of cards from inside his sleeve. "We're going to win it."

"Win it?"

"Aye."
"From who?"

Killian's grin grows wider.

"Blackbeard."

---

They're leaving.

Ian climbs up first, babbling something about how he thought Blackbeard was real but like really real, and Henry's about to follow, smiling and shaking his head, but Killian puts a hand on his arm and stops him.

Henry turns back.

"Thank you," Killian says quietly.

"For what?"

"For telling Ian about me. I realize you didn't have to, but you did, and I—well, you both found me, and I'm grateful."

Henry nods. He looks away, after Ian.

"Just...don't hurt him," he says, and then his eyes are hard on Killian's. "Or my mom. Please."

Killian returns the look equally hard.

"I don't intend to," he says, and it's not a statement—it's a promise.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: THE REUNION (you know the one...)
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I'm posting it without editing from the fabulous lostalongthewayy (because I am IMPATIENT, and don't wanna spend all day tomorrow daydreaming about posting it) so I apologize for any mistakes (they'll be slowly fixed over the next couple of days). Thank you to everyone who's been reading, enjoying, and commenting!!! It really makes my day :D!!

The Enchanted Forest

Teach's Tavern is alive. Light pours from the windows and into the street, and the sound of music and raucous laughter fills the night. Killian and the boys are huddled in the shadows of an alleyway across the street, out of sight of the men loitering outside the door in clusters—the drunk ones are patrons; the ones pretending to be drunk are Blackbeard's guard dogs.

Still, despite the sentinels, Killian doesn't expect any trouble getting in—it's the getting out that'll be tricky.

"Okay," Henry whispers from beside him. "What now?"

"Yea, what now?" Ian says. He's inching forward with his eyes on the tavern like he plans on mounting a one-man (one-boy) ambush.

The lad's certainly not short on courage. Killian adds bold to the steadily growing list of things he knows about his son, alongside tough, likes to read, smiles like Emma, and asks a lot of questions.

"Now," Killian says, grabbing a handful of Ian's coat and drawing him back, "you two are going to-

"Hey, are those ladies those guys' girlfriends?"

Killian blinks, then surveys the front of the tavern once more. There are women amongst the men—women with low-cut dresses, unlaced bodices, and skirts hiked up to well above their knees.

Prostitutes.

He's so accustomed to such sights that he hadn't truly noticed.

Mentally, Killian brutally underlines asks a lot of questions, and adds (often abruptly, sometimes inconveniently). He looks to Henry for help, but Henry just raises his eyebrows pointedly and offers no assistance. Killian's voice is strained and a little high-pitched as he turns back to Ian and says, "Aye, lad, those ladies are those gentleman's girlfriends."

"That guy's got three girlfriends," Ian says.

Killian watches in horror as a man with two women already in his lap slips his hand beneath the skirt of a third, eliciting a giggle.

"Why's he doing that? Is she ticklish?"
Killian closes his eyes and prays for something very large to fall from the sky and strike him down. He supposes this is some sort of punishment, and, frankly, he'd rather be flogged.

*Emma's going to murder me.*

Finally, Henry takes pity on him, and says, "Um, so, back to the plan..."

Killian's knees go weak with relief at the change of topic. He opens his eyes again, and sees that Ian's are covered by one of Henry's hands. Ian's frowning, but he's allowing it, and Henry's expression clearly says: *Quickly, before he asks another question.*

Killian clears his throat, and says, "Erm, right. The plan. The plan is for you two to stay here and wait for me-"

"*Wait?*" Ian says.

"*We're not staying behind-*" Henry starts.

"*Yes, you are.*"

"*But we can help-*"

"*Henry,*" Killian says in a hard voice—the voice he uses on his crew—and Henry falls silent. "*I need you to trust me, and I need you to listen.*"

Henry's eyes blaze, but he keeps his mouth firmly shut. Ian's pulled Henry's hand off his face, and now he's staring intently up at Killian too.

Killian glances at him so he knows he's included before he looks back at Henry and says, "*You and Ian are staying here, and if something goes wrong, you're going to get back to the Jolly Roger as fast as you can.*"

He speaks slowly and steadily, and he holds Henry's gaze the whole time. He needs to know that Henry understands, that he'll do as Killian asks and keep himself and his brother safe.

"*I've informed my crew that if you two return alone they're to set sail for Arendelle immediately.*"

Now Henry's looking at him like he's lost his mind. "*Arendelle? What?*

"*There's a magic bean there. You can acquire it fairly easily if-*"

"*If it's easier then why don't we just do that?*

"*Because Arendelle's a two weeks' journey away,*" he says calmly, "*and we need to get back to Storybrooke now. This-*" he jerks his head towards Teach's Tavern, "*is the fastest way. We have to try this first.*"

Henry nods—displeased yet resigned. And then Killian looks at Ian, who's gone still and quiet, and he sees the shadow of worry in those blue eyes, and for a moment, he's looking at another little boy from long ago—a little boy who's afraid of the dark, afraid of being left alone...

"*I don't wanna go without you,*" Ian says, and it's as if a fist is squeezing Killian's heart.

Without thinking, he reaches into his shirt collar, grasps the chain around his neck, and pulls it over his head. Dangling at the end of the chain is a ring—silver with a red gem. He holds it out towards Ian.
"Is that one magic too?" Ian asks.

Killian chuckles. "No lad, this one's not magic. It's only significance is that it used to belong to my brother."

"You have a brother?"

"I used to. A long time ago," he says. He sees the question in the boy's eyes, but he just shakes his head, lips pressed firmly together—he can't explain now. He uses his hook to pull the chain wider and slips it over Ian's head. Then he kneels, so he and Ian are on the same level.

"Listen, lad, and listen closely," he says. "Even if we're separated tonight, I will find you."

"Promise?" Ian asks in a small voice.

"Aye, I promise. This ring," he says, touching the ring that now rests against Ian's chest, "is my promise. Understand?"

Ian grips the ring with both hands, and nods.

Killian knows there's a slim chance he won't be able to acquire the magic bean from Blackbeard, but he knows there's no chance in hell that this is the last time he ever lays eyes on his son.

*I missed 6 years of your life already, lad; I'm not missing any more.*

Killian straightens, then turns back to Henry.

"Only Smee knows what that ring is. Show it to him and he'll follow your orders. If I don't come out in an hour, sail to Arendelle. Find the magic bean, and trade my ship for it."

"What are you going to do?" Henry asks. "I mean, Blackbeard's not going to just give you the bean, right?"

"I already told you, lad," Killian says with a smirk. "I'm going to win it."

He withdraws the deck of cards from his pocket, shuffles through it, and begins tucking a select few up his sleeves and into the cuffs of his jacket.

"You're going to cheat?" Henry asks dryly, one eyebrow raised.

Killian's about to say yes, obviously but then he sees Ian watching him—Ian with the pure heart—and the words wither on his tongue.

"Erm, no," he says.

Henry rolls his eyes, but Ian just shrugs. "It's okay if you cheat," he says. "Henry cheats at Monopoly all the time."

Henry whirls towards his brother. "I do not!" he hisses, indignant.

"Do too!"

"I don't cheat," Henry says. "You just suck at Monopoly."

Ian glares, and Henry glares back. A smile tugs at Killian's lips, and he turns his face back towards the tavern to hide it. He remembers the way he and Liam used to bicker—the same way that Henry
and Ian are bickering now.

Brothers, he thinks, and his smile grows.

The door of the tavern opens suddenly and spews a few drunken revelers into the street that immediately draw the attention of the men Killian knows to be guards.

It's now or never.

"Remember what I told you," Killian says over his shoulder—cutting the boys' glaring matching short.

As he steps from the alleyway and into the street, he hears Henry mutter, "Wait for an hour or until we hear them killing you. Yea, got it."

---

Henry and Ian watch Hook blend into the crowd in front of the tavern.

"Henry," Ian says, and slips his hand into Henry's.

Henry sighs. "Yea, I know," he says. "C'mon, there's probably a back door we can sneak in."

---

A hush falls over the room as Killian enters. Eyes go wide when they see him, then dart quickly to the center, where Blackbeard sits ensconced at a table piled high with gold and jewels.

Blackbeard carefully lays down his hand of cards and leans back in his chair. "Look what the tide brought in," he says. "Captain Hook."

Killian saunters up to the table and makes a show of casually tugging the leather bag of jewels from his belt. He upends it over the table, spilling a rainbow cascade of gems right into the middle of Blackbeard's card game.

"Evening, Blackbeard," Killian says jauntily.

Blackbeard's eyes never leave Killian's, but Killian sees his mouth tighten with anger.

"I should kill you where you stand for interrupting my game," he says, voice dangerously low and dangerously calm.

Killian raises an eyebrow at the table. "Judging by your dwindling chips...I'd say I've done you a favor."

"If you'd like a favor in return," Blackbeard says, drawing his sword in one swift, practiced motion, "I'd be happy to oblige."

Killian ignores the blade pointed at his chest, and continues grinning. "As luck would have it, I do need a favor. A magic bean, to be exact."

Blackbeard blinks slowly. "And in return?" he asks. "That sorry lot of cheap jewelry you probably stole from some wench?" His tone is patient and measured; he has the bean and he's willing to barter for it, but there's something besides jewels he wants from Killian, and he knows that Killian knows what that something is.
Killian suspected it would come to this, and although he feels a small wrench of sadness at what he's about to do, he doesn't hesitate.

"If the jewels aren't enough, I do have-" he pauses for dramatic effect and makes sure he has Blackbeard's full attention before he wets his lips and continues, "one more thing I could offer."

There's a predatory gleam in Blackbeard's eyes. "Oh, and what's that?"

Killian scratches behind his ear. "I hear tell you haven't had a vessel for some time," he says. "Not since you lost the Jolly Roger. To me."

Blackbeard's face darkens and his eyes narrow at the insult. "I've been meaning to talk to you about that," he growls, and his hand tightens on the hilt of his cutlass.

"Well, it's a good thing I'm here, then, isn't it? You've set yourself up here quite nicely, but what's a pirate without a ship?"

Killian feels everyone in the room freeze, and he fears for a moment he's overstepped—it's a fine line between goading Blackbeard into accepting his challenge, and provoking him so far Blackbeard's forced to kill him to maintain his reputation—but then Blackbeard lowers his sword to the table.

There.

Killian's got him.

"You're truly willing to risk your ship?" Blackbeard asks.

"There's only risk if I lose," Killian says, shrugging. "What do you say? A hand of cards for the Jolly Roger?"

Blackbeard looks at one of the men at the table and nods. The man stands, then grabs another man—if Killian has to guess, he'd say the man currently winning—and heaves him from his chair and to the floor.

Blackbeard gestures at the newly vacated chair. "Have a seat," he says.

"One last thing," Killian says as he sits down. "Before we begin, I need to see it. The bean."

Blackbeard stares at him appraisingly for a moment, one hand twisting the strands of his beard in between his fingers, then he inclines his head graciously, and reaches into the brim of his hat. He pulls out a magic bean, and holds it aloft, so it catches the flickering light of the candles.

Killian's seen enough magic beans to know this one's real.

"Satisfied?" Blackbeard asks.

"Aye," Killian says, and his eyes follow the bean all the way back into Blackbeard's hat.

---

Across the room, two more sets of eyes are following the magic bean.

Henry bends low, so his lips are right next to Ian's ear. "I have a plan," he whispers.

Ian turns his head and blinks his big, blue eyes at him.
"Okay, remember when I was texting during dinner and then mom took my phone away-"

"Which time?"

"-but it was—shut up, Ian—it was a really important conversation, and so we tried to steal my phone back while she was washing the dishes?"

Ian nods.

"Just like that," Henry says, then adds hastily, "Only don't get caught this time."

"You don't get caught."

---

Killian's losing.

Even with all the cards he's hidden in his coat he's losing.

Which means Blackbeard's sleeves are even more well-stocked than his.

Killian throws his cards down, and slides the last of his jewels into the middle of the table.

"Deal," he says.

Blackbeard cocks his head. "Still don't know when to quit?" he asks with a grin.

"I said deal," Killian says. He drags his hand down his face, then lets it fall with a thud to his thigh. A card drops from his sleeve and into his fingers. He has one last chance; one last chance and then his best bet is to stall—give the boys enough time to get back to the Jolly Roger and set sail before Blackbeard becomes its rightful owner and goes to claim it.

Blackbeard's dealing and watching Killian from beneath his lashes, and as he whisks the final card across the table, he asks, "What's so important that you'd be willing to trade your beloved ship for a magic bean?"

Those boys.

Emma.

Blackbeard's voice is quiet, and the crowd in the tavern is so loud and so preoccupied with their own good times that only Killian could have heard his question, so Killian pitches his voice equally low, and says, "Some people I care about are in danger."

Blackbeard laughs quietly to himself and shakes his head. "You really have gone soft."

"I don't remember asking for your opinion," Killian snarls, glaring, and then he feels his insides turn to water.

Ian's in the tavern.

He's tiptoeing in from behind Blackbeard. He's short enough to have gone completely unnoticed by the men at the tables and the serving women alike—a small mercy, because the look on his face is pure mischief. He's looking off to his left, and, carefully, Killian follows his line of sight and sees Henry, walking in on Blackbeard's other side with two overflowing tankards of ale in each hand.
Blackbeard's mouth is moving, but it's as if Killian's gone deaf—save for the roaring in his ears. He knows what's about to happen and he can't stop it. All he can do is watch as Henry stumbles and blunders into Blackbeard, pouring all four drinks down Blackbeard's front.

Blackbeard shouts in alarm and nearly tumbles out of his chair. "What the devil is wrong with you, boy?" he yells. He's groping blindly for his cutlass, but Killian manages to push it off the table and to the floor before Blackbeard's fingers can reach it.

Henry, eyes wide and mouth hanging open in horror, backs away with his hands held up apologetically. "Oh my God, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!" he says in a rush, and Killian has to admire the boy's acting—if he didn't know it was a farce, he might believe it. "I was just bringing over the drinks you ordered and I tripped-"

"We didn't order any drinks!" Blackbeard says.

"I must have gotten the wrong table. I'm really, really sorry. Here, let me help you," Henry says, then takes a rag off a nearby table and starts patting Blackbeard's coat.

Spluttering indignantly, Blackbeard leans away and smacks Henry's hands off his chest.

"Get away from me!"

And then Ian's right there and Killian wants to scream at him to run but he can't find his voice, and it's too late besides—Henry pushes closer, still babbling apologies, and Blackbeard leans even further back, and as he does, Ian's bandage-wrapped hand darts up and into the brim of Blackbeard's hat and pulls out the bean. Killian glimpses his triumphant grin, and then he ducks low and disappears back into the crowd.

Henry's backing away too now, and, miraculously, Blackbeard's letting him go. Killian follows suit, easing himself slowly to his feet, ready to vanish as quickly as Ian had, but then a voice pipes up.

"Hey! That boy robbed you!"

Blackbeard's hand jumps to his hat, and his face immediately goes purple with rage.

"RUN!" Killian bellows, and Henry does, turning on his heel and racing after Ian. Killian jumps up and tips the table into Blackbeard. He plummets to the floor, and drinks, jewels, and gold coins all go crashing down upon him.

"GET HIM!" Blackbeard screams, and the tavern erupts as everyone leaps to their feet to obey, but Killian's already out the door.

---

It's a short sprint back to the docks, but they're being pursued.

"Hold tight to that bean!" Killian pants as he runs behind Henry and Ian.

Suddenly, shots ring out behind them, and there are cracks to either side as lead shot collides with the street, barrels, and buildings.

"Bloody hell!" Killian snaps.

Ian, startled by the gunfire, falters and nearly goes down. Killian lunges forward, grabbing his arm to steady him, and then, with a mighty heave, hoists the boy into his arms.
"Keep your head down, lad," he says, and then, to Henry, "Keep running!"

Ian's arms go around his neck and he tucks his head into Killian's shoulder. Henry runs ahead, and Killian follows on his heels, hugging Ian tight—luckily, the lad's only a lad; Killian's carried rum barrels heavier than him.

Henry reaches the edge of the docks first and skids to a halt.

"Ian," Killian says, "the bean."

Ian takes one arm from around his neck, and opens his palm. Killian takes the bean from him, calls, "Henry!" and tosses it.

Henry catches the magic bean, turns, and drops it into the water.

Killian stops next to Henry, just in time to see the portal sputter to life.

"Whoa," Ian says, and his arms and legs tighten around Killian.

"It's alright, lad. It's nothing to be frightened of," Killian says breathlessly, then he turns to Henry. "I told you to wait for me."

Henry looks at him and shrugs. "You were losing."

Killian's laugh surprises him. He shakes his head in amazement and grins. "That was bloody brilliant!" he says. "What's your mother been teaching you?"

Henry smirks in answer, and Ian bites his lip in a shy smile.

There's more gunfire behind them. Killian ducks instinctively and pushes Ian's head back down.

"JUMP!" he shouts, and, together, he and Henry leap from the docks and into the whirling green vortex below.

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**Storybrooke**

The sign says "Entering Storybrooke", and Emma has a weird feeling like she's been here before, but she knows she hasn't—she has a good memory, and this place isn't in it.

She drives through miles of creepy, pitch dark woods, gripping the steering wheel hard and watching the road with wide, wary eyes, wondering the whole time what the hell made Henry and Ian come here.

She's too scared to angry—she just wants them to be safe.

Part of her thinks—irrationally, she knows, but still—that this has something to do with Neal. Did Henry find something out? Is he looking for his dad? But why did he have to drag Ian with him? Ian's just a little kid, and he's got enough problems as it is—Emma knows he senses the changes that are coming—and then Walsh, and just...he doesn't need daddy drama in his life, especially when it's not even his daddy drama.

When she finally reaches the town—swearing that if this has something to do with Neal she'll shoot him on the spot—Emma breaths a literal sigh of relief. The main street is quaint and actually a little cute, but the place looks deserted. The street lights are lit, but the shops are dark, and there's no one around.
She spots the yellow bug right away. It's parked against the curb ahead of her and she hits the accelerator, but even before she draws even she can tell there's no one inside.

Where are they?

All of a sudden, there's a burst of light and a crack like thunder, and three people are falling out of thin air into the street right in front of her.

Emma shouts and slams on the brakes. She glimpses a man with a black coat and dark hair turning his back to her car and pulling two other figures behind the shield of his body, and then she squeezes her eyes shut and braces herself.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The car screeches to a halt, but there's no thud.

Breathing hard, she opens her eyes.

The man's still there—hunched over and unmoving—but he's there.

She gets out slowly and, on shaky legs, rounds the car.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

The man straightens and turns towards her, and she's half about to apologize, half about to ask what the fuck he's doing in the middle of the street when she realizes the other two people are Henry and Ian.

They spot her, and Ian breaks into a grin and says, "Mom!"

Emma could cry she's so happy to see them.

"Ian! Henry!" she says. She takes a step towards them, but at the same time, the guy takes a step towards her and sort of blocks her way.

"Swan," he says, and the way he says her name like he knows her makes her stop and look at him instead of punching him in the throat. There's something about his face—the brilliant blue eyes that look a little sad, the long mouth and shapely lips, the reddish scruff, the way his hair falls across his forehead—that's jarringly familiar and makes her breath catch. He's walking towards her, his hand held up like she's some sort of frightened animal he's trying to tame, and he's saying, "Look, I know you can't remember me, but-

And then she notices he's dressed all in black leather like some BDSM wet dream, and sticking out one of his sleeves is a metal hook—a fucking hook—and he'd had his hands on her sons and all of a sudden he's too close.

Emma's knee jerks up and catches him squarely in the groin.

"Bloody hell!" he swears and crumples forward. Emma dashes around him and gets to Henry and Ian, pulling Ian into her arms and pushing Henry behind her.

"Mom! Mom, we're fine," Henry's saying, and she thinks he might be laughing, but then she hears more footsteps and she turns, ready to dropkick anyone else who wants it, and sees a man and a woman rushing towards her.

They stop short when they see her, and the woman says, "Emma."
"Who are you?" she blurts, but they don't answer. Instead, they just stare at her sadly with these lost looks in their eyes like they're grieving.

Ian's hugging her waist, and she tightens her grip on him protectively. He's the only thing that makes sense here—him and Henry.

The guy's regained his composure and he's apologizing. "Sorry, love, my apologies. Had to try," he says, then he reaches a hand up to tug at his ear, and something about that is familiar too.

"Mom," says Ian, drawing her attention, and Emma looks down, grateful for the distraction.

"Are you okay?" she asks him. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," he says, and he smiles.

"Henry?" she asks.

Henry nods.

Tears gather in her eyes suddenly.

She wants to ask them questions—what are you doing here? Why did you run away? What happened to your hands? Why are you so full of dirt, and why do you smell like a bar?—but she's just too overwhelmingly relieved that they're safe.

Emma pushes Ian's hair aside and kisses his forehead.

There's a flash of rainbow light, and she remembers.

---

She's Emma Swan, orphan and lost girl, but she's also Emma Swan, daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming.

She's Emma Swan who gave Henry up for adoption, but she's also Emma Swan who chose to keep him.

She's Emma Swan who kissed Captain Hook in the sultry heat of Neverland's jungle; who opened her body to him in the darkness below the deck of his ship. She's Emma Swan who named her son Killian, after his father, and David, after his grandfather.

She's Emma Swan, Savior.

---

Emma blinks, and slowly raises her head.

Storybrooke's back, and she's back in it.

Her parents are there. David has his arm around Mary Margaret's shoulders, and Mary Margaret has both hands pressed to her mouth and tears rolling down her cheeks.

Emma looks at Hook.

"Welcome back," he says gently.
She nods, because she can't bring herself to speak. Part of her feels like she just said goodbye to him; part of her feels their 7 years apart like a hole ripped in her chest.

"Emma," he says, and she sees him lick his lips nervously, look at Ian, gather himself for what comes next.

She waits. She wants him to ask. She wants him to know.

"Am I..." he ducks his head, his voice is trembling, "am I Ian's father?"

Yes, she thinks.

Ian's staring up at her expectantly with his big blue eyes—Hook's eyes. All these years, all those times she's looked at him and felt like she's seeing someone else, someone she can't remember...she'd been seeing Hook.

Emma cups Ian's face in her hands. She strokes one of her thumbs along his cheek.

"Yea, Hook," she says softly. "You're Ian's father."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I've been so exhausted when I get home from work that it's been difficult to find the energy to write. Plus, I've been sort of rearranging/expanding what I had planned for the next few chapters, so that's been time-consuming. I'd like to have the next chapter up within a week, but the only promise I can really make is the promise to work my hardest :D

There's a flash of rainbow light, and when Emma looks at him again, he sees his Emma in her eyes, not the stranger who'd kneed his balls nearly up into his stomach moments before, and all he can think to say is, "Welcome back."

She nods, and her green eyes—eyes that have haunted his dreams and waking moments alike—pierce him. It's as if seven years' worth of yearning have finally brought his dreams to life, but he can't decide if he wants to laugh with joy or weep for all the years lost.

The one thing he's certain of is that he doesn't want to waste another second.

"Emma," he says, and his voice trembles as his courage flees him—but the question's already on his lips, and he needs an answer. "Am I...am I Ian's father?"

Emma looks away, and the moment feels tenuous—he knows that in reality no real time passes, but for him it's long enough to worry: What if Emma denies it? What if she says yes, but she's disappointed or upset?

But then Emma cups Ian's face and says softly, "Yea, Hook. You're Ian's father."

Her affirmation—the way she doesn't falter or hesitate, the way she offers Ian a smile as she says it—knocks the air from Killian's lungs. And then he sees the way she's looking at Ian, he sees the love and the trust that flow between them, and he wants to be a part of it.

He aches for it.

Killian almost takes a step closer, but stops himself. Emma's parents are there, hovering, anxious to approach, and while Snow looks hospitable, David's expression doesn't look particularly friendly or inviting. The last thing he wants is to be the cause of trouble between Emma and her parents, or to spoil how they greet their grandson for the first time—Ian deserves that.

So he stays where he is; he stays on the outside.

"Yea, Hook," Emma says softly. "You're Ian's father."

She hears Hook's breath whoosh out of him, and she thinks she hears some noises from her parents—well, from David—but she can't look away from Ian, from the way his whole face has lit up, and she's cataloguing all the ways he resembles Hook—his ears he's self-conscious of are Hook's ears, his mouth and lips are Hook's mouth and lips, and (somehow) that quirky thing he does with his eyebrow is Hook's quirky thing.
Even his name is Hook's name.

It's definitely strange finding out like this; finding out that for nearly six years she's been raising Hook's son...but it's okay. It's okay because it's never mattered who Ian's father is; she loves him. She loves him and she's never seen him look so happy.

"I'm sorry I never told you," she tells him. "I didn't know. I didn't remember."

He hugs her tighter. "It's okay," he says. "He's here now, right?"

Emma hears what he's really asking: Is he staying?

She looks at Hook then, and sees that he also understands Ian's real question. She knows what his answer will be, because even though she hasn't seen him for seven years, she knows him.

He nods.

Emma looks back at Ian. "Yea, kid, he's here now," she says, and she thinks that, maybe, it's also okay because it's Hook who's Ian's dad.

Ian's smile grows. She brushes the hair from his forehead again, wondering what else to say—there's so much she wants to tell him, so much she needs to tell him—but she doesn't know where to begin, and the middle of the street is also probably not the best place.

She's about to suggest they go to Granny's—Ian's going to love it and Emma thinks Henry's probably been missing Granny's lasagna without knowing it these past seven years—when she's reminded they're not alone.

"Emma," David says. He glances at Hook uncertainly, and so does Emma. Hook doesn't hesitate; he concedes with a slight bowing of his head and a step backwards, and Emma gives him a look she hopes says thank you.

David and Mary Margaret come closer, and Emma turns towards them, still keeping Ian close. She's not letting go of him, and she's not going to hide him. If her parents can't accept that she and Hook-

Without warning, they're hugging her, mindless of Ian caught in between them, who gives a little squeak as he's engulfed. Their arms wrap around her, but hers are trapped around Ian, so she just leans into them and closes her eyes.

"We thought we'd never see you again," David says.

"Me too," she says.

Emma hears her mom sniffling and knows she crying, and Emma almost starts crying too because she'd forgotten what it felt like to be in their arms, safe and loved—and God they even smell the same—and it makes seven years feel like nothing, while at the same time part of her realizes she missed them; she missed them so much.

Emma hears footsteps coming up from the side, and David peels away, opening one of his arms, opening up a space, and pulls Henry in. Ian grunts as he's squished a little bit more, but otherwise doesn't complain.

Emma squeezes him and feels him squeeze back. And then she opens her eyes and sees Hook. He's standing apart, and he's watching them with something like longing in his eyes. Guilt fills her—she
knows what it's like, being on the outside looking in; too many times in her life she's felt what he's feeling, and she knows how much it sucks.

She clears her throat. "Can you breathe down there, kid?" she asks Ian, and he wiggles uncomfortably in response.

David and Mary Margaret spring back and stare down at Ian as though surprised to find him there. Mary Margaret's expression immediately softens, but David still looks shaken.

"Looks like a lot's happened since we last saw you," he says, looking Ian up and down (likely taking in his resemblance to Hook). Then he looks at Hook—a long, probing look—before turning back to Emma. She holds his gaze as he searches her expression. She knows her dad has a big heart and will love Ian no matter what, but it matters to her that he knows she's not embarrassed, she's not regretful.

He sees, and he gives her a little nod.

Emma catches Hook's eye to try and draw him in, but then Ian speaks.

"Are you my grandma and grandpa?" he asks.

Both David and Mary Margaret smile. "Yea," Mary Margaret says. "We are. It's very nice to meet you, Ian, I'm-"

"You're Snow White!" Ian says with a grin.

"I am. You can just call me Snow though—oh, or grandma!"

"Snow, huh?" Emma asks quietly. "Looks like a lot's happened on your end, too."

Snow shrugs, still smiling.

David squats down and offers his hand to Ian. "I'm David. I'm your grandpa-"

"My middle name's David!"

That startles him. He blinks, first at Ian, then up at Emma. "It is?" he asks her.

"Yea," she says.

"How...?" David asks.

"I don't know," she says, frowning. "It just—when he was born, I kissed him and it just sort of...came to me." Then she shrugs and offers him a tremulous smile. "It felt right."

She leaves out the part about how his first name is Killian on purpose—she doesn't know if Hook knows yet, and if he doesn't, this isn't how she wants him to find out.

David turns back to Ian. "It's nice to meet you, Ian. I'm your grandpa David."

Ian shakes his hand and they grin at each other for a moment. Then David straightens and slips his arm around Snow's shoulders.

"So, um," Emma says, brow furrowing, "don't take this the wrong way or anything, but...why is Storybrooke back? What happened?"

Her parents look at each other, and then David sighs in a frustrated sort of way.
"Why don't we move this out of the middle of the street and we can explain—well, try to explain."

Emma makes a face, and Snow says, "The truth is, we have no idea who cast the Dark Curse this time, or why. We just know that we're here now, and—well, we've been here for a week, and nothing bad's happened so far, so..." she trails off.

*So maybe everything's okay? Maybe whoever cast the Dark Curse is a good guy?*

Emma's not so sure.

"But...you have your memories?" she asks, remembering the way they ran up to her and called her name even before she'd kissed Ian and broken the curse on her own memories.

"Most of them-

"Most?"

"Yea, some..." Snow looks to David. "Some are definitely missing."

"Like the ones that might have information about whoever cast this Curse?" Emma asks dryly.

The apologetic expressions on her parents' faces are all the answer she needs. Emma looks to Hook, wondering if he knows anything more, but he shakes his head—he doesn't.

"What about Regina?" Henry blurts. "Is she here?"

Emma hears Ian take a breath as he prepares to ask *Who's Regina?*, so she slips her hand over his mouth, silencing him.

Snow's expression changes to one of sympathy, and Emma braces herself. "We don't know. We haven't found her yet, but...Henry, you should know, we haven't seen her in years."

"What do you mean? Didn't she go back to your castle with you?"

"She did," Snow says. "But she didn't stay long, and when she left, she didn't tell anyone where she was going. No one's heard from her since then. We don't know if she was even in the Enchanted Forest—she may not have gotten swept up in the Curse at all."

Emma sees how hard he takes their words, and touches his arm gently with her free hand.

"Wherever she is, we'll find her, okay?" she says.

Henry nods, but then his eyes shy away from hers. He takes a deep breath, settles his shoulders, and asks, "What about Neal?"

Emma feels *Who's Neal?* hummed against her palm.

Snow glances at Emma before she answers. "We haven't seen him either, Henry, I'm sorry. Last we heard he was still at Rumplestiltskin's castle, but that was...that was a long time ago too."

Henry turns his head even further away, and Emma wishes she could see his face. She wants to know what he's thinking. She looks to Hook once more, but he shakes his head again—he doesn't know anything about Neal, either.

"Let's...let's go somewhere inside and sit down," David says.
Emma takes her hand from Ian's mouth then, and he says, "I'm hungry."

Emma's about to remind him about manners when her stomach growls in agreement, and she remembers she hasn't eaten since that afternoon, and she's pretty sure the boys haven't either.

"Granny's is closed," David says, "But we have some leftovers at the loft. Or I could cook. I'm not sure what we have. We haven't been to the store or groceries. Things have been a little chaotic the past few days."

"Leftovers are fine," Emma says. She turns to find Hook, but he's pulling away, away from the group. Emma wants to talk to him, and she can see the same desire reflected in Hook's eyes, but there're too many people around; it's not the right moment.

Snow's looking inbetween them, and Emma tries to school her face back to smoothness, but it's too late.

"Hook," Snow says, and the brightness in her voice freezes everyone in their tracks. "Would you like to come back with us?"

David looks at her quickly in clear disapproval, and Hook catches it. His eyes flicker downwards.

"Erm, no. No, thank you. I should turn in."

"Where will you stay?" Snow asks doggedly.

"If my memory serves, there's an inn."

"Yes, Granny's! It's still here—well, back again, or whatever. But, yes, Granny has rooms available."

Everyone's staring, but Snow ignores them.

"See you tomorrow, then," she says, and Emma almost groans—her mom has no idea what the situation is, but she clearly doesn't care: she's going to play matchmaker no matter what.

Hook gives a jerky nod. "Goodnight," he says. His eyes slide to Emma, and her heart starts beating faster.

"We'll talk tomorrow?" she asks.

"Aye, tomorrow," he says.

Ian pulls away from her side and runs to him. Hook seems startled as Ian barrels into him and latches onto his waist like an octopus, and Emma almost laughs; there are a few things about Ian Hook is going to have to learn early on, and one of them is how physically affectionate he is, like a German Shepherd that thinks it's a lap dog.

Hook's arms go around Ian slowly, and Emma sees the look on his face—he's still in shock, for sure, but there's something else, something Emma can only describe as awe, and all of sudden she's proud, because that's her kid too—her little ball of sunshine who's putting dents in Captain Hook's armor.

"Goodnight," Ian says into Hook's coat.

"Goodnight, lad," Hook says.

Ian lifts his head. "See you tomorrow?" he asks.
Hook's eyes find hers, and she nods.

"Aye," he says. "See you tomorrow."

"Promise?"

Hook smiles. "I promise."

---

Back at the loft David and Snow break out the leftovers (all from Granny's), and as they eat, Henry fills them in—with occasional contributions from Ian.

It's a struggle to keep her eyeballs from rolling right out of her head as they tell their story. Of course Ian was touching things he wasn't supposed to, and of course he went right up to Hook and introduced himself (she wishes she could have seen the look on Hook's face).

The rum on Ian's hands explains why he smells like a college bar, and although Emma's a little exasperated by Hook's choice of disinfectant—apparently rum really is his solution for everything—she also remembers him doing the same thing to her years ago atop a beanstalk, and she remembers the careful, caring way with which he'd done it (in spite of his "I'm a big, scary pirate" attitude).

Emma almost chokes on her lasagna when they get to the part where Henry spilled beer all over Blackbeard—freaking Blackbeard—so Ian could snatch a magic bean from his hat. It's just like Henry to take matters into his own hands (he's never been very good at sitting around and waiting for others to get things done), and although Emma wishes he and Ian hadn't chosen a murderous pirate to try their pickpocket act out on, it sorta sounds like they might have saved Hook's ass there.

David and Snow are totally entertained, and Emma can see them falling in love with Ian. Emma's not surprised: he's pretty adorable. He's got a less-infuriating version of Hook's charm (which, truthfully, might change once he hits puberty), coupled with a cheerfulness Emma realizes he could only have inherited from David.

Plus, he's got a little lisp from his missing two front teeth that makes everything he says sound 100% more cute.

When they finish their tale, Henry turns to her. "I'm sorry we had to scare you to get you here," he says.

"It's okay," she says, because even as disconcerting as all this is, she has to admit that Henry was right: they had to return, and there's no way he could have convinced her to come up here any other way.

"Are you mad?" Ian asks. His forehead is crinkled anxiously, and Emma runs her fingers along his brow, smoothing it, smoothing his worries away.

"No, I'm not mad," she says, and gives him a little smile. "I was just worried. I thought you guys were running away."

"Mom, we'd never run away," Henry says quietly, and there's a fierce note in his voice that Emma clings to, because she's been his mom—his only mom—for seven years, and she needs to know that whatever happens, whatever's about to change, he'll still need her the same way he's needed her for those seven years.

"I love you," she says, and she knows her voice quivers a little, but she doesn't care.
"I know, mom," Henry says, and she knows he means it. "I love you, too."

"And me!" Ian exclaims. "I love you, too!"

Both she and Henry smile, because what would their little family be without Ian and his relentless joy?

"How about dessert?" Snow asks. She's watching them with a smile Emma can only describe as indulgent.

Ian gasps. "Yes, please!"

Henry snorts. "You don't even know what it is yet."

"It doesn't matter," Ian says. "It's dessert."

"Yea, but what if it's booger pie?"

"We're all out of booger pie, actually," David says. "I ate it all last night."

Ian wrinkles up his nose. "Ew, no way!"

David shrugs. "It was pretty good, actually. Would you like to try it sometime?"

"Booger pie's not real!" Ian says, then he turns to Emma. "Mom, is booger pie real?"

She sees Henry nodding frantically over Ian's head, but she doesn't have the heart to trick him. "No, kid, it's not real," she says.

Ian whips around to stick his tongue out at Henry, who does it back, and it feels exactly as if they're back home in Boston and everything's normal.

Except it's not.

All at once Emma feels a rift inside her, like she's two people at once. Everything's slowly starting to feel more real, and although she feels the pull of familiarity here—some of her happiest moments from before seven years ago took place here—she's not sure it feels like home.

And yet, their apartment back in Boston doesn't feel like home either; not anymore.

Her thoughts stray to Hook, pulled as if by a magnet.

He's Ian's dad.

Ian is Hook's son.

Even if she wanted to go back to Boston right now, she couldn't; she can't rip Ian away from Hook, she won't do that to Ian. And...

And what?

She squeezes her eyes shut.

And she won't do that to Hook, either.

"Emma."
She opens her eyes, and it's just her and her mom at the kitchen table—Henry and Ian are at the island countertop, watching David shovel heaping spoonfuls of ice cream into two bowls.

Her mom's giving her this soft look. "Go to him," she says, and Emma doesn't need to ask who she means.

Emma lets out a shaky breath. Instinctively she wants to resist—she's used to putting Henry and Ian's needs first; she's not used to things the other way around. But she knows her mom's right.

Before she can respond, Henry and Ian are back, and Ian's yawning. Emma smiles to herself. She knows that yawn: the gas tank is empty, and Ian's about two minutes away from totally crashing (probably face-first into his bowl of ice cream).

"After that ice cream it's bath time, kid," she says.

"Emma-" Snow starts.

"I'll go," Emma says, cutting her off. "I will. I just...I gotta get this kid cleaned up and in bed."

"Oh, we can handle that-" Snow starts again, and Emma can hear the eagerness in her voice, but Ian's whining interrupts her.

"I don't wanna take a bath!"

"Yea, I know you don't want to. But you have to. It's 2 in the morning, you need to go to sleep, and there's no way you're getting in bed smelling like rum."

"But mom-!"

"Nope, no 'but moms'," she says.

Ian opens his mouth again, his intent to continue whining clear in his eyes, so Emma says, "Maybe if you're quick, grandma and grandpa will tell you a bedtime story after your bath."

He whirs on David and Snow. "Really?"

Snow doesn't miss a beat. "Of course. We'd be delighted to."

"Bath first, though," David says, sort of sternly, and Ian looks put-out, but he nods. He eats his ice cream quickly, and when he's finished, David holds out his hand. Ian hops off his chair, takes it, and follows David with bouncing footsteps towards the bathroom.

Emma turns to Henry. "Make sure he doesn't give your grandpa too hard a time, will you?" she says, in her you know how your brother is tone.

Henry half-smiles. "Sure, mom," he says, and goes after David and Ian.

Emma watches the three of them, feeling a sad tug on her heart—this is something she wishes her boys could have had all along.

"Looks like you and Hook did a little more than just kiss in Neverland," Snow says.

Emma blinks at her in surprise, not sure if she wants to laugh or just break down and cry.

"We're happy for you, Emma," Snow says. "It looks like the past seven years have been really good ones for you."
"Yea," Emma says. "Yea, they were."

Getting her memories back feels like waking up from a dream—a really good dream. And now...now she feels a little lost. Henry's acting like he's home—but Storybrooke was his first home, so that makes sense. She knows Ian's fine; he's happy wherever Henry is, and he'll probably start missing his toys and his bed eventually, but he'll be okay.

And what about her?

Home has never been a place for her.

Her home is wherever Henry and Ian are, and if Storybrooke's where they want to stay, then that's where they'll stay.

Her mom's still watching her, and the tears shimmering in her eyes make Emma's throat feel tight.

"I really missed you guys," she says.

"Oh, Emma," Snow says. "We missed you too."

Emma hugs her tightly and breathes her in.

"I want to know everything that happened," she says. "I do. I just..."

"You need to talk to Hook."

"Yea," Emma says. "I owe it to Ian to get this figured out."

She feels Snow nod. "We're here for you, Emma, no matter what. But, if you want my opinion," she says, and draws back to look Emma in the eyes, "I don't think you have anything to worry about. I saw the look on Hook's face when he looked at you and Ian."

Emma swallows past the lump in her throat. She knows. She saw it too.

Snow runs her finger lightly along one of Emma's cheeks, wiping away a solitary tear. Emma closes her eyes.

"And I think maybe you feel the same way about Hook as he feels about you," Snow says gently.

Emma holds her breath, unable to admit it, scared to even think it.

"Go to him," Snow says again.

"Do you want me to come with?"

David's there, standing with his arms crossed over his chest, and although he has the whole protective, disapproving father look on his face, Emma can see the part of him that supports her, too.

"I can bring my sword," David offers, and Emma rolls her eyes.

"I think I've got this," she says. She gets up from the table and goes to get her coat from the peg by the door.

"You sure?"

"Yea, dad, I'm sure," she says, then jerks her head towards the bathroom, where she can hear the
sounds of running water, splashing, and Henry and Ian's voices. "You sure you can handle those two?"

David grins. "Not a problem," he says.

Emma slips her coat on, and Snow comes to give her one last hug before she leaves.

"Take your time. We'll wait up for you," she says, and neither Emma nor David miss the implication in her tone.

"Oh my God, mom," Emma says, feeling like a teenager, and she leaves swiftly, closing the door on her mom's sweet smile and David's indignant spluttering.

---

She knocks lightly on Hook's door, and waits. He might be asleep, and if he is, she doesn't want to wake him.

But he's not asleep.

He answers the door almost immediately, dressed in just his pants and loose shirt, with his suspenders hanging down his thighs.

"Emma," he says, and his voice sends a shiver through her. It's difficult not to remember the last time she saw him so undressed, not when he says her name like a caress.

God, she missed him.

"Hey," she says, swallowing hard to keep her lust pinned firmly down. "Um, Ian told me everything."

He looks down and shakes his head. "Swan, I'm sorry I put them in danger-"

Emma wants to tease him for getting their 6-year-old into a bar fight after having been a father for only an hour, but she doesn't. Instead, she says, "I didn't come to berate you for putting them in danger—trust me, I knew it wasn't your fault. I came to thank you."

He pulls his head up, one eyebrow quirked curiously. "Thank me?"

"Yea. For getting them back to me."

"Of course, Emma. Ian's—he's..." Hook pauses, then says carefully, "The boys needed to get home to their mother."

She nods. She can feel how fragile the moment is; she can see the walls he's putting up, and how carefully he's treading, but she just doesn't have the patience (or the tact) for it.

"Look, I need to know now, before this goes any further," she says, and he looks startled but she plows on. "Ian. I need to know if you're going to stick around or not."

He opens his mouth, anger and hurt flashing across his face, but she keeps going.

"I know you said yes back there because it's the honorable thing to do, but if there's a chance that...that you might not want to be in his life anymore, some day, then I need to know now, because-"
"Emma," he says, and the intensity in his voice stops her babbling. "I will never abandon Ian. No matter what. And it's not—" he clenches his teeth for a moment and his eyes flash. "I'm not staying because it's the right thing to do. I'm staying because I want to. Ian's my son."

Emma hears the strain in his voice, hears how it almost breaks.

The anger slips from Hook's face, and suddenly he's completely open and vulnerable. "And...I know I've no right to ask, but...please, Emma, please allow me to be a part of his life."

He bows his head, unable to meet her eyes while he awaits her judgment. Emma can tell he's expecting the worst—not from her, just in general—and she gets it, because in a lot of ways, they're the same.

It breaks her heart.

But, also, he's a goddamn idiot.

"He'd like that," she says, and Killian looks up. There's hope in his eyes, and she gives him more, because she trusts him. "I'd like that, too."

She watches his reaction, watches his eyelids flutter and his lips part, watches the way he relaxes and tenses at the same time, and she knows that, right then, she could step through the door, into his room and into his arms, and they could pick up right where they left off.

But she resists.

Because it's not just about him and her anymore, it's about him and her and Ian.

She knows Hook sees the moment she makes her decision, and there's disappointment in his eyes, but there's understanding, as well.

"Meet us for pancakes tomorrow morning at Granny's?" she asks.

"I'll be there," he says, and she hears the challenge in his voice, and the promise. The look on his face is a look she recognizes, and words he once uttered echo back to her: When I win your heart, Emma...it will be because you want me.

When she smiles, he smiles back.

"I kept my promise, Swan," he says softly. "Not a day went by I didn't think of you."

His eyes bore into her, and warmth floods her.

"Good," she says, and she catches a glimpse of the heat rising in his cheeks before she turns and starts walking back down the hallway.

"Emma," he says, and she turns back. "Ian...you named him after me."

She smirks, and it's Ian's smirk. "It fits him," she says.

---

Her parents are sitting together on the sofa when she gets back to the loft.

"Where are Henry and Ian?" she asks as she closes the door behind her and takes her jacket off.
"They're upstairs," David says.

"Ian fell asleep," Snow says. "He barely made it out of the bath."

Emma checks the time on her phone; it's nearly 3 in the morning. Ian's going to be a grumpy, sleep-deprived, pain-in-the-ass tomorrow morning, and Henry will just be grumpy and sleep-deprived but she's not sure that's much better.

"So," Snow says. "How did it go?" She's visibly vibrating with eagerness, while, beside her, David sits with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes narrowed.

Emma raises her eyebrows, bares her teeth in a smile, and says pointedly, "Goodnight, you guys."

"Goodnight," they say together, a chorus of audibly mixed feelings.

She's halfway up the stairs when she hears, "I think that means it went well!" and she vows to never tell her mom anything ever again.

The top of the loft is dark and quiet. Henry's in the twin bed, and Emma's pretty sure he's awake, but he's lying still and in silence, so Emma leaves him be. She gets into the double with Ian, and snuggles up next to him. He rolls over sleepily and nestles his head beneath her chin.

"Mom?" he mumbles.

"Yea?" she hums.

"I really like my dad."

Smiling, Emma presses a kiss to his hair.

_I do too, kid._

Killian closes the door after Emma leaves and leans his back against it. His heart's still racing, and Emma's, _"Good"_ is still ringing in his ears.

Slowly, he smiles.

Emma may not feel exactly as he does, but he knows she feels something.

And he understands her hesitation: they have a son together, and however they move forward, whatever they are to become—if they're to become anything—they have to put Ian and his happiness first.

Killian closes his eyes and remembers the hope in Ian's eyes as he'd asked Emma, "He's here now, right?"

_Aye, lad. I'm here now._
When Emma wakes up, she's still in Storybrooke.

*Not a dream then.*

The loft is warm and quiet, filled with nothing but the soft glow of the sun through the curtains and the sounds of the boys breathing (they're definitely still deep asleep). She hears her parents' hushed voices from downstairs, and wonders if they're up out of habit, or if her and the boys being here has them too excited to sleep in, like little kids on Christmas morning.

Emma feels like she could sleep at least another two hours, but her internal clock's telling her it's already late in the morning. She should get out of bed. She should get the boys out of bed. But she doesn't want to just yet; she's too comfortable, and everything's too peaceful.

Ian's a little bundle of warmth against her back. She eases from one side to the other, and settles with him against her chest. His hair is a wild, wavy tangle, and it tickles her nose, but she presses her face into it. She can still smell the sea beneath the flowery scent of Snow's shampoo. It reminds her of Hook.

She wonders if he's awake, and thinks he probably is. He's probably at Granny's already, waiting for them...

A strange feeling blooms in the pit of her stomach as she realizes that this is the beginning of sharing Ian with another person—of sharing his time and affection and her place in his life with another *parent*.

When Neal met Henry, Emma was furious. Neal ran out on her to save himself, and he thought he could waltz right back into the picture like he wasn't a giant bag of dicks? She dreaded the changes Neal would wreak on her and Henry's life, but mostly she dreaded the day Neal would let Henry down, like he'd let her down.

But she doesn't feel that way now, with Hook.

Emma closes her eyes and remembers Hook's face from last night.

He still loves her.

After all these years, he still loves her. And maybe that doesn't surprise her. And maybe the fact that she still feels something in return doesn't surprise her either.

She snuggles closer to Ian. He sighs and mumbles something and tucks his toes against her shins but
doesn't wake.

Emma was careful with her affection before, even with Henry, but Ian's heart changed her—his smile and his laugh and his goodnight kisses changed her. She wants to know what that something she feels for Hook is, and she wants to know how—not if, but how—he's going to fit into their little family.

*Please, Emma...please allow me to be a part of Ian's life.*

Emma smiles into Ian's hair, and falls asleep again.

---

She wakes to the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

"Emma?" her mom's voice asks.

"Yea?" Emma lifts her head up, and sees Snow peering back at her from the landing.

"I'm going to the store," Snow says. "Do you need anything? Do you guys want anything special for breakfast?"

"Um," Emma says, struggling to make her brain work past her sleepiness, "actually we're supposed to meet Hook for breakfast at Granny's."

Suddenly the sunlight pouring through the windows looks dim compared to Snow's smile. "Ooh! When?" she says.

Emma lets her head fall back onto the pillow. "I don't know. Probably like two hours ago."

Snow gives a little gasp and starts running down the stairs. "I'll go get your clothes! I washed them for you."

*Like little kids on Christmas, Emma thinks.*

---

As Emma expected, both Henry and Ian are grumbling messes.

Henry sits on the edge of the bed, staring bewilderedly into space, holding his pile of freshly-laundered clothes folded in his lap. Ian tries to burrow into the blankets and disappear, but Emma catches him and drags him out. He then proceeds to do his best impression of a limp noodle, and Emma has to physically wrestle him out of the pair of Henry's old pajamas he's wearing and stuff him into his own shirt and jeans. As she does, she finds a chain around his neck with a ring on it.

Emma touches it. It's a man's ring, silver with a red gem.

"What's this?" she asks him.

He blinks at it fuzzily for a moment, then says, "Oh. My dad gave it to me."

"Is it his?" she asks, thinking of the rings that adorn Hook's hand—but those are big, gaudy things, and this one is more delicate, somehow, and more well cared for.

"He said it's his brother's," Ian says.
Liam.

Emma remembers the story from Neverland. Hook wouldn't give something like this away lightly.

*Please, Emma,* she hears again, *please allow me to be a part of Ian's life.*

She pulls Ian's striped shirt over his head and lays her hand on his chest, her palm cradling the ring.

"Keep it safe, okay?" she says.

He nods, then slumps forward until his chin is resting on her shoulder. She puts her arms around him and rubs slow, lazy circles on his back.

"Tired?" she asks.

"Yea," he says dully.

"Did you sleep okay?"

He shrugs.

Emma turns her head and plants a wet, smacking kiss on his cheek, making him giggle, then she says, "I know something that will cheer you up."

"Hm?"

"We're meeting your dad for breakfast," she says.

Ian sits up fast, grinning hugely, his eyes wide and glittering.

"Really?" he asks.

"Really really," she says. "You gotta go brush your teeth first though, okay? You don't want to knock your dad out with your dragon breath."

Ian leaps off the bed. He sprints past her and down the stairs. She hears him say, "Hi grandma! Hi grandpa!" when he reaches the bottom, and then his footsteps are running across the kitchen and into the bathroom. He remembers himself just enough not to slam the door.

Emma shakes her head and stands.

"Hey, mom?" Henry says. He's still sitting on the edge of his bed in the same position he's been in for ten minutes.

"Yea?" she says, turning towards him.

His eyes are steady on hers as he asks, "Do you think Regina cast the Curse?"

For a moment, Emma sees his 12-year-old self—the boy who was wise beyond his years and knew it, the boy who just wanted to be part of the story—and right then Emma hates whoever casts the Curse; hates them for making Henry's life so complicated again.

She goes and sits next to him on the bed. "Honestly, I don't think so," she says.

"Because if she did, she'd be here, right?" Henry asks.

"Right," Emma says, and she has to smile because that's *her* clever boy.
Henry drops his eyes to his lap. He's wearing the frown he wears when he's working through a hard math problem.

She leans her shoulder into his. "Why don't we go check out Regina's place today?" she suggests. "There might be something there that can help us figure out where she is."

She sort of doubts her own words (nothing's ever *that* easy in Storybrooke), but she's not going to deny Henry hope.

He lifts his eyes to hers again. "Thanks, mom."

"You don't have to thank me, kid. That's what you want, right? To find Regina?"

He nods.

Emma puts her arm around his shoulders. "Then that's what we're gonna do. We're gonna find Regina."

Emma's not sure what will happen if Regina's back—they were at odds over Henry even at the best of times—but Henry's her kid and she's going to fight for him no matter what, so if having Regina back in his life will make him happy, then that's what she's going to make sure happens.

She pulls his forehead to her lips and kisses him. He smiles his "I'm 18 and this is not cool but secretly I enjoy it" smile.

She doesn't mention Neal, and neither does Henry.

---

David's a bit disappointed that they can't go to the station and get back to Sheriffing right away, but Emma promises to meet him after she and Henry check out Regina's.

"Wait, you're the Sheriff?" Ian asks.

"Yep," she says, putting her hands on her hips. "That okay, kid?"

"That's awesome!" Ian gushes. "Do you have a police car?"

"Yep."

"Does it have a siren?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can I ride in it?"

"Absolutely. Later though, okay? We have a few things we need to take care of first."

---

Unsurprisingly, Hook's already at the diner when they get there. Emma sees him through the door before he sees her. He's staring out the window, idly rotating his coffee cup in its saucer.

Emma suddenly feels awkward.

It was easy to go to him last night—she had a reason beyond her own feelings for him; she went for
Ian.

Now, in the light of day, she's painfully aware that she has no idea how the whole Hook-fitting-into-their-lives thing is going to work. Knowing what you want and knowing how to go about getting it are two different animals.

And, as usual, she doesn't have a moment to form a plan or even compose herself because Ian's rushing headlong into the diner.

The bell over the door jingles as they enter, and Hook looks over quickly. His eyes find hers and hold them for a long moment, making her heartbeat quicken, and then he sees Ian. Emma doesn't miss the way his face lights up. His smile and the sparkle in his eyes are genuine—he's excited to see Ian, and it melts her in a good way.

"Hi!" Ian says as he stuffs himself into the booth next to Hook.

"Good morning, lad," he says, then to her and Henry, "Good morning."

Emma slides into the booth across from him. Henry settles next to her and immediately picks up a menu—she heard his stomach growling audibly on the walk over.

"Hey," she says. "Sorry we're late. Someone had a hard time getting out of bed this morning."

Ian and Henry's faces are the faces of pure, wide-eyed innocence.

Emma snorts. "Actually, it's my fault," she admits. "I was up early, but I fell asleep again."

"Quite alright," Hook says patiently, and Emma gets the feeling he would have waited all day and all night, if he'd had to.

She gets a little flutter in her stomach, and it sends a pleasant jitter through her. She shifts in her seat, trying to fight it down, and her foot slides forward and accidentally bumps Hook's. He stiffens, as if considering withdrawing, but then he moves his own leg until his calf rests against her shin.

She can feel his body heat through his boot, and it's a familiar warmth, because Ian's the same way—hot, like there's fire beneath his skin. There's something comforting about it, and the tension breaks inside her. She presses her leg a little more firmly into his, and sees him relax too.

"How long have you been here?" she asks, jerking her chin towards his empty mug.

He shakes his head, mouth pulling down in that exaggerated frown that's the equivalent of a shrug.

"Not long," he says.

"So, since dawn then?" she says flatly, and he doesn't deny it. Emma casts her eyes around, looking for a likely looking waitress to bring her cup of coffee or a caffeine IV. "Did you eat anything yet?"

"No, I-

"Do you like pancakes?" Ian asks.

Emma rolls her eyes. "Ian," she says in her mom voice, and both he and Hook freeze. "C'mon, I know I raised you with manners. It's not polite to interrupt someone when they're speaking."

Ian snaps both hands up over his mouth, and looks at Hook, startled. "Sorry," he says around his fingers.
Killian grins in amusement. "It's alright," he says. "Thank you for the apology, lad. And to answer your question: I've never had pancakes before."

"WHAT?" Ian says in a loud, offended tone. "What do you eat for breakfast then?"

Hook considers. "Depends on for how many weeks we've been at sea."

"Huh?"

"Erm," Hook falters, clearly unsure what to do with an Ian "huh".

"Pirate ships don't have refrigerators," Henry explains. "And most food goes bad pretty quickly if it's not kept cold and dry, so pirates have to eat all the fresh food right away, before it rots, and then after that it's nasty hard bread and dried meat."

"Right," Hook says, then he does a double-take. "Wait, how-"

Henry lowers his menu just enough to smirk at Hook over the top. "I did a school report on the Golden Age of Piracy."

"Truly?" Hook asks, giving Henry an appraising look. Then he raises one eyebrow. "Any mention of me?"

"Well, no," Henry says. "You're not a real pirate-"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I just meant, you know, here, in this world, you're a fictional character, not a...historical figure."

Emma pictures Captain Hook from the Peter Pan movie, and has to stifle a grin. "If it's any consolation," she says, "You really are a lot more appealing than your fictional counterpart."

"Yea, I'm glad you don't have a mustache," Ian says solemnly. "Mustaches are scary."

The principal at Ian's school has a mustache—he's also six-and-a-half feet tall with broad shoulders and a deep voice, and is especially stern with little boys who end up in his office because they were climbing things (trees, flag poles, fences, other, larger children) they weren't supposed to during recess.

Hook's looking back and forth between her, Ian, and Henry, one eyebrow quirked. "I'm rather curious to see this version of me you all seem so amused by..."

Henry pulls his phone of his pocket but Emma quickly pushes his hands back under the table.

"Trust me," she says. "You don't wanna know."

Hook's eyes narrow, and there's a sly smile playing along his lips that makes her cheeks begin to feel warm.

"I'll show you sometime," she promises. "I will. Just—not now. Now I really need something to eat."

Hook eyes her for a moment, that smile still on his face, then he turns back to Ian. "Alright, lad, tell me more about pancakes."

"They're awesome!" Ian says, and while Ian brings Hook up to speed on pancakes, Emma turns to Henry, who's buried in the menu.
"What're you getting?" she asks him.

Henry makes a face. "Think it's too early for lasagna? I have to make up for the last seven years..."

"It's never too early for lasagna," says a voice, and Emma turns to find Granny standing at their table.

"Granny," Emma says, and she can't help but smile.

"It's been a long time, dear," Granny says. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Emma says, and she means it.

Granny puts her hands on her hips and looks Henry up and down. "You've gotten tall."

"Thanks," Henry says, grinning.

"Is she our grandma too?" Ian asks.

Granny looks at Ian as if noticing him for the first time. She raises her eyebrows and peers at him over her glasses.

"Hi," Ian says.

"Hi, there," Granny answers. "Who might you be?"

"I'm Ian," he says, and grins, revealing the gap in his teeth, and Granny visibly softens.

"Well, aren't you cute?" she says, then she looks at Emma. "He yours?"

"He is," Emma says.

Then Granny sees Hook sitting there. Her eyes go from Ian to Hook, back to Ian, then to Emma, and finally back to Ian again.

She lifts her pen and notepad. "So," she says, smiling smugly to herself. "What'll it be?"

---

Ian orders pancakes with extra chocolate chips, extra strawberries, and extra whipped cream and tries to get Hook to order the same, but Emma manages to talk him down; so Hook gets a stack of regular pancakes and a side of bacon, and she and Henry both get two eggs over easy, sausage, and home fries.

Ian watches eagerly as Hook takes his first bite and waits for his reaction. Emma's holding her breath, watching more inconspicuously from beneath her lashes as she pours ketchup on her home fries. Hook's chewing, watching Ian watch him, and, slowly, a smile spreads over his face.

"Do you like them?" Ian asks. He's kicking his feet beneath the table so hard that he's bobbing up and down in his seat.

"Aye, lad, I do. They're very good," he says. "I wish we'd had these aboard the Jolly Roger."

Ian beams.

And then he does something that sort of surprises her.

"Do you wanna try mine?" he asks.
It's not the gesture that surprises her—Ian's always shared his food, ever since he was a baby and she and Henry made a game out of how many of his goldfish crackers they could get him to hand-feed them before he realized he hadn't eaten any himself—it's the fact that Ian offers it without a second's hesitation to Hook.

"Sure, why not?" Hook says, in the tone of voice that suggests he knows he'd be an idiot to refuse.

Emma gets that feeling of pride again as she watches Ian carve up his pancakes into dinosaur-size chunks (try getting a boy to understand that there actually is an upper limit on the amount of food you can politely put in your mouth at one time), stab a massive forkful, and offer it to Hook.

Emma knows Hook's a daring man, but is he daring enough for this?

Hook eyes the fork uncertainly—either because it's too much for a normal human to fit into their mouth, or because he's never been offered food on the end of a six-year-old's fork (or both)—then takes a deep breath and dives in.

He doesn't try to take the fork and hold it himself (which, you know, Emma really has to commend him for his bravery); he allows Ian to hold it (somewhat) steady as he tries to maneuver the pancakes into his mouth.

She can't help the snort of laughter that escapes her—there's something so not Captain Hook about it. To her surprise, Hook's not embarrassed. He gets the pancakes off the fork and sits there, grinning and chewing enthusiastically.

Ian offers both her and Henry a bite of his pancakes too. Emma's really not in the mood for the mess of chocolate chips, strawberries, whipped cream, and syrup that Ian's created, but she wants Hook to know that this is sort of their thing—a family thing they do—and he was just part of it. She takes hers gracefully, only getting a tiny bit of whipped cream on her nose that she knows Hook sees before she manages to wipe it off. Henry and Ian argue over which strawberry Ian should give Henry—Henry demands the biggest one because he's the big brother, but Ian refuses because they're his pancakes—before reaching a compromise (the second biggest strawberry and extra whipped cream).

When they all turn back to their own breakfasts, Emma spies the soft look in Hook's eye and gives him a nudge with her leg. He doesn't look at her, but he slides his other leg forward until it's touching hers, and leaves it there.

---

After they've finished eating, Emma gets Henry to take Ian up to the register to pay so she and Hook can have a second alone.

"Did you really like the pancakes?" she asks.

Hook chuckles. "I did, actually. Although, somehow I felt as if the pancakes were a test," Hook says.

"They were."

Hook raises an eyebrow. "So, the boy's testing me?" he asks with a smirk.

Emma tilts her head from side to side, and gives him a little smile. "Not on purpose, but yea. He just wants to figure you out. He's curious to know who his dad is."

Hook nods his head, but looks down. "Aye."
"Plus," Emma adds with a shrug, "he's a little kid. It matters to him that you like what he likes, and pancakes are pretty much his favorite thing—next to pizza and ice cream."

"So you're saying I have to like pizza and ice cream?"

"No, I'm saying be honest," she says, and looks at him seriously. "He's going to ask you just about every question he can think of—as soon as he thinks of it. So just...be yourself."

He searches her eyes, and Emma sees him worrying about something.

"What if he asks me about...my past?"

Emma knows what he means.

"He won't," she says, and when he takes a deep breath to begin arguing, she says, more firmly, "He won't. He's 6, Hook. He wants to know what your favorite color is and if you've ever wrestled a shark."

"Wrestled a shark?" he says incredulously.

She grins at him. "Did I mention he's 6?" she says. Hook returns her smile, a bit hesitantly, and Emma can tell he's still worried, but she sees Henry and Ian walking back towards them out of the corner of her eye.

"If he asks about, you know, being a pirate, just tone down the, um, racier aspects. Okay?" she says lightly, and then lifts her arm just in time for Ian to crash into her side. She settles her arm around his shoulders, looks at Hook, and says, "Henry and I are going to check out Regina's place. Do you mind watching Ian for a little bit?"

"Me?" Hook asks, startled.

"Yea," she says, "What do you say, kid? Do you want to go with Hook for a little bit?"

"Yea!" Ian nods so vigorously he looks like a bobblehead in an earthquake. "Where're we gonna go?" he asks excitedly.

"Erm..."

"Why don't you guys go to the park?" Emma suggests.

"Can we go look at the boats?" Ian asks instead. "Wait—do they have boats here?"

"They do," Emma says, and smiles.

---

The four of them go outside and stop on the sidewalk. Hook's shifting back and forth on his feet, hand clenching and unclenching, and Emma realizes he's nervous. She's amused—because it's Ian, and how is he more scary than a tavern full of armed, bloodthirsty pirates?—but she gets that he's probably never been around kids before and is feeling out of depth.

She turns to him with her arms crossed over her chest, and tries to keep a straight face as she says, "He's almost six, so he's pretty self-sufficient. He'll tell you if he needs anything." She lays a hand on top of Ian's head. "Right, kid? You'll tell Hook if you need to go to the bathroom or if you're hungry or something?"
"Uh-huh!" Ian says, grinning at Hook.

Emma slips her hands lower, over Ian's ears.

"Okay, if you run out of things to do in like an hour, you can take him to go get ice cream-"

"I love ice cream!" Ian says.

"Shhh," Emma chides him. "You're supposed to be pretending you can't hear me."

"Oh. Sorry," he says, and puts on a blank expression.

Emma looks back at Hook. "Don't let him get the biggest ice cream they have. He'll eat the whole thing and then get sick. And don't let him get anything with walnuts in it. He's allergic. But he knows that, so you should be fine."

Hook nods seriously like he's taking notes in his head.

"If you need something, call me—wait, you don't have a cell phone, do you?"

"No," Hook says.

Emma turns to Henry, and he groans. "Sorry, kid," she says.

Henry takes his phone out of his pocket and offers it Ian, but snatches it back almost immediately and holds it just beyond the reach of Ian's grabbing hands.

"Do not play games on it," he warns. "You'll drain the battery."

Ian presses his lips together and makes a face like he's holding in a shout, then drops his hands to his sides and huffs, "Fine."

Henry gives him the phone and Ian tucks it inside his sweatshirt pocket, then Emma gives Hook one last, bracing smile before she gently nudges Ian in his direction.

Ian slips his hand into Hook's, and turns his face up with the biggest, cheesiest grin on his face. "Ice cream?" he asks brightly.

Hook blinks, then smirks slowly. "Later," he says. "Let's say you and I go have a look at the docks first, eh?"

Emma and Henry watch them walk away across the street and head towards the harbor.

"You probably shoulda told Hook how to dial 911," Henry says.

"C'mon, your brother's not that bad. Hook's a big boy. He can handle himself."

"Five bucks says Ian convinces him to get ice cream in less than an hour."

"You're on, kid."

---

They go to Gold's shop first to retrieve the story book and have a look around. Emma's not really sure what she's looking for, but nothing screams "Dark Curse", so they take the book and leave.

Emma expects to find Regina's house closed up—or at least locked—but it isn't. She and Henry
stand in the entryway for a minute, taking it in. Everything's exactly as it was before—it looks as if the house is merely waiting. Emma fully expects to see Regina walk around the corner like nothing's the matter.

But of course she doesn't.

Because she's not here.

She's not in Storybrooke.

But Emma's job is finding people, and, dead or alive, Emma's going to find Regina.

For *Henry*.

"I'm gonna check upstairs," Henry says. He speaks quietly, as if a raised voice might somehow be a disturbance to this empty house.

Emma watches him walk up the stairs until he's out of sight. She'll join him in a second, but right now she knows he wants privacy, so while she waits, she wanders.

Mostly she feels like she's in a museum—the house has that cold, unwelcome feel to it, always has—but she finds personal, human touches here and there, all having to do with Henry; his school photos hanging on the wall, some artwork he made on the mantelpiece, a math test from 6th grade pinned to the refrigerator.

Emma thinks about their apartment back in Boston, about how most of the furniture is from Target or IKEA, about how it all has wear and tear and probably a drawing or two on it in marker from that phase Ian went through. She can barely open the fridge doors for all the drawings and school work stuck to them, and every flat surface has at least one framed photo of Henry and Ian.

Their place isn't pristine but it's clean, crowded but neat, and it's full of memories—memories of a happy life, memories of the best seven years of Emma's life.

The silence on the first floor is suddenly stifling. Emma doesn't run upstairs, but it's a close thing. She finds Henry in his bedroom, sitting on the bed with his hands clasped loosely between his knees, looking at his bookshelf forlornly.

"Hey," she says softly as she sits beside him.

"Everything seems so small," he says.

Emma glances around the room. It's a boy's bedroom from a catalog: everything's in perfect order, with only a few personal touches—just like downstairs.

"It's weird being back here," Henry says.

"Yea," Emma agrees.

"I don't like remembering what it was like here, before you came. I wish those memories weren't real. I don't like knowing that I didn't really grow up with you."

Emma reaches over and runs her fingers through his hair, smoothing it away from his temple.

"I know, Henry. Me too. I wish it had all been real," she says. "But the lives we had...Regina gave us those. If I had kept you in real life...I don't know if it would have worked out like that. When I got outta jail I was 18. I'd never had a job before—I didn't even have my GED—I was robbing little
mom and pop convenient stores just to eat...what sort of life would that have been for a baby?"

Henry nods, but his shoulders slump a little bit.

It hurts to see him like this, and although she's afraid of his answer, afraid of what she might have to do if he says yes, she still asks, "If you could forget—if all us could forget and go back to Boston—would you do it?"

"No," he says without hesitation. "No. This is where we belong. I just..." He takes a deep breath, ducks his head for a moment, and when he looks back up at her he's smiling—the hopeful sort of Henry smile that Emma loves. "I'm glad we got that extra life anyway."

"Yea, me too."

"And," he says slowly, with a mischievous glint in his eye. "I'm glad we have Ian."

"You mean you haven't changed your mind about having a little brother now that you know his dad's Captain Hook?"

"No—I mean, it explains a lot. But no."

He nods. He's silent for a moment, watching her out of the corner of his eyes, and then he says, "So are you and Hook gonna—"

"Don't finish that sentence," Emma says. "Whatever me and Hook are gonna doesn't matter right now. Right now all that matters is that you and Ian are happy, okay?"

"Okay, mom," he says, and there's a knowingness in his grin that makes Emma roll her eyes.

"Hey, do you think I could take some of my old toys and books back for Ian?" Henry asks.

"I think that'd be awesome," Emma says. "You don't have any Ninja Turtles, do you?"

"No, but I've got some Legos, some dinosaurs, and a pirate ship."

"Sounds perfect. Grab those and meet me downstairs. We can go check out Regina's vault before we meet back up with Ian and Hook."

While she's waiting for Henry to pack up some toys and books for Ian, she checks her phone for a distress call from Hook, but there's nothing.

Killian and Ian are walking along the docks, heading back towards Main Street, and Ian's asking him questions.

"What's your favorite color?"

"Green," he says, thinking of Emma's eyes.

And gold, he thinks, because of the way the boy's blonde hair glimmers like pale gold in the sun the way Emma's does.

"Do you like dinosaurs?"

"What's a dinosaur?"
Ian's hand is in his, his little fingers gripping Killian's, and Killian has never wanted to hold onto anything so tightly ever in his entire life. His hand feels empty when the boy pulls out of his grip to race ahead or to the side, peering at this and that, searching the water for fish and crabs. But he always comes back, and he always slips his fingers eagerly into Killian's again as if he missed the feeling just as much.

"Who's your favorite Ninja Turtle?"

"...what's a Ninja Turtle?"

"Did your hand really get eaten by a crocodile?"

Killian assumes the question has something to do with this realm's depiction of him. He isn't sure how to answer—certainly it's too dark a tale for a little boy—but he remembers Emma telling him to be honest, so he says, in the lightest tone he can manage, "Actually, a man did this to me. He did have skin rather like a crocodile, though."

"Oh," Ian says. He frowns, and Killian feels like a stone's settled in his stomach. "It was a very long time ago, lad," he says. "Nothing to worry about."

Ian's staring at the worn wooden boards beneath his feet.

"Did it hurt?" he finally asks.

"Yes," Killian says quietly. "It did."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No," he says.

Ian nods, as if to himself. "Okay, good. I don't want you to be hurt."

Killian gives Ian's hand a little squeeze.

"How about we go get some iced cream?"

Ian wrinkles his nose at him in a smile, and he resembles Emma so strongly in that moment that Killian's heart actually skips a beat.

_How is this child possible?_ 

"It's ice cream," Ian says.

"My apologies, lad," Killian says, grinning. "Shall we go get some ice cream, then?"

---

On Main Street they find a little ice cream shop run by a young woman named Ava and her brother Nicholas. Ava seems to understand that Ian is in charge and takes his order, although she politely allows Killian to pay and pretend he's useful. She doesn't even blink when he pays with a doubloon, and returns him change in this world's currency—he has no clue what any of it means, but he tucks it away gratefully inside his jacket.

"She's nice. I like her," Ian says as they exit the shop onto the street. He takes a giant lick of his pink ice cream, smiling in supreme satisfaction.
"We'll have to come back again sometime, then," Killian says, and while Ian chirps agreement, Killian's hit hard by the realization that there will be an *again*, that this is his life now, that he's a *father*.

This boy is *his*, and it's Killian's duty to be here for him, always and in every way possible.

It's both thrilling and frightening at the same time—*thrilling* because this boy's brilliant, and he's a lot like Emma but he's a lot like Killian too, and Killian can't quite get over it, but *frightening* because what if Killian *fails*?

"Are you okay?"

Killian realizes he's stopped walking. He gives himself a little shake.

"Aye, lad. I'm alright. How's your ice cream?"

"It's *really* good. Wanna try?"

Killian eyes the brightly colored confection uncertainly. The boy's pancakes earlier had been a touch too sweet for his tastes, and from what he understands, what he's holding now is pure sugar.

But he knows that he'll somehow be letting the boy down if he declines, and Killian *refuses* to let the boy down.

"I'd love some," he says, and bends down to taste Ian's ice cream (if he hadn't seen the boy lick it earlier he'd have no idea what to do with it). It's cold but it's soft and tastes pleasantly of strawberries, and Killian actually likes it.

"Mm," he says. "That's quite good. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Ian says with a sunny smile. "Strawberry's my favorite. Mint chocolate chips good too. We can get that next time."

*Next time.*

Killian smiles to himself.

"Want some more?" Ian asks.

"No thank you, lad. You eat it."

They walk another two blocks before they run into Emma and Henry. Simultaneously their eyes fall to Ian's ice cream, and then Emma pulls her cell phone from her coat pocket and looks at it. She turns to Henry with a grin and says, "You owe me five bucks, kid."

"*Mom.*"

"Nope, c'mon, pay up. It's going in your college fund."

Henry rolls his eyes and digs around in his pocket. "It's *five bucks,*" he huffs.

"It's five bucks you're going to be grateful you have in your bank account later on, I promise," Emma says, holding her hand out expectantly, palm up.

Killian quirks one eyebrow at Emma, but she just responds with a wink. She takes the paper bill Henry stuffs into her hand and slips it into her pocket.
"Mom!" Ian says. "We got ice cream!"

"I see that," Emma says. "Is it good?"

"Uh-huh. Wanna try some?"

"You bet I do."

Killian watches her lean down and take a lick of Ian's ice cream, and—he shouldn't—but suddenly he's wondering what her mouth would taste like right now. Emma straightens, licking ice cream off her lips and smiling that wrinkle-nosed smile down at Ian, and he can't help but notice that there's something different about her, something subtle but profound at the same time.

Her appearance hasn't changed since they were separated seven years ago, but somehow she's more beautiful, and it has something to do with how easily she smiles now, and how that smile lights up her eyes every time.

"How were the docks?" Emma asks.

Killian's about to answer, but then her eyes flick to the side and go wide, catching sight of something over his shoulder. Killian hears pounding footsteps on the pavement behind him, and turns, instinctively tugging Ian behind him.

But it's just Leroy, the dwarf.

He skids to a halt in front of them, red-faced and breathing hard.

"Thank God you're back, sister!" he pants.

"Leroy," Emma says, and Killian hears the dread in her voice. "What's wrong?"

"Something's happened. There's been an attack in the woods."

Killian looks quickly to Emma, and she sighs.

"Well, there goes the whole 'nothing bad's happened' thing," she says.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The struggle has finally ended *goes and lies down for a week*

Emma should have known better. She should have thrown Henry and Ian in the car and driven back to Boston the second she got her memories back. She should have run away as far and as fast as she could go.

Instead, she stayed. She stayed, and now it's apparently her job to save the day.

Leroy's staring at her expectantly, his big fat mouth hanging open, and Emma decides he's by far her least favorite dwarf—she honestly isn't particularly fond of any of them, but Leroy's definitely earned himself a spot on her shit list.

Before she can decide method of execution (her gun's in the SUV, so the fastest way right now might just be to beat him to death with Henry's story book), the squad car veers up to the curb. It barely comes to a full stop before David's jumping out.

He leaps onto the sidewalk, breathless. "Emma, something's happened-"

"Yea, I know," she snaps. "Don't any of you remember how to use a cell phone?"

David freezes, gaping at her with a bewildered expression.

Emma raises her eyebrows and tilts her head in Ian's direction. He's still holding onto Hook's hand, and with his big blue eyes and his big pink ice cream cone, he's the picture of perfect childhood innocence.

David sees, and his face falls.

Leroy, however, is not quite as quick on the uptake.

"Do you think me and my brothers would be running all over Storybrooke looking for you if we had your phone number?" he says scathingly. "Like we don't have anything better to do, princess."

Emma would punch him if not for Ian being there. Hook looks like he's about to, and even David's visibly on the verge of open hostility, but Henry and Ian jump to her defense first.

"Hey, Ian," Henry says loudly, inserting himself into the middle of the group and jerking his thumb towards Leroy. "I bet you can't guess which of the seven dwarves this is."

Ian blinks, then turns to Leroy and says brightly, "You're a dwarf?"

Leroy scowls down at Ian. "Watch who you're calling dwarf, squirt," he says.

Ian grins. "I bet you're Grumpy."

"The name's Leroy here. Who're you?"
"My mom says I shouldn't tell my name to strangers," Ian says, almost in a sing-song voice.

Leroy's eyes narrow dangerously. He puts his hands on his knees, leans in close to Ian, and leers. "And what else did your mom tell you about strangers?" he asks.

"That if they try to hurt me, I can kick them right in the nuts," Ian says, and smiles sweetly.

Leroy straightens and looks at Emma accusingly. She shrugs, and he turns to David, who also shrugs.

"If he says he can't tell you his name, he can't tell you his name. What do you want me to do about it?" David says.

Leroy jabs a finger in Ian's direction. "I want you to arrest him for threatening me."

Emma snorts. "You're afraid of a five-year-old?" she asks, and the look Leroy gives her is infinitely more satisfying than beating him to death with Henry's story book.

"I'm serious," Leroy snarls. "Who's the kid?"

"The kid's my kid," she says. She puts a hand on Ian's shoulder and gently turns him around. She hears Leroy say, "Your kid?" but she ignores him.

She squats down in front of Ian. He's lost his smile, and is watching her warily.

"I've got to go into work," she says carefully, and the disappointment on his face kills her. She gives his arms a squeeze, trying to communicate an apology, trying to tell him how much she actually doesn't want to go without using words. "This is just like at home, okay? It's just like I'm working a case and I've got a new lead I have to follow up on."

"Are you going to the woods?" he asks with a wobbly little frown.

"Yea."

He shakes his head. "Don't."

"Ian, I have to-"

"There's something bad in the woods," he says, and something about the way he says it unsettles her. She remembers her creepy drive through the woods last night, that feeling that made her skin crawl, that feeling like there were eyes on her, watching her from the darkness.

Ian must have felt the same thing she did. She doesn't know how to reassure him. It would be a lie to contradict him—to tell him there's nothing out there except trees and dirt—and he wouldn't believe her anyway, so she tries to comfort him the best way she knows how.

"Come here," she says, and opens her arms. Ian leans into her and wraps his arms around her neck. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Hook's hand dart in and snatch the ice cream from Ian just before it ends up in her hair.

Emma hugs him tight. "There's nothing to worry about. I'm the Sheriff here, and Hook and your grandpa are like my partners, okay? We're going to watch each others' backs. Protect each other."

"Like Batman and Robin?"

"Yea, kid. Like Batman and Robin."
"You're Batman, right?" he whispers.

She turns her head to whisper back, "I'm definitely Batman."

He giggles, and she kisses his cheek, then stands up.

"C'mon, you and Henry are going to go hang out at Granny's until we get back," she says.

Ian takes Henry's hand, but Henry doesn't move.

"Mom," he says. "We don't need a babysitter. We're not babies."

"I know you're not babies. I just want to know you guys are somewhere safe in case something happens," she says, and raises her eyebrows pointedly.

Henry's mouth tightens, but he nods.

"Snow's at the Mayor's Office," David says, "But I can call and ask her to meet Henry and Ian at Granny's when she's finished."

"Thanks," Emma says. Truthfully, she doesn't expect whatever's in the woods to attack the town—if it could have, it would have—but she's not going to leave Henry and Ian behind unprotected.

"Alright," Henry says to Ian. "You ready?"

"Uh-huh!"

Killian hands the ice cream cone off to Henry, who opens his mouth wide and takes a huge mouthful.

"HEY!" Ian screeches. "That's mine!"

Henry shrugs. "What? You weren't eating it."

Ian lets go of Henry's hand and with a growl tries to snatch his ice cream back. Henry back-peddles quickly down the sidewalk, holding the ice cream aloft. Ian follows, jumping up and down like an angry frog.

"Careful crossing the street," Emma calls after them. "And hold your brother's hand!"

She watches them a moment longer, and then she feels a tug on her sweater sleeve.

"Emma," says Hook's voice quietly. She turns and looks down to see Hook's fingers snagged in her cuff.

Her eyes find his, and then he glances away, at Ian and Henry. A crease appears between his brows as he asks, "Will they be safe here alone? Should we stay with them until your mother arrives?"

He's toying with her sweater, rolling it in between his fingers like he enjoys the feeling. Emma's pretty sure he's completely unaware he's doing it—until he brushes her wrist and suddenly stops.

But he doesn't let go, and Emma doesn't pull away. His fingertips find the sensitive skin on the inside of her wrist again, and stroke.

A warm, rushing wave crashes over her.
She forgot how gentle he could actually be, and somehow it makes her feel safe—the way she felt safe in his arms when he held her that night aboard the Jolly Roger, in the brief calm after they’d had sex. Then, she felt like nothing could touch her, not with Hook there beside her; and what terrified her about that was not the intensity of Hook’s feelings, laid bare before her, but how much she actually liked it.

David clears his throat. "Granny has a crossbow," he says. "You might be surprised what she can do with it."

Emma startles and pulls her sleeve from Hook’s grasp. David’s looking suspiciously in between her and Hook, and she feels like a teenager who’s been caught making out with her boyfriend in her bedroom while she thought her parents weren’t home.

She can’t quite meet Hook’s eyes as she says, "Let’s go. I’ll drive."

Henry takes Ian into Granny’s and leads him to the booth all the way at the back. Ian crams himself into the corner of the seat with his back to the window, and sits with his knees drawn up and his arms wrapped around his legs.

And he pouts.

"I don’t want mom to go into the woods," he says.

Henry sits across from him. "I already told you, there’s nothing in the woods," he says firmly.

"There is," Ian says, and he’s got that sulky, challenging look that’s difficult for Henry to resist, but he decides to take the high road this time (a high road which has nothing to do with the fact that an attack in the woods sort of invalidates his argument).

"Mom has to go," he says patiently. "She’s the Sheriff. It’s her job."

"I don’t want mom to be the Sheriff."

Normally, Henry would leave Ian be and go play Xbox until Ian eventually got over whatever was bothering him and asked to join; but he can’t do that here. He takes the story book and thumps it onto the table.

"I’m going to tell you a story," he says.

"About what?" Ian asks, and although he’s still doing his best to glare, Henry can tell he’s curious.

"About mom."

"Mom?"

"Yea. Mom," Henry says, and grins slowly, "and a dragon."

When they get to town line, the rest of the dwarves are already there, along with a group of men Emma doesn’t recognize. They’re dressed like hikers or campers, and they’re all armed with bows as tall as their shoulders. One of them, a man with gray-streaked, sandy blonde hair and a green scarf hanging loosely around his neck, leaves the group and strides forward quickly to meet David as he exits the squad car.

Emma and Hook get out of the SUV and approach more slowly. She stops a little short of the group
—if she gets too close to Leroy she might get around to punching him—and waits. David and the other man clasp each others' forearms in a friendly, familiar way, and then David turns to her.

"Emma, I'd like you to meet Robin," he says. "Robin, this is my daughter, Emma."

"Robin," she says. Then she notices the bows again. "As in...Robin Hood?"

Robin cocks his head to the side and grins at her. "So, you've heard of me."

"Sort of," Emma says. "My kids really like your story. They're gonna freak when they find out you're real."

*Although one of them's going to be disappointed you're not a fox.*

"Robin's the captain of our palace guard," David explains. "And a friend."

Robin sweeps his arm out and bows. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Emma. Your father's told me much about you. If what he says can be believed, you're quite the hero."

Hook makes a strange sound—like a growl bitten off just before it becomes vocal. Emma shoots him a warning glance over her shoulder.

"Um, thanks," she says to Robin, then crosses her arms over her chest and puts on her Sheriff Swan face. "So, what exactly happened?"

Robin straightens, still grinning, completely unfazed by the daggers Hook's glaring at him. "One of my Merry Men is missing," he says.

"One of your what?"

"Merry Men," Robin says again.

Emma sighs inwardly. "Right. Them. So, who's missing?"

"Little John."

"Little John," she repeats. "Of course. Um, any chance he just...wandered off?"

"If by wandered off you mean 'taken', then yes," says Robin.

"Taken?" she asks, and he nods. "Did you see what took him?"

"Unfortunately, no, but I..." Robin shifts uncomfortably, his confident demeanor suddenly gone. "I felt it."

Emma raises an eyebrow at him.

"We've been exploring these woods for a few days now-"

"Looking for what?"

David jumps in. "Looking for anyone who may have gotten dumped out here by the Curse," he says, then pauses, licks his lips, and continues, "And-"

"And anyone who might be hiding because they cast the Curse?" Emma guesses.

David nods. "Right."
That actually makes Emma feel a little better; at the very least, it's reassuring to know that her parents aren't naive, that in spite of their hopes to the contrary, they were in reality expecting and preparing for another crisis.

Emma takes a deep, steadying breath. "Okay," she says slowly. "Tell me the rest."

"We were in the south woods, heading north along the town line," Robin says. "Out of nowhere, I felt something rush past me—like a gust of wind—and then Little John screamed. When I turned around, he was gone."

A ripple passes through the Merry Men, as if they collectively shivered.

"And no one saw anything?" Emma asks, this time addressing the Merry Men directly, but they all shake their heads.

She unfolds her arms and jams her hands into the back pockets of her jeans.

"No one else has gone missing, have they? Not just from the woods; I mean from anywhere in town?"

Her dad shakes his head. "Not that we know of."

Hook speaks up for the first time. "That's quite the coincidence," he says. "The Savior arrives in Storybrooke, and the very next day there's an attack? Whoever cast this Curse clearly did it with the intention of drawing Emma in."

"And now what?" Leroy asks harshly. "They're gonna start pick us off one by one?"

"Starting with anyone who wanders into the woods?" Emma says, then shrugs. "Seems likely."

"So, what are you gonna do about it?" Leroy says.

Emma thinks he's talking to David—you know, their king for the past 7 years—but she realizes he's talking to her. David and Robin and the Merry Men are looking at her as well—deferring to her.

Emma swallows hard and looks away, into the trees. The woods are deep and dense, and it'll take them longer than the amount of daylight they have left to search their entirety. What's worse, they have no idea what they're chasing.

She does not want to do this; she does not want to be their leader or their Savior or their whatever. She just wants to go back home to her kids. Hook can come too, and her parents, but everyone else can kinda just go fuck themselves—especially Leroy.

"Emma, love," says Hook quietly—so quietly she doesn't think the others can hear. "You're not alone. We're here. Tell us what you want us to do."

She almost laughs.

You're something of an open book.

Emma draws herself up and turns back to the group. "We're gonna run a search grid," she says. "Robin, you said you were in the south woods?"

Robin nods.

"Then we go south."
Let's get this over with.

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They spread out in a line, arm's length apart, and begin their march with their eyes on the undergrowth, looking for tracks or drag marks—or a body.

Emma hopes it's not that last one.

David is on her right, (purposely) in between her and Hook, and he's walking closer than strictly necessary, given that their goal is to cover as much ground as possible. To her left is Robin, and past him the Merry Men, and, finally, the dwarves.

Robin and his men move stealthily, making no sound and disturbing almost nothing. Emma feels awkward and clumsy compared to them—but not as clumsy as Hook is. He's clearly more used to strutting along the deck of a ship than strolling through the woods. She tries to smile encouragingly (or maybe just sympathetically) at him—past David, which is hard enough—but he's glaring fixedly at the obstacle course of thorn bushes, man-sized and possibly man-eating ferns, and dead branches that litter the ground ahead of him, so she gives up and keeps her eyes down.

They walk in silence for close to half an hour before David suddenly veers a little closer.

"I'm sorry if we scared Ian back there," he says. "I wasn't thinking."

"It's alright," she sighs. "I'm sorry I didn't give you my cell phone number this morning. I wasn't thinking either."

She feels a bit of the tension thaw between them.

"So," she says, "mom's the mayor now, huh?"

David smiles. "Well, with Regina missing, it just seemed right for Snow to step in."

"Makes sense," Emma says. "She is their queen, right?"

"Exactly. The people here need a leader—someone to help them reintegrate. We did it in the Enchanted Forest seven years ago, and we can do it here in Storybrooke now."

"Wait, does that mean you guys are planning on staying?"

Her dad's hurt expression makes her backtrack.

"I just mean, you know, I thought the Enchanted Forest was your home? I thought that's where you guys wanted to be?"

"Emma, we want to be where you are," David says softly. "The only reason we'd want to go back to the Enchanted Forest is if you came with us."

She can see the truth in his eyes, and the pain—she hadn't stopped to think how hard it might have been for them to be away from her, with their memories intact.

She can feel Hook watching her, and from her other side, Robin doing the same. She nods—not really sure what she's acknowledging or what she's agreeing to—but she nods, and David nods back.

Emma returns her eyes to the forest floor. "What about everyone else?" she asks. "Do they all want to stay?"
David chuckles. "Honestly? I think once everyone gets used to TV and microwaves and hot running water, they're not gonna want to go back either."

"I can't blame them," Emma says. "What do you guys do for toilets over there, anyway?"

"You really don't wanna know," David says, and with a wink he returns to his place in line.

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After nearly two hours and nothing to show for it, Emma stops them.

"This is pointless," she says. "Whatever took Little John didn't go this way."

The Merry Men don't look happy with her assessment, but Robin and David exchange looks before both nodding in agreement.

"We need more men," Robin says.

"We can gather volunteers in town and continue our search in the morning," David says, then he looks past Emma and Robin, to where the dwarves are standing all the way at the other end of the line, too far away to have heard their conversation. "I'll be right back."

As David jogs away, Robin gives the Merry Men a hand signal, and, reluctantly, they turn and begin walking back the way they came.

Robin watches them a moment before he takes a step closer to Emma.

"Don't mind them," he says, jerking his head towards the Merry Men. "They're just worried."

Hook's standing a few paces behind her, and Emma can feel him listening in.

"I get it," she says. "Little John's their friend. They wanna find him safe."

"Exactly," Robin says, and he smiles warmly. In spite of herself, Emma actually kind of likes him.

"So how did Robin Hood end up working for Prince Charming, anyway?" she asks.

Robin plants one end of his bow in the dirt and leans on it. "We ran into each other shortly after your parents arrived in the Enchanted Forest," he says. "They were headed to their castle, and the Merry Men and I—well, let's just say we were adrift. They offered us a place in their service, and-" He shrugs. "The rest is history. Rather boring history, really."

Emma snorts. "Well, boring is better than all this," she says, and gestures around them, at the woods that may or may not contain some evil creature.

"True," Robin says, then his gaze hardens. "You know...your parents love you very much."

She blinks at him, startled. "Yea, I know," she says.

"It was very difficult for them to be away from you. They spoke of you all the time."

Emma chews on her bottom lip. It's a little annoying, being spoken to in this way by someone she just met...but she understands; her dad had called Robin a friend, and friends look out for each other.

"Were they happy?" she asks quietly.
Robin's expression softens and he smiles sadly. "As happy as two people can be, when their only daughter is trapped in a different realm."

Emma folds her arms and ducks her head. She stares at the dirt on the toes of her boots.

"I thought they'd start over, you know? Be king and queen. Rule the Enchanted Forest. Have more kids."

Her throat feels tight thinking about it—about the possibility of her parents moving on, without her.

"They made the best of their situation," Robin says gently. "The people look up to your parents, Emma, and that's because your parents have never let them down. They've always done their duty, despite how much they may have been hurting deep inside."

She nods, lips pressed firmly together. Tears sting her eyes, but she fights them down. Hook's hovering close behind her—she can feel his body heat against her back, but then it disappears. She lifts her head to see David approaching over Robin's shoulder.

She quickly swipes at her cheeks, schooling her face back to a calm mask. Robin must hear David's footsteps because he perks up, and says cheerily, "So, your father tells me you have a son," just as David steps up beside him.

Oh my God, of all the topics right now...

"Um, I have two sons, actually."

"Two?" Robin says, cocking an eyebrow at David, who suddenly looks as if he'd rather be anywhere else. "Your father only mentioned the one. Henry."

"Henry was the only one he knew about. I didn't know I was pregnant when we got separated. Ian was born a few months after."

"Oh," Robin says, clearly confused, clearly not sure how to ask the questions on his mind.

Emma shifts a little, giving Robin a clear line of sight to Hook, and turns her head a little in Hook's direction.

Robin's eyes go wide. "Oh," he says.

"We should catch up to the others," David says brusquely, and walks swiftly away, crashing through the ferns.

Robin stares after him, then grins. "He doesn't seem to like you very much," he says to Hook. "Now, has it always been that way, or is that a more recent development?"

To Emma's surprise, Hook chuckles.

"I'm fairly certain it's always been that way, although recent developments don't seem to have helped much," he says.

Robin extends his hand. "We weren't properly introduced before," Robin says. "I'm Robin, and I can only presume you're Captain Hook?"


"Likewise," Robin says, then smiles at Emma and gestures after David. "Let's follow him, shall we?"
And you can tell me more about your sons on the way."

The journey back into Storybrooke feels longer than their drive into the woods earlier, but Killian doesn't mind. Emma's more relaxed, and although she doesn't speak, he's just happy to be in her presence—even if there are six of Robin's men packed tightly into her backseat, like sardines.

When they arrive at Granny's, Emma rushes in to check on Henry and Ian. Killian stays behind, ensuring all the Merry Men have exited Emma's vehicle before he closes the doors behind them. When he mounts the sidewalk, it's to find David waiting for him, with his hands on his hips and a cold look in his eyes.

Killian does a quick, discreet check of the street—searching for possible witnesses, in case David's about to attempt murder—and steps up beside him so they're shoulder-to-shoulder, facing the warmly glowing lights of Granny's front window.

"I think it's time you and I have a little talk about your intentions towards my daughter," he says. His tone is light, friendly, but Killian hears the note of cold steel in his voice, as threatening as if he'd unsheathed a sword and held it to Killian's throat.

Killian relaxes his stance, loosens his shoulders, and tucks his thumb into the front pocket of his vest.

"That's a little old fashioned even by my standards," he says with a smirk. "And I still pay with doubloons."

"I know your reputation, Hook. Emma's not some conquest."

Killian feels his anger kindle. "I wouldn't risk my life for someone I see as loot," he says hotly. "Whatever we become is up to her as much as me."

"And what about Ian?"

His anger flares, reaching boiling point in an instant. He whirls towards David and David turns to meet him. He sees David's hand move—instinctively reaching for a sword, Killian knows—and Killian reacts; his own hand darts out and grips David's wrist.

David goes rigid in his grasp.

"What exactly are you implying?" Killian growls.

David's eyes narrow dangerously and bore into Killian's. "Oh, I don't know," he spits back, "You might get bored and decide to go back to being a pirate, or maybe the 'being a father thing' won't take, and-"

Killian digs his fingers into David's jacket—more to keep from punching him than anything—and hisses, "I would never do anything to harm that boy. He's my son. You of all people should know what it's like to miss out on your child's entire life."

David's arm spasms, but Killian hangs on. His heart's hammering his ribs, and blood is pounding in his ears.

"I'm here now," he says. "And I'm staying. Question that again at your peril."

The tinkle of the bell over Granny's front door announces Emma's appearance.

"Hey, are you guys coming or what?" she calls.
Killian drops David's arm and walks away, striding quickly up the walkway. His fury is burning a hole in his belly, and he tries to keep his scowl hidden, but, naturally, Emma sees.

"What was that all about? Are you okay?" she asks. but Killian just gives a quick shake of his head—not trusting his voice—and slips past her into the diner.

Henry and Ian are sitting in the booth at the back, across from Snow White. There are toys spread across the table and lined up along the back of the seats; Killian spots a model pirate ship and some large, lizard-like creatures.

Ian races over as soon as he's through the door, and barrels into him, nearly knocking the air from his lungs. He hugs Killian around the middle, and grins up at him.

"Hi," he says.

Ian's smile is like a balm to Killian's anger. He feels the tension leak from his body immediately, and manages his own smile.

"Good evening, lad," he says.

He doesn't know what to do with his arms, but he doesn't want to leave them awkwardly hanging at his sides, so he does what he saw Emma do before; he puts them around the boy's shoulders. Ian seems to lean into him more as he does.

"Do you wanna come play dinosaur pirates with us?" Ian asks.

"Ah," Killian says, glancing at the toys. "So those are dinosaurs?"

"Yea. Wanna play?"

Emma stands close beside Killian—close enough that he can feel her arm brush his—and puts a hand on Ian's head, running her fingers through his hair.

"Can we do dinosaur pirates back at the loft?" she asks. "We have to get going. Grandma ordered a pizza."

Ian turns his big blue eyes from his mother back to Killian. "Are you coming too?"

Killian can't help his eyes flickering to David, standing beside his wife and Henry at the booth.

"Alas," he sighs. "I'm very tired and need to go lie down. Another time, perhaps."

"Can you eat breakfast again with us tomorrow?"

"Erm," he says, and looks to Emma. She nods, smiling, and he turns back to Ian. "I'd love to."

Ian's grin grows wider. Killian can see the white edge of a tooth beginning to poke through his gums in the gap where his front teeth used to be.

"I'm going to walk Hook up to his room," Emma says, and gently pries Ian's arms from around Killian's waist. She turns him around, and gives him a push back towards the table. "Why don't you go check out the menu and find some other things you think your dad hasn't tried yet."

"Okay!" Ian says brightly, and runs back to the table.

Emma touches Killian's arm gently. He follows her past the booth—nodding at Henry, carefully
avoiding David's glare—through the hallway and the lobby, up the stairs, and to his room.

She stops at his door and turns to face him.

"Was David doing his whole 'overprotective dad' thing out there?" she asks.

Killian huffs out a breath. "Aye, love. Something like that."

Emma rolls her eyes and crosses her arms over her chest. "He'll get tired of it eventually," she sighs. "Just let him get it out of his system."

"And if I mysteriously go missing before he tires of it?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I'd like to say I'll avenge you, but he's my dad, so..." she says, and smiles that crinkle-nosed smile Killian loves.

She unfolds her arms and sticks her hands in the back pockets of her jeans.

"I never got a chance to ask how your afternoon was. Did Ian behave himself?"

"He did. Although, I'm a little disappointed he never asked me if I've ever wrestled a shark."

"Next time, maybe," she says.

"Aye, next time," he says. "Thank you for letting me spend time with him."

"Thanks for wanting to spend time with him," she replies softly.

"Of course. I want to get to know him just as much as the lad wishes to get to know me. I've missed a lot, Emma; I'd like not to miss anything more."

He takes a risk, and steps closer. She doesn't back away, but her eyelids flutter and she looks down.

"About earlier," she says, keeping her eyes on the floor. "What you said in the forest, that I'm not alone-"

"I meant it, Emma," he says.

She nods, as if to herself, then takes a deep breath. "You know what I was yesterday?" she asks. "A mother. Not a Savior, just a mother. That's it. And I liked it."

"You still have what matters most, Emma," he says. "You still have Henry and Ian."

And you have me.

She pulls her head up, staring at him with wide, surprised eyes, and he realizes he must have said it out loud.

Without taking his eyes off hers, he lifts his hand slowly to her hair, and runs his fingers gently through it. She takes a shuddering breath, and it's the most difficult thing Killian's ever done not to bury his hand in the soft, golden strands and pull her lips to his.

As his hand travels downward, he encounters a rough, slightly sticky patch, and suddenly he's grinning.

"What?" Emma asks.
"There's ice cream in your hair," he says, rolling the spot back and forth between his fingers.

She blinks slowly, and then she takes a step towards him, closing the distance between them. Her lips part, Killian sees her pink tongue glide across them, wetting them. Heat floods his body in anticipation. He holds still, trying to keep the butterflies whirling in his stomach from rising up and choking him.

She raises up onto her tiptoes and kisses his cheek, just near the corner of his lips.

Killian could turn his head and capture her mouth with his, he could kiss her until they're both breathless—he wants to—but he doesn't; Emma's trusting him to take this slow.

He closes his eyes and savors the feel of her soft lips against his skin. She lingers there, and then she's gone. He opens his eyes in time to see the smile she flashes at him beneath the blush spreading over her cheeks, before she whispers "Goodnight," and turns down the hallway.

Emma's never truly appreciated how talkative Ian is until right this moment, when his chattering distracts everyone else at the dinner table from noticing her faraway look and her red cheeks.

She kissed Hook—well, okay, not on the lips, but very, very close.

She barely resisted his lips, and she resisted at all only because she knew if she really kissed him she'd drown; she'd fall in so deep there'd be no climbing back out.

Not that she didn't want to take that particular plunge, she just wasn't completely ready for it yet.

But fuck his lips were so soft—she felt just their corners but that was enough, enough to remember the last time; and his stubble, the way it tickles her own lips-

Ian shaking her arm pulls her abruptly from her thoughts.

"Mom!" he says loudly, his face incredibly close to hers. "Can grandpa give me a bath?"

"Um," she says, "I don't know. You have to ask your grandpa first."

"He said yes."

"Then I guess grandpa's giving you a bath."

"You know, I think your dad likes him," Snow says with a smile, as she and Emma watch him skip away towards the bathroom.

Emma smiles. "He has that effect on people," she says, and she thinks of the goofy, boyish grin Hook gets when he's talking to Ian.

Now if only David would warm up to Hook just as easily as he's warming up to Ian...

Henry wants to go upstairs to play games on his phone, and Emma lets him go because she knows he needs a break after spending 6 hours with his brother, so she and Snow are left alone to wash the dishes together.

They fall into an easy rhythm of soaping and rinsing and drying, and it relaxes Emma. It makes her feel like she's back in Boston, and her and the boys have just finished dinner; Henry's retreated to his room for private teenager time, and Ian's getting his last ten minutes of TV in before Emma finds him and throws him in the bathtub.
She wishes right then that they were home, that she didn't have to wake up in the morning and lead another search party through the woods—and even while she's wishing for it, she feels guilty; her parents are so happy that they're together again, and Emma's happy too, but she doesn't want to be here, in Storybrooke.

Emma finishes drying the handful of forks she's holding, sticks them in the drying rack, and turns to her mom.

"Are you and dad going to stay in Storybrooke?" she asks.

Snow glances at her, then drops her eyes back to the sink. "Your father said you asked," she says quietly. "Of course we're staying, Emma. We're finally all back together. Why would we want to leave?"

Emma's has no response, so she remains silent.

"You're not thinking of going back to Boston, are you?" Snow says, and passes her a bowl.

Emma takes it and starts drying it. "I don't know," she admits. "Our lives weren't in danger there, you know? There weren't any monsters or evil sorceresses after us. It was normal. It was good."

"What about Hook?"

Emma shrugs. "He could come too."

Snow almost drops the plate she's washing. "So you and Hook are serious?"

"No," Emma says quickly. "It's not like that. It's just...co-parenting's a thing. Lots of people do it. Hook and I don't have to be, you know, together to raise Ian."

Snow's staring hard at the plate in her hands with a furrowed brow.

Emma sighs. "I don't know. I'll figure it out after I figure out who cast the Curse and who's kidnapping people from the woods."

"We."

"What?"

Snow sets the plate in the sink and turns fully to face her, planting one soapy hand on her hip.

"After we figure out who cast the Curse and who's kidnapping people from the woods," she says. "You're not in this alone, Emma. You may be the Savior, but that doesn't mean we aren't going to help you."

Hook's voice is in her head.

You're not alone.

"Thanks, mom," she says.

"Please don't thank me, Emma. I know you're used to doing things on your own, but...you're our daughter; your father and I are always going to be here for you. We want to help you."

Emma nods. She's turning back to the bowl she's supposed to be drying when Ian runs up in a flurry of wet-sounding footsteps. He's got a towel wrapped around his shoulders, but it doesn't reach every
low and Emma knows it's definitely not covering all the things it should be. David's standing helplessly in the bathroom doorway, arms spread wide in apology.

"Did you know grandpa fought a dragon too?" Ian says. He skids to a halt and almost slips—Emma catches his arm and keeps him steady.

"I did," she says. Apparently, Henry read him the story of her fighting that dragon, back before she broke the original Curse on Storybrooke.

"Do you think the thing in the woods is a dragon?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I think dragons are probably a little too big to hide in a forest. I think they go more for caves in the mountains."

"Oh."

"Yea. Um, can you please go dry off and put some clothes on? Your buns are hanging out and it's scaring your grandma."

Ian makes a face like he's offended she drew attention to his naked butt cheeks, and whirls around to trot back to the bathroom, flashing them even more. Emma turns towards Snow to apologize, but the look on Snow's face just makes them burst out laughing until they're both red-faced and hunched over.

"Hey," Snow says, straightening and wiping tears from her cheeks. "After Ian goes to bed, I've got a bottle of wine if you want to hang out and catch up? You can tell me all about Boston."

Emma smiles. "Yea, let's do that. You can tell me what it's like to be queen of the Enchanted Forest."
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Ah ha HAAA. Ok, so BIG THINGS were supposed to happen this chapter, but as I started writing I realized other, smaller things need to happen first. So here's a a chapter lovingly titled Kilian's Very Exciting Day (aka Captain Cobroctopus Goes to the Park).

As is his habit, Killian's awake well before dawn.

He lays in the dark and watches the light change from slate to ash to the palest gray, and then to ivory as the sun breaks above the horizon. The room is warm and the air is still, and all the sounds are unfamiliar. He's grown used to the creaking of his ship, the muffled voices of his crew, and the roar of the wind and the sea. Here there's only the birds, screaming to the world that they're awake.

He'd close the window to shut out the noise, only he's certain he'd suffocate if he did, so he flips the covers off his chest and slides one leg out from beneath the sheet to cool his body temperature. He folds his blunted arm behind his head, while the fingers of the other find their way to his lips.

He can still feel Emma's kiss—there, just at the corner, as if her lips left a physical imprint.

He thought about it all night; his dreams were filled with images of her, images pulled from his memories of every kiss and every touch they ever shared.

His body aches for her. He longs to slip his hand below the blankets covering his waist and ease the pressure in his loins—how many times over the past 7 years had he fantasized that it was her hand closing over him? Hundreds? Thousands? Only this isn't one of those cold, lonely nights aboard the Jolly Roger, one of those bleak moments where his only comfort is the memory of Emma Swan.

He's back in Storybrooke, and she's here too.

He stands and crosses the small room to the chair in the corner he left his clothes folded atop. He puts his trousers on, not bothering to do up the laces, and goes to stand before the window.

There's no view of the sea here, only rooftops. Everything's steeped in bluish shadow, the sun not having risen high enough yet to spill its golden light onto the street. There's no movement outside, not of people or vehicles or even one of what must be the trillions of birds Killian can hear screeching. Storybrooke is still asleep.

He gazes over the buildings. Emma's only a few blocks away, beneath one of those rooftops, probably still sleeping peacefully.

And his son's there too.

Frustration clenches like a fist inside him.

Bloody hell.

If only he had known about Ian. He would have come back, he would have found them. For seven years he imagined he was doing what was best for her by letting her go, by letting her live a happy
life out there somewhere with Henry, but instead he left her to raise their child on her own.

He can't imagine what it must have been like for her—without her memories of him or their handful of nights together—to find out she was pregnant, to carry, birth, and raise a child when you had no clue who the other parent was.

And yet raise him she did, and there's so much joy in that child that there's no doubt in Killian's mind that Emma raised him with all the love she had in her body.

His frustration gives way to yearning. He wants to be a part of her little family, he wants to-

There's a knock on the door, light and quick.

He tenses.

It's far too early for visitors, so either there's been another attack and Emma's here to retrieve him, or David's come to murder him and dispose of his body before anyone in Storybrooke's the wiser.

Killian retrieves his cutlass from the floor beside the bed, and creeps silently to the door. Whether by coincidence or by design, the door handle is a lever, and easily managed with his stump arm. He tightens his grip on his cutlass, and eases the door open a crack, just enough to peer through.

It's Emma.

She has her back to the door, staring down the hallway towards the window at the end where the golden sunlight has just begun to paint the walls and carpet with a rosy glow, and hasn't noticed him yet. Killian sets his cutlass against the wall and opens the door wider.

"You're here early, love," he says.

She starts a little and begins to turn towards him. "Yea, well, the Merry Men don't wanna wait, and my dad doesn't want them to go without him, so-

She stops as she faces him fully and sees he's standing before her wearing only his trousers. Her eyes go wide and her cheeks turn pink. He feels a flush creeping up his own neck as her gaze travels down his chest from collarbones to navel, and then lower. He realizes belatedly that he's still hard, and the outline of his morning arousal is perfectly visible, pressed against the front of his pants.

Her blush deepens to crimson, but she doesn't look away.

Killian can only think of one way to save face in this situation. He leans forward to rest his shoulder against the doorjamb, and lifts one eyebrow.

"See something you like, Swan?" he asks.

Emma's eyes snap back to his face. Her pupils are huge, black discs surrounded by a thin sliver of green. He doesn't think she's seen him like this before—during their previous encounters they removed as little clothing as possible, propelled both by the urgency to join their bodies, and the urgent desire to avoid discovery.

She's still staring, and her eyes are inching downwards again.

"Perhaps you'd like to come inside?"

He's teasing her, but he's half-serious, as well.
She takes a deep breath, crosses her arms over her chest, and tilts her head back to look at the ceiling. He watches her, and he grins slowly.

"Shut up," she says to the light fixture hanging above them.

"I didn't say anything, love."

"Still shut up. Get dressed. We have to go."

"Are you certain you want me to change? I can search the woods like this, if it pleases you-"

Her hands are on him, pulling his face to hers. On instinct, he closes his eyes. His nose bumps hers, he feels her breath ghosting along his lips, and he waits...

But the kiss never comes. He opens his eyes to see hers staring back at him, hard.

"Payback, jerk," she says. "Now put some clothes on and meet me outside."

Killian watches her stalk down the hallway and disappear into the stairwell before he closes his door and leans against it. He supposes he deserved that, only now the throbbing in his groin is guaranteed to drive him mad before the day's out.

He sighs to himself.

Very well.

---

She's waiting in the parking lot beside her vehicle. It's the small yellow one this time, the one she calls "the bug". She's leaning against its side with her arms folded over her chest and her long legs stretched out in front of her, crossed at the ankle.

She regards him coolly as he approaches, and suddenly his insides are squirming with an awkward sort of shame.

He stops a modest distance away from her. "Emma," he says, his hand sliding up of its own accord to tug nervously at his ear. "My apologies for upstairs. That was perhaps a bit forward of me-"

"Oh, please," she says. "You think I can't handle the sight of a little chest hair—well, a lot of chest hair?"

Her smile invites him to take a step closer, so he does.

"Does it bother you? My chest hair?" he asks.

If he remembers correctly—and he does, he hasn't forgotten a second of their time together—he rather enjoyed dragging her fingers through it.

Her eyes are tracing his lips as she answers. "No, it doesn't," she says, and the way she says it also says I like it.

He closes the gap between them, until he can smell the soap from her still-damp hair. The scent is crisp and floral, and he wants to press his nose into it. The squirming in his gut goes from uncomfortable to pleasant in an instant, and then from warm to cold as a voice behind them speaks.

"Good morning, you two," Granny says brightly.
"Good morning," Killian returns without turning around—he doesn't have to see Granny's face to feel her smugness. He waits until the sound of her footsteps recedes and he hears the tinkling of the bell before he grins, and says, "Now, where were we?"

"We were getting in the car," Emma says, then sighs. "Sorry, it looks like the hallway outside your door might be the only chance we ever have for romance."

"Are you saying you desire romance, Swan?" he purrs.

She rolls her eyes and looks away, but she's wearing a pleased smile and she's blushing again. He can't take his eyes off her: her hair, the color of sunshine and spun gold, darkest where it's still wet; her green eyes, bright in the morning light; her pale pink lips; her freckles, standing out brown-gold against the cream of her skin.

There are dark smudges beneath her eyes, and that's when he realizes how tired she looks.

"Did you sleep, Swan?" he asks.

"Eh," she grunts. "A bit. I was up late with my parents, and then Ian woke me up a few times during the night."

"Is he alright?"

"Yea, he's fine. He said he was having bad dreams, but honestly, I think he just had a stomach ache from all the junk he ate yesterday. Ice cream for lunch and pizza for dinner isn't exactly a good combo for a 5-year-old."

She's looking away, and he has the feeling she's not meeting his eyes on purpose.

"What else is on your mind, love?"

She looks at him. Her lips part and she takes a breath, but she hesitates.

"Emma, you can talk to me," he says.

She lets hers breath out in an exasperated puff and drags the fingers of both hands through her hair. He gets another intoxicating whiff of her soap again and he imagines burying his face in it.

"It was just a rough morning," she says. "The boys are upset with me. Ian was crying when I left because we're not having breakfast with you, and Henry's mad because he has to spend another day being babysat by his grandma."

"What's wrong with spending time with his grandmother?"

"It's not the grandma part, it's the babysitting part. He thinks I'm treating him like a little kid, like he can't take care of himself—and, you know, I'm not denying he's more mature than most other kids his age, but he can't..." She scrubs her hands through her hair once more and then drops them to fold her arms tight over her chest. "He can't protect himself. Not against whatever's in the woods, at least. Or any of the other things that seem to find their way to Storybrooke."

"Surely he understands that? That he has to stay with his grandmother for his safety?"

"No, of course he doesn't understand that," she says. "He's 17. He wants to hear that he's an adult now and he can have a sword and go search the woods."

Killian feels guilty. While Emma was busy being a parent this morning, all Killian was concerned
with was when he might be able to kiss her again.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asks.

"You can't make One-Eyed Jim magically appear, can you?"

"I—wait, who?"

Emma smiles. "It's Ian's favorite stuffed animal. I don't know, it just makes him feel better. Like he's got a friend with him. He and Henry are gonna be stuck in the Mayor's Office all day, and I know Ian would feel better about it if he had One-Eyed Jim for company."

"One-Eyed Jim," Killian repeats slowly.

What an absurd name.

"Yep," Emma says. "He's an octopus."

"And he only has one eye?"

"No, actually he has two. I have no idea where the name came from. Ian just made it up."

A grin pulls at his lips. "Well, Swan," he says, "I can't retrieve Ian's stuffed animal, but, if it would help, I could watch the boys today, instead of your mother?"

Her mouth falls open slightly in surprise. "You'd do that?"

"Unless you'd rather have me help search the woods today-"

"No, I mean...Henry too?"

"Of course. Henry and Ian are brothers. That's a very important bond, Swan, especially-" he pauses, mouth suddenly gone dry. He has to wet his lips before continuing. "Especially for boys with no father."

She's watching him with a troubled frown and a crease between her brows, and Killian's afraid he offended her without meaning to, but then she says, "Like you and Liam."

Liam.

For a moment he feels as if he's standing on the edge of the bottomless well that is his sorrow over Liam's passing, teetering, about to fall in, but he drags himself away, forces himself to focus on Emma's face, on the here and now and not the past.

"Aye," he says, in a voice that shakes. "Like Liam and I. We grew up without our father, and I...I remember what that was like."

There are questions in her eyes, and Killian braces himself; he'll answer whatever she wishes, regardless of whatever painful memories he'll have to relive in doing so. For her, he's an open book.

But she doesn't ask any questions. She merely smiles a small, sad smile, and says, "Henry and Ian are close. I don't want that to change. And I don't want Henry to feel left out now that Ian has you, and Henry, well..."

Henry doesn't have Neal.
"Emma, I may not be Henry's father...but that doesn't mean I don't care for the boy. I'll treat him the same as I would treat Ian."

"I know," she says softly.

_I know._

_Good._

She has a way of making such simple phrases vibrant with meaning.

"Hey, can you do me another favor?" she asks.

"Anything, love."

"Could you talk to Henry? About why he can't just go running off into the woods with us? He might listen if it's coming from someone whose job isn't to ruin his life."

Killian chuckles. He felt that way about Liam, once.

"I'd be happy to talk to him, Swan. I remember being his age-"

She snorts. "What, like a million years ago?"

"More like two hundred," he says.

She's grinning at him. "You know you can't take them to another bar here, right? I don't know what the legal drinking age is in the Enchanted Forest, but here it's 21."

He returns her grin. "Then we shall have to seek out entertainment elsewhere."

"Sorry, no brothels either," she says.

"I would never take children to a brothel.""

"Henry told me about the prostitutes at Blackbeard's tavern."

"Those weren't—I didn't...Swan," he pleads, and she laughs.

"C'mon, we should get going. I'll call my mom and tell her you're coming to get the boys."

---

Snow's positively beaming with delight when he shows up. She sweeps open the door and ushers him through. Killian steps inside and looks around, noting that everything appears to be the exact same and in the exact same place as it was seven years ago.

"Henry, Ian!" Snow calls. "Hook's here."

Henry emerges from the bathroom. He's got a toothbrush stuck in his mouth and foam dribbling down his chin, Ian's riding his back like a monkey, talking directly into his ear, and the sour look on Henry's face says, _This is all your fault._

Ian sees Killian, squeaks out a, "Hi!" and jump-falls from Henry's back. Henry gratefully turns back into the bathroom and closes the door behind him as Ian races across the loft and crashes into Killian. Killian's ready for it this time, and his arms go around the boy without hesitation.
"Where are we going?" Ian asks immediately, grinning up at him with that gap-toothed smile.

"Well, for starters, I thought perhaps we could get some breakfast. Have you eaten yet?"

"No! Can we get pancakes again?"

"If pancakes are what you desire, then pancakes we shall have," Killian says.

"Ian, honey," Snow says. "Why don't you go put your shoes on and get ready to go?"

"Okay!" Ian says. He releases Killian and runs away, taking the steps to the top of the loft two at a time. Snow watches him go—Killian sees her warm, indulgent smile, and is grateful for it—then she turns to him.

"Will you be okay on your own with them?"

If it had been anyone else, Killian might have been offended, but he understands her question isn't meant to criticize him.

"I captained a pirate ship for centuries," he says. "I think I can handle two boys."

He carefully avoids thinking about how, last time they were in his care, they stole something very valuable from a ruthless, bloodthirsty pirate and nearly got themselves and him killed.

"Ian seems to have really taken to you," she says, and suddenly he's embarrassed.

"Aye," is all he can say. He feels his ears growing hot, and knows they must be bright red.

"I'm happy he's getting to know his father. It must have been difficult for him before, without you."

"Emma was there," Killian says. "He had Emma. And Henry."

"You're right, I just..." she trails off. She drops her eyes to her hands, and begins nervously picking at her fingers. "David's father died when he was very young, and even though his mother loved him very much, his father not being there left a hole in his heart. It's hard for a child to grow up without one of their parents."

"I know," he says gruffly, without meaning to.

Snow tilts her head curiously, but she doesn't push. Instead, she holds out Henry's story book.

"Here, you should read this to him."

Killian takes it, and eyes it uncertainly. "I don't understand..."

"I mean, not the whole thing," she says quickly. "I know Ian knows a little bit about what's going on, but there's still a lot in here Emma hasn't explained to him yet...I just thought maybe you could read him the part about how you and Emma met. I think he'd like to hear it."

Killian holds the book back out towards her, shaking his head. "Perhaps it would be best for Emma to explain that. At least initially."

"There are two sides to the story of how you met. Emma can tell hers, and you...you can tell him yours. He should know where he came from."

"But...I was a villain then."
"But you aren't now," she says gently. "And you're the only one who can explain to him why that is."

Emma is why that is.

He's still hesitating, the book held in front of him, hanging in the open space between himself and Snow White. Her hands are folded neatly at her waist—she clearly has no intention of taking the book back, so he tucks the book under his arm and nods.

"Besides," she says sweetly, "reading together is a good way for you two to bond."

He's embarrassed again—embarrassed by her eagerness for him to be a father to Ian. It's overwhelming. He doesn't know what to do in the face of her obvious enthusiasm, so he huffs and looks away. "I only wish your husband shared your desire to see me in the boy's life."

"Oh, David will come around," she says, waving a hand dismissively. "You just need to give him time. Maybe like a year."

He looks around quickly to see if she's yanking his chain, and she is. She smiles at him again, and says more seriously, "If you can make David see what Emma sees—that you care for her and for Ian and Henry and that you want to be a part of their lives—then he'll stop acting like he wants to kill you in your sleep."

That you care for her and for Ian and Henry and that you want to be a part of their lives...

"When did I become so transparent?" he wonders aloud.

"Mm," she says thoughtfully. "Sometime around the time you fell in love with my daughter."

Killian almost chokes on his own shock.

"Hey, grandma?"

"Yes, Ian?" Snow asks, turning towards his voice.

"I can't find my other shoe."

"I'll come look," she says, and with one more, knowing glance in Killian's direction, she goes to help Ian.

---

Henry's silent throughout breakfast, and offers no suggestions for where he'd like to go after, so they go where Ian suggests: the park.

Killian's more fond of and familiar with the sea, but he has to admit the park is rather lovely. There's an open space of brilliantly green, neatly trimmed grass, paved paths for walking, benches for sitting, and an area with a giant, wood-and-metal contraption Killian might think is some sort of torture device if not for all the children climbing on it.

Henry sits on a bench beneath the shade of a tree. It's clear he wants to be alone, but Ian follows him with bouncing footsteps, causing whatever's inside the backpack he's wearing to rattle and clang like a box of rocks. Ian sits on the ground at Henry's feet, and plops the backpack on the bench. He opens it and begins removing the items from inside—first the giant model pirate ship, and then all the smaller figurines, including the lizard-creatures he says are called dinosaurs.
Killian sits on the bench on Ian’s other side. Henry side-eyes both of them but makes no comment. Instead he takes out his phone and busies himself with it.

Ian finishes emptying his bag and lines the giant lizards up so that they’re surrounding the ship, then he turns to Killian. “Wanna play?” he asks.

“Sure. What are we playing?”

“Dinosaur pirates.”

“Mnhm,” Killian says slowly. “And how exactly does one play dinosaur pirates?”

“Easy,” Ian answers. He spills a handful of miniscule, yellow-skinned people onto the deck of the ship. “This is us. We’re the regular pirates. The bad guys are the dinosaur pirates.” He selects the largest of the lizards and holds it out to Killian for his inspection. “I made this one Blackbeard. He’s the T-Rex because the T-Rex is always the bad dinosaur in the movies.”

“Well, I think Blackbeard the dinosaur is certainly better looking than Blackbeard the human,” Killian remarks, and Ian giggles.

“Hey, Henry, are you gonna play?” Ian asks, tapping Henry on the arm with the dinosaur toy.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to.”

“I’ll let you be mom,” Ian wheedles, and he holds up one of the small, yellow-skinned people, the one with a woman’s face drawn on.

Henry looks over. “Hey! Where’s the hair we made for her?”

Ian shrugs. “Mom said I couldn’t keep spaghetti taped to a Lego and she took it off.”

Henry sighs and shakes his head, but he tucks his phone away and takes the Lego. “I worked really hard on that hair,” he says, frowning exaggeratedly.

“It looked good,” Ian assures him.

"Thanks. Who're we gonna make Hook?"

"He's gonna be himself," Ian says, and picks up one of the people pieces, one that's missing a hand, and gives it to Killian. He holds it pinched between his thumb and forefinger, not entirely certain what he's supposed to do with it.

"Then who's gonna be the dinosaurs?" Henry asks.

"Me."

"You're gonna be you and all the dinosaurs?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's not fair. I wanna be the dinosaurs."
"Then who's gonna be mom?"

"Hook can be mom."

Ian looks over at him and wrinkles his nose. "He's probably gonna make them kiss though."

Killian makes no response, he merely stares neutrally, waiting for their decision.

"What if we make a no-kissing rule?" Henry suggests. "None of the characters can kiss any of the other characters."

"That seems fair," Killian says reasonably. "Otherwise I might be worried one of the dinosaurs would try to kiss me. They all look like they have very bad breath."

Ian grins. "Okay, you can be mom," he says, and passes the "Emma" figurine over to Killian.

Without warning, the game begins, and the bench is plunged into chaos.

The general plot is vague and keeps changing. Mostly, it seems to involve a lot of near-drowning, walking the plank, and being kidnapped by Blackbeard, only to be rescued at the last minute—usually by Emma. Once, Killian had to simultaneously play himself, hanging from a cliff, about to fall, and Emma, swooping in to save him (which was all rather difficult to accomplish given that he only had one hand).

Ian asks him questions as they play.

"Have you ever walked the plank?"

"No."

"Did you ever make anyone else walk the plank?"

Emma's voice is in Killian's head, telling him to be honest, so he says, "Yes."

"Were they bad guys?"

"Some of them, aye."

"Oh. How old are you?"

"Erm, very," Killian says vaguely. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Henry smirk.

"Older than my mom?" Ian asks.

"Yes."

"Are you 50?"

"No."

"60?"

"No."

Ian considers for a moment. "100?"

Killian chuckles. "No, lad. But close. I'm 191."
"What?" Ian says, his voice so high-pitched it's nearly a shriek. "How are you even alive?"

"I think a better question is how am I 191-years-old and still this devilishly handsome?" he says, with a waggle of his eyebrows.

He does it just to make the boy laugh, just to see the gap-toothed grin and the way his tongue presses into the breach, just to see his nose crinkle when he smiles.

"Oh, by the way," Ian says. "You're gonna get kidnapped by Blackbeard now."

"Ah, right. Here we are," Killian says, and hands over his piece so Ian can stick it in one of the dinosaurs mouths.

"Who do you want to rescue you?"

"Why don't you rescue me this time?"

"Not my mom?" Ian asks.

"Your mother has saved me more than enough times already. She deserves a break. You and Henry, on the other hand, are slacking. You need to pull your weight."

It takes another fifteen minutes for the game to finish—the climax is the smashing of the various toys together in some sort of final battle. In the end, Blackbeard and his dinosaur henchmen lie upon the ground around the bench, while he, the boys, and Emma stand victorious atop the pirate ship.

Ian breathes a deep, satisfied sigh, and asks, "Can I go play at the park now?"

"Aye, go ahead."

Ian dashes away and flings himself onto the play apparatus. Killian watches him shimmy along one section that definitely does not look climbable, and he can't decide whether he wants to look away out of fear or keep watching in case he needs to run over and stop the boy from plunging to his death.

"Can I ask you something?" Henry asks.

"Aye, lad," Killian says, reluctantly tearing his eyes away from Ian, who's now dangling upside down by his knees from a set of parallel bars.

"Can you teach me how to fight?"

That gets Killian's attention. He straightens and turns to face Henry. "Pardon?"

"Can you teach me how to fight?" Henry repeats. "You know, with a sword."

"Why do you want to learn how to fight?"

"Well, you can fight. Grandpa can fight. Mom can fight—not with a sword but she can fight. Grandma's really good with a bow...maybe if I could fight too, then mom would trust me and I could help search the woods and stuff."

"It's not that she doesn't trust you lad, it's just-"

"It's just what?"
"It's just that she's your mother," Killian says. "You and Ian are the most important thing in her life, and she's always going to do everything she can to ensure you two are safe."

Henry rolls his eyes, and suddenly Killian thinks he knows how Liam must have felt whenever he tries to explain something to Killian in reasonable terms and Killian, both hot-headed and hard-headed, was having none of it.

He keeps his voice steady as he says, "Last time you were here your mother nearly lost you. And now you're back, and right away there's another threat. Can you blame her for wanting to keep you and your brother out of it?"

"But I'm 17 now!" Henry bursts out, fists pounding his thighs for emphasis. "I'm not a little kid anymore. I don't want to be kept safe; I want to be out there helping!"

"I understand," Killian says evenly, but Henry throws him a look that says You clearly don't.

Killian debates with himself for a moment. He tries to think back, to how Liam would have dealt with the situation, if Liam were him and Henry was a 17-year-old Killian.

How had Liam always dealt with Killian, at any age?

Brutal honesty.

That, and usually a good, rough shake, but Killian thinks he'll skip that part.

"Henry, you want all the respect of an adult, but that's not something that's handed to you the moment you turn 17—or 18, or any age, for that matter," he says. "Nor will it happen just because you have a sword in your hand."

Henry's staring at him hard. His jaw is clenched tight, and his eyes are bright with stubbornly held-onto anger, but he's listening.

"If you want a place alongside your mother and your grandparents then you have to earn it, do you understand? And you won't earn it by demanding to be there; you'll earn it by showing you're capable of being there."

"Then teach me how to use a sword." Henry says through clenched teeth.

"If you truly want me to, I will. As long as your mother says it's alright—"

"I don't have to ask my mom."

Killian doesn't necessarily think that's true, but he also doesn't think it's a point worth arguing over at the moment, so he says, "Maybe you don't have to, but you should."

He can tell it's not the answer Henry wanted.

"I'm going for a walk," he says, and pushes himself up off the bench.

Killian sighs inwardly, watching Henry's back as he walks away with his shoulders hunched and his fists clenched. Now he definitely understands how Liam must have felt.

Ian runs over, pink-cheeked and breathless. "Where's Henry going?"

"He's just going for a walk."
"Oh."

"How about you? Are you finished playing at the park?"

"No, just taking a break," Ian says, and collapses onto the bench beside him. Despite the heat—the
day's warm and growing warmer by the second—he pushes against Killian's side. Killian lifts his
arm and rests it along the back of the bench so Ian can tuck himself beneath.

"Aren't you hot with your coat on?" Ian asks.

"I don't mind it," Killian says, shrugging.

Ian tilts his head back and stares up at Killian. Killian stares back. The boy's eyelashes aren't blonde,
they're long and dark, like his own. They make the blue of his eyes seem even brighter.

"How'd you get that scar?" Ian asks, pointing to Killian's cheek.

Killian grins lopsidedly. "Actually, I got it from trying to shave when I was just a little lad—younger
than you even."

"Really?"

"Aye, really," he says, mimicking the boy's tone. "I saw my father doing it and I wanted to try, but
the razor was too sharp—that, and I had no clue what I was doing."

"I have a scar from shaving too. Wanna see?"

Killian chuckles. "Of course. Show me."

Ian pushes his sweaty bangs back of his forehead, and on his temple, just over one pale brow, Killian
sees a thin, horizontal scar.

"What's it doing all the way up there?" he asks.

Ian starts giggling. "I thought you were supposed to shave your whole face. So I did."

Killian laughs too. "Ian, lad, one day, when you're older, I'll teach you how to shave properly."

"Promise?"

"Aye, I promise."

"Good. Because I want to be really good at it. Not like Henry. He cuts himself on accident all the
time."

"Perhaps I could teach Henry then as well."

"You should," Ian says solemnly. He leans over the side of the bench to pull the story book from
underneath, where Killian left it, and settles back against Killian's side with his legs stretched out in
front of him and the book open in his lap.

"Would you like me to read to you?" Killian asks.

"Will you?" Ian asks eagerly.

"Aye. What sort of story would you like to hear?"
Ian shrugs. "Anything."

Killian thinks of Snow's suggestion, but he can't bring himself to do it, not when he has the nagging feeling that Emma would be disappointed.

"Well, what's you favorite one so far?" he asks.

"Mmm, can you read the one about mom and the dragon? I like that one."

Killian smiles. "I don't think I've heard that story, but it sounds lovely. Will you find the page for me?"

---

Killian's read the story twice—by request—by the time Henry returns. Killian's pleased to see he no longer looks angry—closed off, perhaps, but not angry.

*It's a start,* Killian thinks.

"Were you texting Violet?" Ian asks.

"No, shut up."

"Were you looking at her Instagram?"

"I said shut up."

"Who's Violet?" Killian asks with interest.

"Nobody."

"She's-" Ian starts.

"She's nobody," Henry growls at Ian, then, to Killian, "Can we please go get lunch? I'm starving."

---

They order lunch from a cafe by the docks, and then carry their meals in their little brown bags to one of the piers. They sit at a picnic table all the way at the end, just next to the railing, so they have an open view of the harbor. It's peaceful—just the cobalt sea and the cerulean sky, a cooling breeze off the water, and the boys discussing that one time they were at the beach and a seagull stole their lunches.

"It ate an entire bag of Doritos," Henry says.

"And then it pooped all over my gym shoes," Ian says.

"And our towels," Henry adds.

"And mom's sunglasses."

"Yea," Henry says. "That was sort of a bad day at the beach."

"It was good until the seagull."

"True. I think I taught you how to swim that day."
"No," Ian says. "Mom did. You were on the phone with Violet the whole time."

"Oh, right."

"Remind me who Violet is again?" Killian says.

"Eugh, she's no one. Please stop asking me," Henry says.

They're disposing of their trash when Henry receives a phone call from Emma, and he informs her that everything's fine, they're all still alive. Henry says goodbye and puts his phone back into his jeans pocket, then turns to Killian.

"My mom said we should meet them at Granny's around 7."

"Have they found anything?"

"She said no. She also asked me to ask you if you put sunscreen on Ian."

Killian stares blankly.

"It's the stuff that keeps him from getting sunburned," Henry explains.

Killian looks at Ian, and Ian looks back. There's a strip of radiantly pink skin across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose. "Erm, no, I didn't," he says.

Henry grins at Ian. "You're gonna get the goo tonight."

Ian wrinkles his face in disgust. "I hate that stuff."

"What's the goo?" Killian asks.

"It's this green jelly mom puts on him when he gets sunburned. To help him heal."

"It's sticky and it makes your clothes stick to you and it smells funny," Ian says, squirming in place.

Killian feels like squirming too. He's not proving particularly adept at caring for his own son—at this point, he can only minimize further damage and hope Emma has mercy on him.

"Perhaps we should spend the rest of the day in the shade," he suggests, only slightly desperately. "Or inside."

"I don't wanna go inside," Ian says.

"We can take a walk through some of the neighborhoods," Henry says. "They're pretty shady. And the houses are pretty cool."

"What do you say, lad?" Killian asks Ian.

Ian shrugs. "Okay."

"Alright, Henry. Lead the way."

They're five minutes into their walk when Ian's tugging on his hand urgently. "Can you carry me?" he asks. He turns his big, pleading eyes on Killian, and there's no way for Killian to resist, so he hoists Ian onto his back as he saw Henry doing earlier.

The boy's not much of a burden other than the added body heat and the way his chin bumps Killian's
shoulder as he walks. After a while, Killian realizes that Ian's been silent for far too long.

"He's asleep," Henry says.

"How can he sleep like that?" Killian asks.

"Ian can sleep anywhere, trust me. He once fell asleep in the pool when he was two."

Killian's horrified, but Henry's quick to reassure him that Ian was in no real danger, as the pool was a "kiddie pool" and Ian fell asleep sitting up and with Emma right beside him.

"We have pictures of it," Henry says. "Mom will have to show you."

"Aye," Killian says. "I'd very much like to see them."

*Pictures.*

What a marvel.

It's not precisely the same as going back in time and actually being there, but perhaps he'll be able to reclaim a little of what he lost.

They walk in silence for a time, each lost in his own thoughts. Killian tries to imagine what other sorts of pictures Emma might have—from the day they spent at the beach when she taught Ian to swim and then the seagulls stole their lunches, for instance? Or of Ian as a baby? Or just...*anything*, really. Anything, and everything. He wants to see as much as possible.

"Hey, about earlier," Henry says, pulling Killian from his thoughts.

"Yes, lad?" Killian says. He's not certain for how long they've been waking—for how long he's been daydreaming—but Ian's still asleep.

"I'm sorry," Henry says. "I was kind of a jerk and I shouldn't have been."

"Thank you for the apology, Henry," he says. "No hard feelings. As I said, I understand."

Henry nods, and falls into silence again. Killian can feel him wanting to ask something else, so he waits and focuses on the houses they're passing to keep his thoughts from wandering back to his daydreams—all he manages to do, however, is to wonder what their home in Boston looks like, and if Emma would like these houses, with the massive front porches and the sprawling yards.

"So, will you really teach me how to use a sword?" Henry asks finally.

Killian takes a deep breath. "As long as your mother—"

"I know, I know, as long as my mom says it's okay. But will you?"

"Aye, Henry. I will. But I also need you to understand that having a few lessons won't make you a proficient swordsman. You won't be ready to actually use a sword in any sort of real-life scenario for quite some time."

"Yea, I know, I just...I don't like sitting around doing nothing. And I don't like—I don't know, I don't like being vulnerable. I wanna be able to defend myself."

By the time they start heading back towards Main Street to meet Emma, Ian's awake again. He walks with one hand holding onto Killian's hook as if he might fall over otherwise, and the other rubbing his eyes.

They reach Granny's to find the patio packed with a horde of sweaty, dirt-caked Merry Men and dwarves. Emma's inside, streaked with dirt and sweat like the others, but gorgeous in spite of it. Her hair's pulled up into a ponytail, exposing her long, graceful neck, and she's wearing a short-sleeved shirt rolled up past her shoulders, so that Killian has a glimpse of the freckles there.

"Hey," she says when she sees them. She looks exhausted, and thankful to see them.

Ian goes to her and hugs her, closing his eyes like he's going to fall asleep again.

"Hi, babe," Emma says, curling around him, kissing the top of his head and smoothing his hair back off his forehead. "How was your day?"

Ian nods into her shirt.

"Did you have fun?"

He nods again.

"You're all sunburned," she says, and looks up at Killian.

"My apologies, love," he says, scratching behind his ear. "It's my fault. I didn't know."

"It's alright. He'll survive. Big day, huh?"

"We spent most of it wandering around Storybrooke, so I imagine he's rather tired. He did take a nap though."

She smiles at him. "Did you guys go to the park?"

"Aye."

"That always gets him," she says, then looks back down at Ian. "Alright, kid. Why don't you go wash your hands and then we'll order?"

"Okay," Ian mumbles.

"Remember where the bathroom is?"

"Yea," Ian says, and peels himself off of Emma and starts trudging towards the back with shuffling footsteps.

Emma watches him until he's out of sight, and then she slips her hands into her back pockets and takes a step closer and lowers her voice.

"How was it?" she asks.

"I think it's safe to say neither of them were bored," he says.

"Good. I'm glad. Did you talk to Henry?"
"Aye. I think I managed to convince him not to go chasing after the thing in the woods on his own," he says. "He did ask me if I would teach him to use a sword, however."

"I'm not surprised," she says, lifting her hands from her pockets to cross them over her chest. "What did you say?"

"I told him he had to ask you first, Swan."

She nods. "Thank you. And yea, it's okay—I mean, as long as he knows one lesson doesn't mean he can go fight a dragon or something."

"I think he understands," Killian says. "And what about you? How did the search fare?"

"We didn't find anything," she says, and her tone tells Killian that she was expecting just that. "We're going back in tomorrow, though. The Merry Men aren't going to stop until they find their friend."

"They're loyal," Killian says. "Not surprising given that they seem very close to your parents."

"Yea. I actually kind of like them—even though they don't seem to like me very much right now."

"Why don't they like you?" Killian asks quickly. He just passed through their lot, should he have thrown a few glares around, made it clear anyone who wanted to bully Emma would have to deal with him, as well?

"Robin's okay. The rest just think I'm holding them back or something," she says, and the amusement in her voice cools his rising anger, bringing it back to a normal temperature.

"Would you like for me to take the boys again tomorrow?"

"No."

He feels a stab of disappointment.

"I have a plan for tomorrow," she says. "And I want you there with me."

She wants him there.

She wants him there with her.

Her words really shouldn't make his heart start hammering his ribs, but they do.

Henry enters the diner then. "Hey, mom," he says. "Can you hold this for me? I have to use the bathroom."

"Sure," Emma says, taking the story book from him. "Will you make sure your brother's washing his hands? And that he didn't fall asleep on the toilet or something?"

Killian quirks an eyebrow at her curiously.

"It's happened," she says. "Potty training was rough."

He wants to ask her about the pictures then, about whether she has any on her immediate person that he can see, or if they can drive to Boston right after dinner and retrieve them from her home, but his eyes fall to the book.

"Emma, there's something we need to talk about."
His tone has her on red alert. He sees her tense, sees her armor go on. He takes her by the elbow and gently leads her to the side, away from the group milling around Granny's counter and towards the empty table in the front window.

Across the room, David sees and narrows his eyes suspiciously, but Killian ignores him.

Emma's watching him with her eyebrows raised, and Killian has to look down, at the book in her hands, before he's able to speak.

"Your mother suggested I read the story of how you and I met to Ian," he says carefully.

"Oh," she says, and he hears disappointment in her voice.

He looks up, catching her eye. "I didn't do it."

He can see relief washing over her, see her expression clear and her shoulders relax.

"I was worried Ian might have questions I don't have the answer to."

"Thank you," she says.

His heart's beating too quickly again. "You're welcome, Emma, but perhaps it's time we talk about...about what you and I-"

"About us," she says.

"Aye, love. About us."

She looks away, biting her lower lip, thinking. "Let me talk to Ian first, okay? I want to make sure he understands, and that...and that he's alright with whatever might happen."

"And after we can talk about us," she says, and smiles, and her smile is a promise—a hopeful promise.

He feels warm all over, and not even David's glare can burst the swell of happiness inside him.

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They eat dinner on the patio with the Merry Men, the dwarves, and Emma's parents. The patio is in shade, a welcome relief from the heat of the day. Emma's at a table with David, Snow, and Henry, and Killian finds himself at the table next to theirs with Ian, Robin, and Robin's son, Roland.

Ian's ecstatic that there's another boy in town near his age, and doesn't hesitate to introduce himself.

"Hi! I'm Ian."

"I'm Roland," the other boy answers. He has black, curly hair, and big, dark eyes, and Killian can already tell he's a more reserved, more sensitive soul than Ian.

"How old are you?" Ian asks.

"9."

"I'm 5. Wanna be friends?"

Roland grins. "Okay."
Killian turns to Robin, who's smiling indulgently at the boys with a twinkle in his eyes, and asks quietly, "Do you think that tactic would work on David?"

"You could try," Robin says, cocking his head and grinning.

"Cheers, mate," Killian says, and raises his beer—Granny doesn't serve rum, unfortunately.

"Cheers," Robin agrees, and clinks his glass against Killian's.

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They stay until well after dark, when the patio's lit only by the candles on the tables and the strings of miniature light bulbs crisscrossing over their heads. Ian falls asleep again, and Killian removes his long coat and folds it for him to use as a pillow. When Emma rises to leave, David and Snow do too.

Killian's hoping for another moment alone with Emma, preferably outside his room—or inside it, for that matter—but she's bending over to pick up Ian, and it's too late.

He helps her ease the boy out of the chair and into her arms, and then drapes his coat over him.

"Are you sure?" Emma asks, even as she tugs the jacket more securely around Ian's shoulders.

"The night's grown chilly, Swan."

She smiles. "Alright. See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow. Goodnight, Emma."

"Goodnight."

He watches her, Henry, and her parents until they're out of sight, swallowed by the dark street.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Last calm-ish chapter before (SPOILER ALERT) we plunge into some ACTION!!! So, tomorrow I start a 6-week long period of summer job-vacation-summer job. I'm going to write as much as I can, but I'm thinking I may only be able to do two more chapter within that time, so I apologize in advance for the slow update period ahead :)

Boston, 6 months ago

It's after dinner, and the evening's winding down. Emma finishes the dishes, packs the boys' lunches for the next day and stores them in the fridge, then sits at the kitchen table to look over Ian's homework.

Henry's there, glowering at the copy of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*—Emma told him he shouldn't have to like a book Violet likes in order for her to like him, but he insists on torturing himself, and won't listen to a word Emma has to say about it, so she's resigned to wait it out (and pick up the pieces afterwards, if need be).

She shuffles through Ian's school folder, pulling out notices and graded homework and putting them aside. She finds the family portrait he drew, and holds it up.

*Fuck* it's adorable. She loves his drawings, especially the way he always draws her with bright yellow hair down to the floor.

"Oh, about that picture," Henry says, glancing up briefly from his book. "Ian was asking me some questions."

"What questions?" Emma asks, smiling as she tucks the drawing back into Ian's folder, and puts the folder safely in his backpack.

"Questions about his dad."

Emma feels her smile evaporate.

"Oh," she says, but what she really means is *oh, fuck.*

She supposes the only thing that should really surprise her is that Ian hasn't asked questions sooner.

"What did you say?" she asks.

"I didn't say anything because I don't know anything. I just thought you should know he asked."

Emma compulsively drags the fingers of both hands into her hair and tugs it back tight. "Thanks," she says. "I'll talk to him about it."

Henry just hums in response, already engrossed—or attempting to be engrossed—in his book again.

She follows the sounds of splashing water into the bathroom. Ian's in the tub, simulating some sort of
naval battle with his Ninja Turtles and his bath toys.

"Alright, kid," she says. "Time for some soap."

"I already did," Ian says, without looking at her.

"Uh-huh. Then how come I don't see any bubbles in that tub?"

"Um," Ian says.

"Exactly. Soap. Now. The Battle of Thermopylae or whatever can wait."

"Thermopylae was a land battle," says Henry's voice from the other room.

"This is the Battle of Salami," Ian says.

"Not salami," Henry says, and Emma can hear the eye-roll in his voice. "Salamis."

"Well, put the Battle of Salamis on hold for a minute, and get cooking on the Battle of Ian-Washes-His-Hair."

Her lame mom joke earns her a skeptical frown, but he pops open the bottle of shampoo and squirts out a handful. Emma sits on the little step stool next to the tub and starts working body wash into a loofah while Ian scrubs the shampoo into his hair. When he's finished, she hands him the sudsy loofah, and says, "Everywhere."

"Mom."

"I'm serious. Armpits. Butt. Toes."

He gives her a withering glare.

"You do it, or I do it."

That's about all the incentive he needs. He's probably old enough to start learning to use the shower, but for now he seems content to stick to baths, which means every night they go through the same ritual of Emma coaxing him into using the right amount of soap in all the right places—which is fine. Emma's in no hurry for him to grow up, and the fact that he still sort of needs her there for bath time is enough.

When he's out of the tub and dry, she tells him, "Go put on your pajamas and pick out a book. I'll be right there."

He scampers out of the bathroom, and Emma sets to work draining the tub, removing his bath toys, and laying them out to dry. She throws his dirty clothes in the hamper, hangs the towel over the shower railing to dry, and goes to his room.

He's sitting in bed, wearing Spider-Man pajamas and holding Henry's copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* with a hopeful grin on his face.

"Try again," she says dryly.

He heaves a dramatic sigh, but puts *Harry Potter* aside and dives into the stack of library books on the floor next to his bed. He pulls out *Berenstain Bears and the Spooky Old Tree*, and Emma squeezes in next to him with her back against the headboard. She takes the book into her lap, and Ian snuggles against her side with his knees drawn up.
She's about to open the book, but she hesitates. She wants to talk to Ian now about what happened earlier, before any doubts or anxieties he has have a chance to settle.

"Hey...before I start reading, is there anything you want to talk about?"

He looks up at her with one eyebrow raised.

"Henry told me what you asked him earlier," she says. "When you were drawing your family portrait."

"Oh," he says, and looks back down.

"Do you want to ask me about your dad?" she asks gently.

She sees his chin wobbling, and puts her arm around his shoulders.

"Hey, it's okay," she says, rubbing her hand soothingly up and down his arm. "If you don't want to talk about it right now, we don't have to."

Ian lowers his face until it's pressed into her shirt, and asks quietly, "Who's my dad?"

Emma dredges up her one hazy memory of that night. It's like reaching into murky waters and feeling around with your hands for the edges of something soft and slippery, something to grab onto and drag to the surface.

She doesn't remember his face, really, just a flash of his blue eyes—blue like Ian's, the color of a crystal clear summer sky over the ocean—beneath jet black brows and hair, some stubble, soft lips, the feel of his hand on the skin of her back. He had a gentle, sad smile, but a wicked smirk.

One day, she'll be able to tell Ian that he looks like his father, but now she can't; now she can only tell him the simple, plain facts of what happened.

"I don't know his name," she says. "I only met him once."

Emma lied to Henry when he first asked who his dad was, told him his dad was dead, that he was a fireman who died a hero—but that blew up in her face after a simple Google search when he was eleven. He was devastated—and angry beyond belief. It took him a long time to understand, to realize that she only tried to spare his feelings.

She doesn't want to lie to Ian the same way she lied to Henry. She doesn't want him to go through the same earth-shattering disappointment that Henry did. Better to tell him the truth now, as kindly as she can, and help him bear it.

"Did he leave you like Henry's dad did?"

"No. It wasn't like that. He wasn't a bad guy."

"Then why is he gone?"

"He just is."

"Where is he now?" Ian asks.

"I don't know," she says.

Ian pulls his head up.
"Does he know about me?"

She brushes a wet, dark gold curl of hair off his forehead. She knows this next word—this one word—is going to hurt the most, out of everything.

"No," she says, struggling to keep her voice from trembling.

Ian buries his head in her shoulder again and is silent.

Emma doesn't think about Ian's dad often, doesn't wonder where he is or what he's doing, she doesn't think about what might have happened if she tried to find him, and she really tries not to wonder if he ever thinks about her, but right now she's wishing she could go back in time and find him.

She's threading her fingers through his hair, gently working through the tangles, when he finally lifts his head up again.

"It's okay," he says, eyes glittering fiercely.

"It's okay?"

He presses his lips together and nods. "Yea. I don't have a dad but I have you and Henry," he says.

She gathers him closer and squeezes him tightly. "I love you," she says. Tears sting her eyes but she holds them in. "I love you more than anything in the world, and I'm always going to love you."

"I love you, too, mom."

She holds him, breathing in his bubble-bath smell. She knows this won't be the last time he'll have questions, or the first time the answers to those question will upset him, but for now they're okay. They weathered the first storm, and made it out alive together.

"Now can we read Harry Potter?" Ian asks.

She laughs. "Nice try, kid. Not until you're ten."

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**Storybrooke, now**

Letting Ian fall asleep at Granny's had been a mistake. It's 10 o'clock, an hour past what's usually his bedtime, and he's upstairs using the furniture to enact some sort of full-scale pirate battle, as energetic as if he just ate an entire package of sour gummy worms and washed it down with a pot of coffee.

"Looks like they had fun with Hook today, huh?" Snow asks.

"Looks like it," Emma says, ignoring another loud bang from the top of the loft that she really—really—does not want an explanation for.

Ian hasn't taken off Hook's jacket since he woke up—about five minutes after they got back to the loft—and Henry's so excited about his imminent sword-fighting lessons that he convinced David to show him some of the footwork. He's currently in the living room with David, doing what looks to Emma like some sort of crab shuffle.

Emma smiles at the scene for a moment before turning back to the shopping bag she's unpacking. "I'm just surprised dad's not mad that Henry asked Hook to teach him how to use a sword and not him," she says, pulling a pair of jeans out from amongst a stack of t-shirts.
"I managed to convince him not to be," Snow says primly.

"Can you convince him not to be mad at Hook?" Emma mutters. She unfolds the pants and holds them up. They're dark wash and they look like a slim fit, which is perfect because that's exactly what Henry's into these days.

"Your dad's not mad. He's just-

"Overprotective?"

"Basically. Give him time. I told Hook the same thing. He'll come around eventually, when he sees what you see."

"Do you see what I see?" Emma asks curiously. She doesn't remember her mom being particularly fond of Hook in Neverland. Or after.

"I didn't at first," Snow admits. "But I'm starting to. It's clear that he genuinely cares about Henry and Ian. And you."

With that last one, she throws Emma a meaningful look, but Emma concentrates on the t-shirts she's sorting—a pile of big ones for Henry, a pile of small ones for Ian; stripes, solids, logos...and then she realizes something.

"Wait, if you weren't sure about Hook, then why were you so nice to him at the beginning?"

"Because you're my daughter, Emma," Snow says, as if it should be obvious. "I trust you, and I know you wouldn't have been with Hook if you didn't trust him." She stops, and her brow crinkles. "Plus, I want you to be happy, and if being with Hook will make you happy, then that's what I want for you. You two have a child together, and that's something really special. It will bring you two closer, if you let it."

She shakes her head, as if she had been talking to herself, or speaking aloud without meaning to, then brightens suddenly, and holds up the pair of pajamas in her hands for Emma to inspect. They're dark blue and patterned with constellations that Emma thinks look like they'll glow in the dark.

"What do you think of these ones?" Snow asks.

"Um," Emma says, still reeling a bit from everything her mom just said. "They're nice. I think Ian's going to like them."

Snow smiles and folds the pajamas, adding them to a pile of others.

Emma waits for her to say something else, to continue the train of thought she began earlier, but it seems that bit of the conversation is over. Emma mentally puts her mom down for Team You-Guys-Should-Get-Together alongside Granny—but opposite David on Team Don't-Touch-My-Daughter—then closes the score book in her mind and tucks it away.

"Thanks for getting all this," Emma says. "I don't know when we'll be able to get our stuff from Boston."

She doesn't think if we'll get our stuff, or if we're staying, but it's a close thing. She's not going to open that door yet; that's a problem for much later, when things get settled here.

"No problem, really," Snow says. "I figured they shouldn't have to walk around Storybrooke wearing the same outfit every day."
"Does that have anything to do with them technically being royalty and needing to keep up appearances?" she asks slyly.

"No," Snow says. "It has to do with the fact that I'm their grandmother, and I need to make up for almost 7 years worth of Christmases and birthdays. And I know what you're thinking, kids usually think clothes are a lame gift, but it's just a start."

"You don't have to spoil them just because you missed a few birthdays."

"I know I don't have to," Snow says lightly. "But I'm going to."

Emma hears a loud thump from upstairs as Ian hops off what Emma can only assume is the dresser, and then he's running down the stairs. He's wearing Hook's long jacket, and it trails behind him like the train on a bridal gown. Emma freezes, waiting for disaster, waiting for Ian to trip over the jacket and tumble down the stairs to land in a broken-boned heap at the bottom, but he makes it down safely and trots across the loft, his bare feet slapping the wood floors.

"Hey, look what I found!" he says, and holds up a small leather pouch and a knife.

"Where did you get those?" Emma asks.

"Inside my dad's coat."

"Okay. How about you give me that knife?"

Ian hands over the knife. "What about this?" he asks, and shakes the pouch, making whatever's inside clink. "It's full of gold!"

"Put the gold back where you found it. You didn't take any, did you?"

"No."

"Good, because Hook's a pirate, and he'll know if you stole his treasure."

Ian giggles and tucks the pouch into some inside pocket. Emma imagines there's way more where that came from, likely just somewhere Ian wasn't able to find. Before he can run off again, Emma stops him.

"Bath time, kid. Take that coat off and go get in the tub."

"Do I have to?" he whines.

"Yep—no, don't even try the cute face with me. It's not gonna work tonight. It's way past your bed time."

His puppy dog eyes are gone in an instant. "Will you read me a story after?"

"Sure," Emma says. "If you're quick."

He sheds the jacket and sprints into the bathroom.

David stops what he's doing with Henry and turns to Emma. "Will he be okay in there on his own?"

"Yea. He just wanted you in there before to talk to," she says, but she sees her dad's crestfallen expression, and adds, "But if you want to be the soap police tonight, be my guest. He'll be happy for the company."
"Go ahead, grandpa," Henry says. "I'm pretty tired, anyway."

David claps Henry on the shoulder, and goes to join Ian in the bathroom.

"So, did Hook say when he's going to start teaching you?" Snow asks Henry.

Henry shrugs, and wanders over to the kitchen table. "I don't know. Whenever he has time, I guess. Maybe tomorrow?"

He looks at Emma then.

"I need him in the woods tomorrow during the day," Emma says. "But maybe after?"

"Okay," Henry says.

He fiddles absently with the sleeve of one of the shirts she folded, and Emma knows what's coming.

Henry's moods are predictable. He gets angry but he doesn't usually lash out; he'll be grumpy and sullen and withdrawn, sometimes for minutes, sometimes for hours—the time varies, but one thing remains constant: in the end, his rational brain wins out, and he and Emma can have a sensible conversation about what's bothering him.

"I'm sorry I was a jerk this morning," he says.

"I understand you don't want to be left out," she says. "I get it, Henry. I do. But right now I need to figure out what's in the woods, and I need to figure out who cast the Curse. So that means I need you to watch your brother and make sure you both stay safe. I know being Ian's babysitter isn't fun."

"No, it's fine. I'm his big brother, I know it's sort of my responsibility to help take care of him."

Emma smiles.

*There's my Henry.*

"I just don't want to be the little kid who needs to be protected anymore."

Emma puts down the package of socks she's trying to rip open and takes the two steps needed to be at Henry's side.

"You're not," she says, touching his arm. "I know you're not. But you're not ready to go chasing after mystery monsters in the woods, either. And that's not just me as your mother who would literally die to protect you talking. That's me as the Sheriff. Having someone out there with us who doesn't know how to protect himself puts us all at risk."

She squeezes his arm.

"You can do sword-fighting lessons or whatever with Hook—and with grandpa if you want—but that doesn't mean we think you're gonna be ready to go on patrol with us anytime soon, alright?"

"Alright," Henry says, nodding. "But I will one day, right?"

"One day. Let's talk about it after you finish college," she says.

He makes a face. "Am I still going to go to college now?"

"Uh, yea, you're still going to college," she says, in her don't-even-argue-with-me mom voice.
"College is non-negotiable."

"You know, Henry," Snow says. "If you're looking for something useful to do, Belle could use some help in the library. I know you like books. And maybe doing research isn't as cool as sword-fighting, but it's actually really helpful."

"We also need someone to update the computers at the station," Emma says. "They're basically dinosaurs."

"I could also use a secretary at the Mayor's Office-"

Emma's shaking her head vigorously, and Snow trails off.

"Um, maybe just the library and the computers for now," Emma says. "What do you think?"

"That depends," Henry says. "Is it like a job? Am I going to get paid?"

"Your college fund is going to get paid. Does that count?"

Henry rolls his eyes. "I guess. Can we at least update the vending machine at the station too?"

Emma snorts. "Not likely. I think we're just stuck with stale pretzels and Charleston Chews forever, kid."

"Hey, Henry, do you know what else would be really useful?" Snow asks, and Emma recognizes her tone—it's the same voice she uses when she's about to ask one of the boys to do a chore.

"What?" Henry asks cautiously, with that cornered-animal look on his face.

Snow lifts an enormous pile of folded shirts, shorts, and jeans from the table, and carries it towards him. "You could throw these in the washing machine for me," she says, smiling sweetly.

"Anything for you, grandma," Henry sighs.

Snow transfers the clothes into Henry's arms, but keeps one hand on top, preventing Henry from moving. "If you get tired of learning how to use a sword, I could also teach you how to shoot a bow. I'm sure Robin would help, too."

Henry's face lights up and stars gather in his eyes. "Robin Hood? Really?"

"Mmhm," Snow says.

Henry walks away grinning. Snow turns to Emma, and whispers, "Don't tell your father his grandson thinks Robin Hood is cooler than he is."

"Only if you don't tell Hook, either," Emma mutters.

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By some divine coincidence, the story Ian picks out is the story of how Emma and Hook met. They settle side by side on the double bed, warm and cozy against a pile of pillows. Emma draws her legs up, props the story book on her knees, but pauses just as she's about to open it.

There's a lot in the book that Ian's too young to know about yet, and if she's going to tell this story, there's going to be a lot of skipping-over of certain parts.
"Ok, here's the deal," she says.

Ian looks at her eagerly.

"There're a lot of things that happen in this book that you're not ready for-"

"Like Harry Potter?"

"Yes. Like Harry Potter. I'm going to have to skip over some things, so when I say 'blindfold', I want you to over your eyes, okay?"

Ian nods.

"And no peeking. Got it?"

"Got it," Ian says.

Emma opens the book, and flips through the pages until she finds the picture of her pulling Hook from a pile of dead bodies, back in the Enchanted Forest.

"Aright," she says. "This is the story of how I met your dad-"

"Of how you fell in love," Ian corrects, and Emma almost chokes.

She wants to say, The story of everything that led up to your dad and I having sex and making you, but she doesn't.

She hesitates too long, and Ian pounces.

"Do you love him?"

He's definitely been watching Law & Order behind her back, because he's got Lenny Briscoe's interrogation face down perfectly, squinty eyes and half-raised eyebrow included.

"I like him," Emma says. "I like him a lot. But I don't know if I love him yet."

One of his eyes narrows a little bit more, and Emma can almost feel herself begin to sweat.

Well, this conversation is happening. God, how do you explain this to an almost-6-year-old?

"Love takes time," she says carefully. "It's not like in the movies. It doesn't happen right away. Not for everyone, at least. Sometimes you need to really get to know a person before you can love them."

"But he loves you."

"I—how do you even know that?"

"He looks at you like Flynn Rider looks at Rapunzel—like you're the sun and the moon and the stars all at once. Or like you're pancakes with ice cream on top."

Emma's pretty sure Hook doesn't look at pancakes with ice cream on top the same way Ian does, but she's not going to argue with him. She also can't deny that he's right—or deny that she already knew Hook loves her.

She sets the book aside and sits up, turning her body to face Ian. "Ian. I really like your dad, and I want him to be part of our family."
"I want him to be my dad," Ian says, and all of a sudden there's a desperate note in his voice that wasn't there before. This is going to spiral out of control fast if she doesn't get a handle on it.

Emma reaches out and cups his face with both hands. "He is your dad, Ian," she says. "He's always going to be your dad, no matter what. Just like I'm always going to be your mom, and Henry's always going to be your brother."

"But I want him to live with us."

"He might not. Sometimes moms and dads aren't together and don't live with each other, and that's okay."

"But you said he's here now. You weren't together before because you lost your memories but now they're back and now he's back!"

"Ian..."

"He's not a bad guy like Henry's dad!" Ian says, and tears burst from his eyes to start streaming down his cheeks. "He's a good guy!"

"I know he is-"

"Then why don't you love him?"

His face is red, he's breathing too quickly, and then his shoulders start shaking. Emma drags him by the armpits into her lap. His arms and legs go around her and he sobs into her hair.

"Shhhh, it's okay," she whispers, rocking him from side to side. "It's alright."

"I don't want him to leave," he cries.

"He's not going to."

Ian just sobs harder, and all Emma can do is hold him, wait for the tears to pass and for him to calm down. She never should have tried to talk to him about Hook. He had too long a day, there have been too many changes in too short a time...Emma should have just put him to bed.

After a few minutes, Henry appears.

"Mom, what's wrong?"

"Come here," she says.

"Is he okay?" Henry asks, coming forward slowly, eyeing Ian like he's afraid of him. She gets it. Ian doesn't cry like this. Usually, if he cries his tears are mild and brief, like a sun shower.

"He's fine," Emma says, then takes a deep breath. "Can you do something for me?"

Henry nods.

"I want you to take the car, go get Hook, and bring him back here."

---

Emma hears Hook arrive. There's a quiet exchange of voices at the front door, and then she hears his light footsteps on the stairs, slow and steady.
"Emma?" he asks when he reaches the top.

She doesn't answer. She's still sitting on the edge of the bed with Ian in her arms. He's stopped sobbing, but he's trembling and he lets out a little hiccups whimper every now and then. Hook walks over and sits delicately on the bed beside her. He's wearing just a black linen shirt and a black velvet vest, and he looks strangely undressed and vulnerable without his heavy coat.

"Ian," Hook says. "What's wrong, lad?"

Ian pulls away from her and turns towards Hook. Hook catches sight of his puffy, tear-smeared cheeks, and his eyes go wide in horror. With a shudder, Ian starts sobbing again. He leans towards Hook and opens his arms, and Hook takes him and slides him off Emma's lap into his.

He stares at Emma wildly the whole time. "Swan, what happened?"

Emma scoots closer and rubs Ian's back as Ian cries into Hook's shoulder.

"I was about to read to him the story of how we met," she says quietly. "And he asked me if I loved you."

Hook's eyebrows draw down, but she can't tell if he's apprehensive or just confused.

"I told him I didn't know yet," she says, and lowers her eyes from his.

"I don't want you to leave!" Ian wails.

Hook turns back to Ian, tightens his arms around Ian's shaking body, and presses his cheek against his hair.

"Hush, lad. Who says I'm leaving?"

"You're gonna leave because mom doesn't love you."

Emma expects that to hurt Hook, to cut deep, but it doesn't—he looks as if he's about to laugh.

"I'm not going to leave because your mother doesn't love me. It's okay if your mother doesn't love me."

Ian's crying cuts off abruptly. He sits back, staring at Hook with tear-filled eyes and a wobbly frown.

"I love her," Hook says. He's looking at Ian but Emma knows his words are for her. "I've loved her for a very long time, and I'm always going to love her. And you know what else?"

Ian shakes his head.

"I love you, Ian. You're my son, and I'm never going to leave you."

"Promise?" Ian gasps. He's calming down, wiping away his tears and taking deep, gulping breaths.

"Aye, lad, I promise."

Ian falls forward against Hook's chest. He gives one more shudder that threatens for a moment to turn into a sob, but he keeps himself together.

Emma reaches out and takes one of his hands. "Feel better?" she asks.
"Yes," Ian says in a small voice, and closes his eyes.

Emma rubs her thumb back and forth over his knuckles while Hook rubs his back, and slowly he relaxes, slowly his breathing returns to normal, slowly the tears glittering in his eyes dry up and disappear.

It's strange for Emma to see Ian being comforted in someone else's arms. For nearly 6 years, she's been the only one to hold him when he cries, to soothe his hurts. If she had thought about it earlier, she might have guessed she'd be jealous, seeing the way Ian wanted Hook over Emma in this moment, but she actually doesn't mind. It's reassuring, in a way, that Ian trusts him so much. It makes it easier for Emma—easier to believe that this could work out, that her and Hook could work out.

Ian yawns and stretches a bit, extending his legs so that they lay across Emma's lap. Hook looks down at his pajamas, and grins.

"I like your nightwear," he says.

"My pajamas?" Ian asks, crinkling his nose.

"Aye, lad, your pajamas."

"Grandma got them for me."

"Well, your grandmother has excellent taste," Killian says. "I hope you told her thank you."

"I did."

"Do you know any of their names? The constellations?"

"Um," Ian says, looking down at his shirt. He finds the one he's looking for and points to it. "That's the big dipper."

"Any others?"

Ian shakes his head.

"Well, then I shall have to teach you, won't I?"

Ian smiles then, and it's a watery smile but it's a smile.

One by one, Hook points to each star and names it. Occasionally, there's a story behind the constellation, and when there is, Hook tells it. Ian watches with rapt attention, repeating the names after Hook says them, and furrowing his brow as if determined to commit them to memory.

Emma loses herself for a bit in the sound of Hook's voice. She can see the thing that's growing between Hook and Ian—the bond, and it strikes her then, how much they look alike. The shape and color of their eyes are the same, they have the same long, dark lashes, and even their brows and hair are similar, save for the color. Emma thinks Ian has her rounder face and her nose, but his lips are Hook's, as are his ears.

When he's older, he's going to look like Hook's copy.

Emma scoots closer until her thigh is pressed against Hook's, and leans into his shoulder. He glances at her as she does, but Ian's there, so anything he wants to say—anything he wants to do—he keeps to himself, and shows her the briefest of smiles before turning back to Ian's pajamas.
"This one here is called Cygnus," Hook says, and he looks up at Ian with a flash of his eyes. "Do you know what 'Cygnus' means?"

Ian shakes his head.

"It means Swan."

"Like me and mom and Henry," Ian says. "That's our last name."

"Aye, lad. There are many myths surrounding Cygnus. Some say he's the pet of a queen, some say he's the poet Orpheus, and others say he's the son of Poseidon. Some even say it's Zeus."

"Oh, Henry told me about Zeus!" Ian says brightly. "He could control lightning."

"Do you know Poseidon?"

"He's the god of the sea."

"You're a clever lad," Hook says, grinning.

The sound of careful footsteps on the stairs announce Henry's arrival. He stops short of the landing, leaning in so he's visible only to the waist.

"Um, grandma and grandpa made hot chocolate downstairs," he says. "Grandma says it's good for making you feel better when you're sad."

"What do you think?" Emma asks Ian. "Want some hot chocolate?"

"Yea," he says. He's clearly exhausted and completely worn out from his tears. Emma tries to take comfort in the fact that at least she knows he's definitely going to sleep tonight.

"Shall I carry you down, lad?" Hook asks. "Or would you rather walk?"

"Can you carry me?"

"As you wish," Hook says, and levers himself to his feet with Ian wrapped around his front like a koala bear.

Henry moves to the side so Hook and Ian can pass, and when Emma reaches him, he asks, "Is Ian okay?"

She puts an arm around his shoulders and pulls his forehead to her lips. She realizes she's trembling and forces herself to stop.

"He's fine. He was just worried," she says. "We can talk about it tomorrow."

Henry nods, and Emma follows him downstairs. Hook's sitting on one of the stools at the countertop with Ian in his lap. Ian's holding a mug overflowing with whipped cream and cinnamon, and as Emma takes the stool beside them, he yawns hugely. Emma almost groans as she's forced to yawn as well.

"Perhaps I should leave so you can all get some rest," Hook suggests, looking uncomfortable.

"No, don't go!" Ian says, and he whips around so fast he slops hot chocolate over his hands.

"I have to, lad, you need to sleep."
"Stay here, please!" Ian begs. Tears are already welling in his eyes, and Emma senses another imminent meltdown.

"Ian-" she starts.

"I can't-" Hook says.

"You can stay, if you want," David says. His voice drowns out both of theirs. "The sofa is a pull-out. It's not the most comfortable bed, but it's a bed."

Emma's speechless, and so is Hook. Snow takes a sip of her hot chocolate, her eyes darting from David to Hook and back. She's apparently as surprised as Emma feels.

Hook rips his eyes away from David to look at Ian, and one glimpse of Ian's fresh tears makes him crumble. "Alright," he says. "I'll stay."

---

After half a mug of hot chocolate, Ian's passed out cold in Hook's arms. His face is scrunched up, and one of his fists is curled tight in Hook's vest, as if he intends to never let go. Snow is gazing softly at the scene, as if it melts her heart, and even David's gaze has lost its hard edge.

"C'mon, let's get him in bed," Emma says, and leads the way back upstairs.

Hook moves slowly, as if carrying an armful of something highly explosive.

"Trust me, he's out," Emma says. "He's not waking up for anything."

Hook carries Ian to the bed, and lays him down gently. He adjusts the pillow beneath Ian's head, and then runs the backs of his fingers over Ian's brow, smoothing out the frown lines.

Emma stands beside him. They're silent, watching Ian sleep, watching his face slowly relax as Hook strokes his cheek. There's that gentleness of his again, the one he hides beneath layers of sarcasm and haughtiness.

"Thanks for coming over," she whispers.

"You don't have to thank me, Swan," he says, without turning his head. "I told you, I'll always be at your side."

"You don't have to say that. I'm not Ian. I don't need reassurances."

He looks at her then, and Emma feels like the intensity of his blue eyes could burn holes in the universe. "I meant it, Emma. I will never leave you or Ian. If there's one thing in this world you can be certain of, love, let it be that."

She can read him, and she knows he's telling the truth. And that's all she wanted, really—to know that he'll always be there, no matter what happens between them, no matter if they work out as an us or not.

She slips her hand into his, and lets the way she grips his fingers speak the words she can't bring herself to say. He laces his fingers through hers, and squeezes back hard.

"The sofa's down here, Hook," David calls sternly.

"Ah," Killian sighs, eyes lifting to the ceiling. "For a moment there, I was beginning to worry he'd
started liking me."

---

Emma feels like she only just closed her eyes when she's being roughly shaken awake again.

She comes to her senses immediately. The loft is dark, and the sky outside is velvety black. It's night, and it's still sometime well before dawn. Everyone's silent, everyone's asleep—except Ian.

"Mom," he wails, and shakes her again.

"What? What is it?"

As if in answer, a burst of lightning illuminates the room, showing her Ian's wide, panicked eyes, before they're plunged back into darkness.

"It's okay," she whispers. "It's just a storm."

"No, I had a bad dream," he says.

Her hands find his arms and she pulls him down against her chest, just as a loud crack of thunder rends the night and makes the entire loft quiver from the noise.

"What did you dream about?" she asks when it's quiet again. She suspects his bad dreams are a result of being overtired and emotionally overwrought.

"There was a shadow," he whispers.

"A shadow?"

"It was outside the window. Watching us."

Emma tenses. She watches a double pulse of lightning cast its flickering, blue-white light into the loft. The window is directly over their heads. She knows nothing's there—how could it possibly be?—but a small part of her is actually, genuinely afraid that she's wrong. She wants to look, but it's as if she's frozen.

Another loud peal of thunder, like the sky's being torn apart, and then rain starts pelting the window.

Ian clings to her. "I want Mr. Jim."

"I know, babe. I know. We'll get him as soon as we can."

The whole loft echoes with the sound of the rain drumming the roof, and the deep rumbles of thunder.

"Emma?"

She almost jumps out of her skin. Hook's at the top of the stairs, almost invisible in the darkness save for the pale oval of his face.

"Sorry if I frightened you, Swan," he says as he creeps closer. "The storm woke me, and then I heard the boy from downstairs. Is everything alright?"

Ian doesn't move, but he says, "There was a shadow outside the window."
Hook's right next to the bed, close enough for Emma to see fear steal across his face.

"He just had a bad dream," she says.

Hook doesn't seem to hear her. Jaw clenched, he approaches the window and peers out. He surveys the air for several long minutes, then turns his eyes downwards, to the street.

"Mom?" Henry asks.

"It's alright," she answers. "Ian just had a bad dream. Go back to sleep."

She hears Henry collapse back against his pillows and pull the blankets tight around him.

"Swan," Hook says. "Why don't you take the boys downstairs and put them in my bed?"

"What?"

"They'll be more comfortable down there," he says carefully. "The storm's quieter."

She can hear he strain in his voice, and the barely-contained urgency. Even though she thinks he's being a bit overdramatic, she clutches Ian tighter, gets out of bed, and goes to Henry's.

"Henry?"

"Mmm," he grumbles.

She shifts Ian to her hip so she can lean down and shake Henry by his shoulder. "C'mon, we're going downstairs. You and Ian are going to sleep on the pull-out."

"What? Why?"

"Please, Henry. Just do it."

He groans a complaint but he sits up, throws the covers off, and follows her down the stairs. When they reach the bottom, David and Snow round the corner.

"Everything alright?" Snow asks.

"Yea," Emma says, keeping her tone calm and even. "Ian just had a nightmare that there was something outside the window, so I'm gonna put him and Henry on the pull-out. Hook's upstairs."

David's expression closes and he slips past her up the stairs. Snow rolls her eyes and goes with him.

Henry crosses the loft and throws himself backwards onto the sofa bed with all the teenage attitude he can muster. Emma sets Ian on his feet so he can crawl in beside Henry. He gets himself beneath the blanket, then immediately rolls and snuggles against his brother.

"Why are you so warm?" Henry moans.

"Because I love you so much," Ian replies.

"Alright, go to sleep," Emma says. "I'll see you guys in the morning."

They mutter a chorus of goodnights at her, and she goes back upstairs. Hook and her parents are gathered next to her bed.

"There was a shadow outside the window?" Snow asks her in an urgent whisper.
"No," Emma says. "It was just a dream-"

"Was it?" Hook asks in a hard voice. "A shadow outside his window, Emma. Sound familiar?"

She appreciates his concern and his caution, but this is a bit ridiculous.

"Pan's Shadow is dead," she says.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Hook says. "In either case, that's too much of a coincidence for me, Emma. I'm not taking any chances."

Snow and David seem to be thinking along the same lines, and suddenly Emma feels like the only sane person in the room.

"Look, I get that you guys all live in a place where magic and monsters are an everyday thing, but I think you're overreacting. Ian probably just saw a picture in Henry's book. You can't seriously think that Pan's Shadow was really out there?"

"I'll stay up here and keep watch," is all Hook says.

"I'll stay with you," David says.

Emma wants to scream—only she's an adult, and adults shouldn't scream just because they're frustrated. She takes a deep breath, and says firmly, "They're my kids. The only one who's going to lose sleep over them is me. I'll keep watch. The rest of you can go back to sleep."

"Emma, I'm not leaving you alone up here," Hook says.

"Then stay."

She accidentally says it like a challenge. He looks at her like he did back in the Enchanted Forest, when they were faced with the beanstalk.

_I was hoping it would be you._

"Mom, dad, can you stay downstairs with the boys?" she asks, and then because she knows it will make them feel better, she adds, "Just in case."

David nods, face set in grim determination as if he's heading off to battle.

"I'll make you two some tea," Snow says. She takes David by the arm, and they both go back downstairs.

Emma sits down on the bed and pulls her legs up for sit cross-legged. Hook picks up the chair by the desk, and carries it over to set beside the bed. He sits down facing the window, and Emma notices he somehow has his knife, the one Ian found in his jacket.

She looks to the window. Rain flows down the glass like a series of rivers, making everything beyond blurry and indistinct. An occasional flicker of lightning gives her a slightly clearer picture, but the only thing she's certain of is that it's still nighttime.

"I really hope you're wrong," she says.

Hook doesn't take his eyes off the window. "Me too, love."
Henry listens to his grandma make tea and carry it upstairs. He's not sure what's going on, but he's too tired to care. He'll worry about it tomorrow.

He's almost asleep again when Ian says, "Henry?"

"Hm?" Henry mumbles, and he tries to make it sound as annoyed as possible—he just wants to sleep, and that's already next to impossible when the person draped across you is like a mini volcano.

"What's gonna happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Mom and my dad. What's gonna happen?"

Henry opens his eyes then. Ian has his head resting on Henry's chest, and all Henry can see is his messy blonde hair. Across the loft, upstairs, he can just barely make out Emma and Hook sitting in front of the window.

He knows Hook's not Neal—he knows it in his bones and he hates it, he hates Neal for being who he is, for doing what he did to his mom and for the way he treated her; he's a little mad at Hook for being a better man than Neal, but he knows that's irrational, and unfair, and he refuses to indulge in it.

Henry can't see through people the way his mom can, but he's a pretty good judge of character. Hook's a good guy. He's good for Emma, and he's good for Ian, and Henry thinks he could like the guy—really like him—if he lets himself.

"Henry?"

Henry closes his eyes again, and shifts, settling his arms around Ian and turning a little bit into his warmth.

"Mom and Hook like each other," he says. "They're gonna date. And maybe they'll end up being boyfriend and girlfriend, or maybe they'll end up just being friends. But nothing's really going to change. Even if mom and Hook don't fall in love and get married, Hook's still going to be your dad, and he's still going to be around and see you all the time and play dinosaur pirates, okay?"

"Okay. Are we going to live here?"

"Do you want to live here?"

He feels Ian shrug. "It's small. Is there an aquarium?"

"If I say yes, will you stop asking me questions and go to sleep?"

"Yea."

"Then yes, there's an aquarium. It's really small, but they have a touch tank. It's by the docks. I'll show you tomorrow."

"Okay," Ian says. He's silent for a while, and Henry thinks he finally fell asleep, but then he asks, "Are there shadows here?"

"What?"

"Shadows. With glowing eyes. I had a dream there was one outside the window watching us sleep."
Suddenly, Henry's not burning lava hot anymore. Suddenly, he's cold. He opens his eyes, and sees Emma and Hook again, at the window—guarding it.

"No," he says hoarsely. "There aren't. You just had a dream. Go to sleep."
I just want to thank y'all for your patience, and I apologize for the long wait. I still have 3 weeks of my summer job left, so it may be another 3 weeks before I can update again, so I thank you in advance for even more of your patience. However, I was planning on updating "Cygnets" with a few chapters in the meantime, so if you're into that, keep an eye out! :D

The storm splutters to an end near daybreak, but by the time the clouds finally clear and the sun is visible, it's well past dawn. As light fills the loft, Killian heaves an inward sigh of relief. The night is over, and the danger is past.

He stands, ignores the stiffness in his knees and the sharp pain at the small of his back, and goes to the bed. Emma's asleep there, curled up like a cat beneath the thin blanket. She fell asleep not long after their watch started, and Killian didn't have the heart to keep her from her rest, so he merely pulled the blanket up over her shoulders.

He drinks in the sight of her now like a man dying of thirst.

Bloody hell, she's gorgeous.

Her hair is fanned out around her head liked a halo of pale gold. One long lock curls over her cheek, and Killian reaches down to gently tuck it behind her ear. As his fingers brush her cheek, her lips quirk reflexively in a smile, but she doesn't wake.

It still feels like a miracle to him that he's able to gaze upon her at all, and there's a small part of him that's afraid it won't last, that he'll wake up from this wonderful dream he's having and find himself alone again, separated from her for the rest of eternity.

Resolve hardens inside him, like a stone sitting in his gut. Even were that to happen, he knows nothing could keep him from fighting every day to get back to her. Not now, not anymore.

Previously, the thought of her and Henry safe and happy somewhere had stilled his restless heart, stopped him from pursuing—regardless of the barrier he knew existed between the realms—every whisper of a magic bean or portal to another realm that crossed his path. He would be an intruder, he told himself, an unwelcome guest bound only to ruin her and her boy's peaceful existence in their land without magic.

The risk of destroying her happiness was too great, so he resigned himself to spend the rest of his remaining years with only the memory of her.

At least, that's what he told himself, but he knows half the reason was fear—fear that she wouldn't recognize him, fear that she would therefore reject him...and that would have been more difficult than never seeing her again.

He finds his heart growing melancholy at the thought, and he suddenly needs to clear his head, banish his miserable thoughts. And if he's to aid her in whatever she has planned for the woods this
afternoon, he needs to catch some rest himself, as well. He turns away from her—it's difficult, but he manages—and walks quietly to the desk, where he finds a pen and paper and writes her a brief message:

*I'll meet you at Granny's for breakfast.*

He takes his jacket from where it's folded atop the dresser, and tiptoes downstairs. There are no answering footsteps from around the corner, where Emma's parents keep their room, so Killian assumes they're asleep as well. He crosses the loft to the pull-out couch. Henry and Ian are lying back-to-back, and a grin pulls at Killian's lips at the sight: somehow Ian's managed to occupy the majority of the bed, while Henry's accorded a thin sliver of mattress just on the edge.

Killian wants to sit but he's afraid to wake them, so he contents himself with a quick brush of his fingers through the boy's hair, which has become a wild, wavy tangle overnight. He looks peaceful, Killian observes, and he hopes he and Emma managed to assuage his fear—just the memory of Ian so panicked makes Killian's heart hurt all over again. He understands a bit better now the need for him and Emma to proceed with caution. The most fragile of them all, the one bound to be hurt the worst, is Ian, and the thought of hurting him is unbearable.

Again he feels resolve settle solidly in his stomach. If his desires never find completion—if he and Emma never find their way into each others' arms again, if she decides she can't open her heart to him—then just to be at her side, to be with her, Henry, and Ian...it would be enough.

With one last pull of his fingers through Ian's hair—Killian notes it's the same soft texture as Emma's—he turns and heads for the door. David's standing there, a phantom in the gloom, and Killian's hand almost reaches for the knife at his hip before he realizes who it is.

"Heading out?" David asks in a low voice as Killian approaches.

"Aye. I need an hour of sleep before we take to the woods."

He doesn't need to point out that there are no longer any sleeping options available for him in this house that are respectful to David and Snow's hospitality—save for the chair he occupied all night, but he doesn't believe his back (or his rear end) could take it.

David folds his arms over his chest. "I think the rain may have put a damper on our plans," he says. "We probably won't go into the woods now until the afternoon, when everything's a bit drier. Why don't you try to get a few more hours sleep and we'll pick you up around lunchtime?"

Killian hesitates a moment. The air seems less frosty between him and the prince, and he understands that what David's offering him now is a kind gesture, and he knows what he's about to say might seem contrary and ungrateful, but he takes the risk and says it anyway.

"Frankly, I'd prefer spending time with Emma and the boys over a few more hours sleep. Whenever they awake, I'll be at Granny's—for breakfast, or an early lunch, it makes no difference. Let them get their rest; I don't mind waiting."

He sees David's nod of approval in the semi-darkness, and he almost—almost—thinks the man's about to offer his hand to shake, but he doesn't, so Killian say goodbye and makes his quiet exit.

The morning is already suffocatingly warm, and moisture hangs heavy in the air. He walks slowly, edging around puddles, clinging to the shade where he can, but it's not much use. His shirt's damp all the way through and his trousers are clinging to him in all the wrong ways by the time he reaches Granny's, but he finds he's not quite ready to go in; his thoughts are as oppressive as the weather, and...
even if he were to lay in bed he wouldn't be able to sleep.

He needs the sea air to clear his head, so he goes to the docks instead. There's a strong breeze off the water, and it cools his brow immediately. He opens the buttons of his vest and the wind cuts through the thin fabric of his shirt to chill his flesh. It feels like home to him. He takes a deep pull of air in through his nose, letting that crisp, clean, salty smell of the sea sit in his chest. It saturates his entire being, and the tension slowly, slowly trickles away.

Despite the strain leaving him like the tide receding from the shore, one memory remains, like a bloated corpse washed up on the beach, and it drives a spike of agony through him.

Killian can still feel Ian shaking in his arms as he cried, as if the boy was still there. The thought that he would ever leave Ian—that he would do to his own child what his father did to him and Liam—fills him with such a desperate fury that he's suddenly choking on his own anger.

Killian never believed he'd be a father—he'd taken precautions his whole life to ensure he never would be—and now that he is one, he understands his own father even less. How could you abandon your own children? How could you sell them into servitude—to save yourself?

He's been a father for three days, and he would die before he let anything happen to Ian—it's a certainty that rages molten hot at his core.

Without meaning to, he forms a mental image of Pan's Shadow hovering over his son's sleeping form, and his urge to protect and keep safe burns hotter. He turns away from the sea and walks quickly back to Granny's. If what Ian saw was reality and not a dream—and Killian's deadly certain it was reality—then it's likely that Pan's Shadow is the same entity that snatched Robin's man Little John from the woods.

Where better to hide during the day than the dense woods that surround Storybrooke? The forest here isn't as dim and murky as the jungles of Neverland, but in some places, it's damn close. He might need those few hours of sleep David tried to offer him after all, if he's to be of any use tracking down the Shadow and putting an end to it.

He reaches Granny's and goes inside—he doesn't know why he walks through the diner instead of around it to get to the inn, but he does. It's crowded with early breakfast-goers, including what seems like an overabundance of children—he hadn't paid any mind to children in general before, save for the ones who looked as if they might pick his pocket, but now he's abruptly more aware of their existence. He notices a few that are clearly around Ian's age, and one he's certain he saw running around the park with Ian yesterday, but one in particular catches his eye—rather, it's the stuffed dog she's holding that intrigues him.

A thought strikes Killian, and all thoughts of sleep flee his brain.

Emma had mentioned a stuffed animal that Ian was attached to, a certain octopus that was a friend and a comfort, a Mr. One-Eyed Jim that aided the boy's sleep.

Killian spies Granny collecting cash from a line of customers at the register, and immediately pushes through the crowd to gain her side.

"Yes?" she asks without looking round.

"I need to ask a favor—just a question, really."

"I'm listening," she says, in the tone of voice that suggests whatever he has to say better not be a waste of her time.
"I need to know how one would acquire a stuffed animal in this realm."

She stops and stares at him unblinkingly over the rim of her glasses for several long seconds.

"You want to get your kid a toy?" she asks finally.

"Aye," he says, and abruptly bites off the That's what I said that almost follows—he doesn't want to hurt his chances of getting the information he needs. That, and the woman frightens him a bit.

Granny turns fully to face him and props one fist on her hip. "I'll tell you what you want to know," she says. "But you have to do something for me in return."

"Anything," he says, perhaps a tad too fast, for she grins wolfishly.

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Killian's the one late to the diner this time. In his haste and his distraction, he almost physically runs into Emma as she's exiting the bathroom, and they both stumble to a halt, standing so close they're nearly touching.

"Hey," she says, smiling at him in a way that warms his belly. "I was wondering where you were—oh, wow, you smell good."

"Does that surprise you?" he asks harshly.

Her eyebrows spring up to her hairline, and Killian nearly bites his tongue in half out of irritation with his own behavior. He forces himself to relax, and says in calmer tones, "My apologies, Swan. I shouldn't have snapped. It's...it's been a very trying morning so far."

She nods in acknowledgement of his apology, but still seems wary as she asks, "Is everything okay?"

"Aye. I was convinced—nay, coerced by Granny into allowing her to launder my clothes," he says darkly.

Her eyes widen, amusement dancing in their green depths, and it's clearly a struggle for her to contain her mirth. He feels frustration nibbling at the edges of his sanity again.

"Laugh all you want, Swan," he says. "I had to sit in my room wearing nothing but a towel for two hours. Two hours!" When he sees no blossoming of sympathy in her, he adds, almost in a pout, "And it was a very small towel." He sounds absurd even to his own ears, but he can't help it.

"Well," Emma says, her voice hovering just on the verge of laughter, "if you ever find yourself in that situation again, give me a call and I'll come help you out."

It takes a moment for her statement and its meaning to penetrate the haze of annoyance that clouds his brain, but suddenly every one of his senses is on high alert. He sees her smile, half teasing, but half serious and almost predatory, and heat floods him. The thought of Emma visiting his room, stripping him of his towel and dropping it to the floor...

"Mom!"

"Be right there," Emma calls, sparing Ian and Henry—sitting together in one of the booths—a glance before turning to Killian once more. "So, is that why you were late?"

He sighs. "Actually, I was late for another reason."
"Oh?"

"Can I show you something, Swan?"

"Yea..."

He shifts so that his back is to the boys, and pulls a stuffed animal from inside his coat. It's a crab, soft and plush and luridly orange, with friendly-looking black eyes.

Emma blinks at it. "Is that...?"

"For Ian?" he asks. "Aye." It caught Killian's eye immediately upon entering the little shop Granny directed him to a few streets over. "It's not One-Eyed Jim, but I thought perhaps it would—you said the octopus was like a friend to the boy—so I thought maybe this would provide him some comfort, and perhaps help keep the nightmares away."

Emma reaches out and takes one of the crab's squishy claws in between her fingers. "Does that mean you think what he saw was just a nightmare?" she asks softly,

"No," he says.

She's silent, but her frown deepens and her eyes—still locked on the crab—cloud over with worry. Killian can practically see her thoughts roiling. After a moment, she comes back to herself, and she smiles warmly up at him once more, a smile that sets her eyes sparkling, banishing the worry he saw there seconds before. "Ian's really going to like this," she says.

He half-smiles, nervously. His heart gives an anxious flutter.

"Are you certain? It's not-"

Too foolish?

Too presumptuous?

Too orange?

"It's perfect," she says, then she leans around him and calls, "Hey, Ian. Come here for a second."

Killian's not prepared. He doesn't know what to do—he's never given a child a gift before. He gave Ian Liam's ring, but that was different; that hadn't been a gift, exactly—and this certainly is a gift. His first gift. His first gift to his son.

Ian runs over and spots the crab instantly. "Wow! That's cool!" he gushes, and Killian can tell he wants to reach for it, but is well-mannered enough not to. Killian crouches down, so he's on eye-level with Ian. He can feel Emma watching him, see her smile out of the corner of his eye.

"I came across this little fellow on my walk back to the inn, and he looked like he needed a friend. Do you know anyone who could help him out?"

"I'll be his friend!" Ian says.

Killian smiles and hands Ian the crab.

Ian takes it reverently. "Is it really for me?" he asks.

"Aye, lad, it's for you. I thought perhaps he could keep you company."
Ian's grinning at the crab, and then he's grinning at Killian, and then he's plowing into Killian, rocking him backwards on his heels and nearly knocking him onto his rear end on the floor. He wraps his arms around Killian's neck, and says loudly into his ear, "Thank you!"

Killian returns the hug, relishing the feeling of the boy happy in his arms, a complete contrast from the night before. "You're welcome, lad. I'm happy you like him."

"You know, he needs a name," Emma says from above them.

Ian steps back to peer critically at the crab. His brow furrows. "Roger," he says decisively, then looks up at Killian. "Like your ship."

Roger.

Killian grins.

"Just Roger?" Emma asks. "Not one-claw, three-leg, no-eyebrows or anything? Just Roger?"

"Just Roger," Ian says firmly. "I'm gonna go show Henry."

Showing Henry apparently means running over full-speed, clambering into the booth, and shoving it under Henry's nose.

"Henry! Look!"

"Um, very nice," Henry says, clearly startled by the appearance of a large, stuffed orange crab close enough to kiss.

Emma snorts and mutters, "Oh my God." No sooner are the words past her lips than the door opens, setting the little bell over it tinkling, and Killian looks over to see David and Robin. Both men stand in the doorway, gazing out over the crowd in the diner, and as soon as they catch sight of Killian and Emma, Killian can tell by their expression that their quiet morning has come to an end.

"Fuck," Emma swears under her breath, and darts from his side to walk as quickly to the booth as possible without raising any alarms. Killian follows, but sweeps past Emma to head off David and Robin.

They both stop short, and two pairs of eyes slide past him to where Emma's crouching next to the booth, beside Ian.

"Ah, right," David says ruefully.

"Good call, mate," Robin says.

They both attempt to look nonchalant, and Killian turns back to the booth in time to see Ian and Henry sliding out of it. Henry takes Ian's hand and purposefully starts leading him back towards the machine called the jukebox.

"I swear to God, do NOT play What's New Pussycat," Killian hears Henry say.

"What about Welcome to the Jungle?"

"I don't know. I think it's a little too early for Guns & Roses..."

Emma watches them until they're out of earshot, and then she joins Killian, David, and Robin.
"Alright, what's going on?" she asks David.

"We have a problem," David says.


"Another attack?" Killian guesses. He pitches his voice low—he knows the boys can't hear them, but there are plenty of other guests in the diner casting curious glances in their direction.

"Not just one," David says. "Three,"

"In the woods?" Emma asks.

"No, they were taken from their homes in the middle of the night."

"Snatched right from their beds, apparently," Robin says.

"The wife of one of the victims says a shadow with glowing eyes dragged her husband out of their window and carried him off towards the woods," David says.

Emma turns away, and Killian follows her gaze back to Henry and Ian, standing in the corner with their heads bent over the jukebox. The image of Pan's Shadow hovering over a sleeping Ian reforms in Killian's mind. He remembers Emma's terror in Neverland, and the thought of the boys being taken—the thought of Ian at the mercy of Pan's Shadow—fills Killian with cold dread, and he shivers.

The last thing Emma wants to do right now is leave Henry and Ian, but she knows she has to. They have to find those people, and they have to catch or destroy Pan's Shadow before it can hurt anyone else. One phone call and her mom's there in an instant, ushering the boys out of the diner, smiling cheerily as if everything's fine.

"We're going to go see my friend Belle," she says.

"Belle as in Beauty and the Beast," Henry provides, which has Ian gasping with excitement. Henry knows something serious is up, of course, but their talk yesterday—and his talk with Hook—seems to have cooled his impatience a bit, and he's back to fulfilling his big brother duties with gusto.

They wait in the diner until Snow and the boys are well down the street, then she and Killian pile into the squad car behind Robin and David, and speed into the woods. The humidity is worse amongst the trees, and Emma's sweating and feeling soggy all over by the time they reach the town line.

The Merry Men and the dwarves are there waiting, standing close together as if expecting an ambush. One tall figure stands incongruously amongst the group, a splash of red surrounded by the muted browns, greens, and grays of the Merry Men, and Emma goes to her immediately.

"Hey, girl," Ruby says, opening her arms for a hug. "Long time, no see."

Emma slips her arms briefly around her friend before stepping back.

"What the hell, Ruby," she says with a grin. "You haven't aged a day."

Ruby's as beautiful as ever, and Emma suddenly feels a little self-conscious about her own appearance. She's kept in shape—more out of stubborn pride than any desire to be particularly attractive—but she knows there are small, telltale signs of approaching middle age.
As if Ruby can sense her thoughts, she plants her hands firmly on her hips, and says, "You look damn good too, Emma. Whatever you've been doing in Boston for seven years...it suits you."

Emma almost snorts. "Being a single, working mom? I'm pretty sure that's actually what gave me all my gray hairs."

"No way," she says. "You're still sexy as hell. And," she drops her voice low and looks over Emma's shoulder—Emma doesn't have to turn around to know she's staring at Hook. "Someone else definitely thinks so too."

Emma feels a rush of heat to her face, and Ruby grins in satisfaction.

"Oh, and speaking of," she adds slyly, "Granny told me all about that cute little blondie you've got hanging around you named Ian."

Emma smiles. "He is pretty cute," she says in smug agreement.

Ruby's grin widens. "You're going to have to tell me all about how that happened."

"I will," Emma says, and she can't help but feel a bit conspiratorial. She really, really missed Ruby. She missed having a friend—those had been few and far between in Boston, so few and far between as to be basically nonexistent. "How about we save that for later though and meet up for a drink sometime?"

"Definitely," Ruby says, and the wicked gleam in her eye almost makes Emma regret her suggestion—that she can see a few nasty hangovers in her very near future.

Someone clears their throat from behind them. "Sorry to interrupt, ladies," Robin says politely, "But shall we get started?"

"Yes," Emma says. She rotates on her heel to face the Merry Men and the dwarves. "Alright. Everyone, give me your cell phones."

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Since no one else there has the necessary tech skills, it takes Emma nearly a full hour to install the same "Kid Tracker" GPS she has on Henry's phone on David, Ruby, Robin, the dwarves, and all of the Merry Men's phones, and then link them to her own. It's her backup plan. Her original plan was-

"Wait, I thought the plan was to use Ruby?" Leroy says.

Before Emma can say "It was," Ruby arches one perfectly-manicured eyebrow, and says, "You know how tracking by scent works, right?"

"Yea," Leroy says defensively.

"And do you know what rain does to a scent trail?"

Leroy just glares.

Ruby lifts her chin and then addresses Emma loudly, "So, Sheriff, what's Plan B? Tell us what we need to do."

"All you need to do," Emma says as she moves down the line of Merry Men, passing back phones, "is put these somewhere they won't fall out easily, and don't touch them."
"That's it? How's that going to help us find this thing?"

Leroy again. Emma wishes she could just staple his mouth shut.

"I can track your phones using my phone," Emma says.

"Which means what, exactly?" Robin asks, and Emma can tell he already suspects what she's about to say.

She looks to her dad then. They talked about this: he has a relationship with these people, and she doesn't. If she's going to get the Merry Men and the dwarves to go along with her plan, she's going to need his support. She catches David's eye, and he nods, so she takes a quick, deep breath, and says, "Which means that I can track the Shadow by tracking our phones-" her voice hitches slightly- "after it takes one of us."

There are several grunts of shock and murmurs of disagreement all around as her words settle in.

"So we're all basically acting as bait," Robin says, his voice cutting firm and clear over the chatter.

"Yea," Emma says apologetically. "I think it hasn't attacked us before because we've been in such a big group. If we divide into pairs..."

"We'll draw it out," Robin finishes for her.

"Yea, if it's still hungry," Leroy growls sullenly.

"The Shadow doesn't eat people," Hook says, so harshly that Leroy snaps his jaw shut. "It takes their shadows but leaves their bodies behind. We can reunite the two and revive everyone who's been attacked as long as we don't wait too long—once the flesh begins to rot, it's hopeless."

Robin goes a shade paler. "Do you think it's too late for Little John?" he asks Hook.

Hook's scowl eases slightly as he says, "I'd say Little John doesn't have much longer."

There's a brief silence, and then David takes a step in. "You can trust what Hook says. He spent over a century in Neverland with this thing," he says.

Hook looks like he's about to have a heart attack. He's staring at the back of David's head, and Emma's pretty sure David knows but it purposely ignoring him.

Robin turns back to Emma. "And you can truly use these," he lifts his phone and gives it a shake, "to track us to wherever the creature takes us?"

"Yes," she says firmly. "And hopefully it's the same place it took all the others."

Silence falls again, and Emma feels the urge to fill it with something. "It's not the greatest plan, but it's all I can think of right now. If Regina were here she'd probably have some sort of magic that we could use to track down whatever's in the woods, but...I don't know. I don't know what else to do. All I know is that the Shadow was watching my kids through the window last night, and I'm not going to let it take one of them."

The Merry Men are—not inconspicuously—throwing Robin skeptical, meaningful glances, but he seems immune to them. He nods and straightens, then makes a show of tucking his phone deep inside his vest.

"You heard her, men," he says briskly. "Divide into pairs and try to look as appetizing as possible—
and don't touch those phones."

The Merry Men and the dwarves shuffle around, seeking partners. David and Robin stand shoulder-to-shoulder, watching with a critical eye, making adjustments here and there. Ruby manages to get paired with Leroy, and by her sadistic smile and the blood vessel about to burst in Leroy's temple, Emma can tell Ruby did it on purpose.

Killian's at her side, just at her shoulder. "There's one problem, love," he says in her ear. "I don't have one of those cell phones the others have."

She can feel his warmth like a solid presence, and it's sort of comforting. She turns her head slightly, just enough so she can see his eyes. "That's because you're going with me," she says, "And I don't plan on getting attacked."

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They divide the groups up evenly between the north and south woods, then spread out and begin walking. The earth is soaked and soggy, the bushes and branches are heavy and drooping with moisture, and it's not long before Emma's splattered with mud up to her knees, and her jeans and shirt are nearly soaked through from her own sweat and from all the wet ferns she has to keep pushing through. Hook's in only slightly better shape than she is—though she imagines all that leather is better proof against water than her own clothes, there are beads of sweat glistening on his temples, and his damp black hair is plastered to his forehead.

The trees seem to crowd and close in on them as they make their way slowly deeper and deeper into the forest, and there's something in the air that has Emma on edge—she realizes what has her skin crawling is the feeling that she's being watched, the same as when she first drove into Storybrooke three days ago.

She glances at Hook, wondering if he feels it too, but he's apparently focused on picking his way over and around all the debris from the storm that litters their path, so she keeps her mouth shut, keeps her eyes low, but opens her ears to sounds from above—she doesn't expect the Shadow to come after her, but she's not ruling it out, either.

After an hour, they reach a large tree split in half by lightning and pause to catch their breath. Emma pulls out her phone to check the positions of the other groups, and sees that, so far, everyone's still together and still moving steadily.

She tucks her phone back into her jeans and turns to Hook. "Ready?" she asks.

"Aye, love," he says, and rakes a hand through his hair, sweeping it off his forehead.

"Aren't you hot?" she asks as they start walking again.

He merely shrugs in response.

"You know, we could get you some different clothes," she says. He pulls his eyes away from the ground to look at her. "I mean, not that I'm not into black leather, I just know that summer's up here can be pretty brutal, and Ian would be pretty upset if you got heatstroke. And Granny probably wouldn't bother you about washing your clothes if you had more than one outfit."

Emma thinks it's that last bit that decides him. He looks back down. "I suppose I should," he says. "If I'm to stay here, I may as well look the part—wait, I wouldn't have to wear shorts though, would I?"

He sounds so horrified Emma almost laughs. She tries to picture him in shorts and flip-flops and she
just...she can't. "What's wrong, Captain?" she asks with a grin. "Are you afraid of showing a little leg?"

He chuckles. "Hardly, Swan. It's only that if I'm to be putting my body parts on display, I'd rather it be for your benefit only."

Her brain is too quick for her—it instantly flashes back to the scene from yesterday morning: Hook standing nearly naked in his doorway. His pants were slung so low she could tell he wasn't wearing anything underneath—and that made her think he probably didn't have anything on while he slept, either. The skin of his chest and arms was paler than that of his face and hands, and there were scars there; some were clearly from gunshot wounds, and some were likely from a sword or knife. He wasn't muscular—captains didn't do the same hard labor as the rest of the crew, she knew, but he was slim and fit.

She'd barely caught a full glimpse of him before, during their first time in that darkened cabin below the deck of his ship, or their few rushed meetings after, in Storybrooke. The sight of his chest on display like that was...it was mesmerizing, and Emma wanted to see more—she wanted to see it all.

"What are you thinking, Swan?"

Emma jolts as Hook's voice drags her out of her fantasy. "Um, nothing," she says quickly, keeping her face turned away, hoping her warm cheeks don't reveal too much. "I was thinking about Ruby."

"Ah, the wolf," Hook says conversationally, although Emma swears she hears a trace of a laugh in his voice. "I didn't realize you and her were such good friends."

"We were," Emma says, slowly getting herself back under control. "At least, we were before everyone got their memories back and things got crazy around here. After that there wasn't a lot of time for having friends."

She recalls the night at the Rabbit Hole with Ruby, Mary Margaret, and Ashley.

Simpler times, she thinks.

"I see," Hook says, nodding to himself. "Did you have many friends in Boston?"

"None," Emma says, and she tries to say it lightly, as if it's a joke that doesn't bother her, but it doesn't work. It was a little pathetic the way her heart had leapt with joy when David mentioned yesterday that Ruby was in town—she tried to tell herself it was just relief that there was an adult in town she could talk to whom she also had a simple, uncomplicated relationship with, but really it was out of loneliness.

A friend provided a different sort of company than your kids or your parents or your...or Hook, and it was a kind of company she truly missed.

Hook throws her a sympathetic glance, then turns his eyes back to the forest floor.

"And what about, erm...other types of friends?"

"You mean like boyfriends?" Emma asks, knowing what he's thinking.

"Aye, those."

"No, not really," she says, and huffs out a breath. "It's hard to meet people when you've got a job and two kids to raise on your own—and it's even harder to meet someone who's not turned off by the
fact that both your kids have different dads."

Silence, and then, "Did you want to meet someone?"

"I don't know," she says. "I was pretty happy with it being just me and Henry and Ian. I...I sort of tried, once-"

Walsh.

She feels one massive ugh shudder through her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees his head turn sharply in her direction.

"Oh?" he asks, and she can hear how delicately he's asking, as if the wrong answer might break him.

"Yea, he—I just wanted there to be a guy around for the boys, you know? But he turned out to be a jerk."

"Did you love him?" Hook asks.

"No," Emma says, without hesitation.

His footsteps falter, and she sees him slow, but she keeps walking doggedly forward, dragging him with her.

"So tell me about the Enchanted Forest," she says, loudly, as if volume could slow her racing heart or stop the way Hook's eyes feel pleasantly hot on her skin when he looks at her. "I bet it was one swashbuckling adventure after the next."

"I left the Enchanted Forest, actually."

She pulls her head up and stops. "What? Really? Why?"

He stops too. "There was nothing for me there," he says softly. "Why would I stay?"

"Oh," she says, and she feels a stab of sadness for him—having her memories erased feels like a blessing now; she can't imagine what the past seven years must have been like for him. She feels a deep, gaping pit open inside her; a well of despair at the thought of him all alone while she, Henry, and Ian lived happily and totally oblivious.

His eyes remain steady on hers for a moment, then he jerks his head sideways, and they start walking again. "What about you, Swan," he says. "Tell me more about Boston. Did Henry and Ian like it?"

"Yea, they liked it." Thinking about her boys is calming, and she latches onto that thread like a lifeline. "There's always something to do—go to a baseball game, or go to the park, or just sit at home and watch a movie. The pizza wasn't great, but we survived."

"Do they have many friends?"

"Yea," she says, smiling. "Ian gets along with pretty much everyone. He has a huge crush on the girl who lives a few houses down—" Hook laughs, a deep, hearty laugh. "You should ask him about her sometimes," she suggests. "Her name's Sienna. He gets all red and embarrassed. It's really cute."

"I will," Killian chuckles. "And Henry?"

"Henry doesn't make friends as easily, but he has a few solid ones—well, he used to. Things sort of
fell apart this year."

"What happened?"

"There was this girl he liked-"

"Violet?"

Emma frowns. "Yea, how'd you know?"

"Ian mentioned her."

"Oh. Oh, God. Don't let him tease Henry about Violet. He doesn't get how much it actually upsets Henry."

"Understood," Hook says, nodding dutifully. "Continue with your story, please, Swan. I'm interested."

"Ah. Well, anyway," she says. "He was trying really hard to impress her, and he was positive she liked him back...and then she started dating his best friend."

"Ah," Hook sighs. "Poor lad."

"Yea," Emma says. "I think the worst part for him was that they were kind of flirting for a long time behind his back, and he had no idea. He probably would have gotten over it more easily if they had just told him what was going on. And now he's sort of cut off from his friend group because of them, which, you know, makes him feel even more lonely and betrayed."

"His heart will mend, Swan, just give him time."

"I know," she says, "but it's been two months and he's still really bummed out about it. On the bright side, I guess, he really threw himself into track and field this year. He beat the school's record for high jump and pole vaulting and got a scholarship out of it."

"What's pole vaulting?"

"You, like...use one really long stick to sort of shoot you over another horizontal stick that's up really high in the air," she says. She tries to use her arms to simulate pole vaulting, but it just looks like she's rowing a boat in midair, and Hook makes a face. "The ancient Greeks did it, shut up."

Hook quirks one eyebrow. "I don't think the Greeks ever did pole vaulting, Swan."

"They did too! And they did the other things—the running and the jumping," Emma says. "You know, the Olympics?"

The raised eyebrow remains, quivering skeptically.

"Whatever," Emma says, rolling her eyes but grinning nonetheless. "I think the whole ancient Greek thing is why Henry joined in the first place. He really likes all that history stuff—that's why Ian knows all the Greek gods."

"They're both clever lads."

"They are," Emma says, feeling a swell of pride. "They really are. Henry helped me a lot with Ian. I don't think that kid would be half as smart as he is if Henry didn't read to him so much."
"And you," Hook says.

"Hm?"

"Don't count yourself out, Swan. You read to him as well. Ian said as much. He told me you're rather good at doing the voices."

She stops short, and he does too.

"Hey, about last night," she says, and the confusion on his face makes her squeeze her eyes shut. "Sorry—you mentioning me reading to Ian reminded me of last night. I never really got to tell him the story of how we met, and you and I never really talked to him about...about us."

She opens her eyes to see his staring intently back.

"And we never really talked about us either," she says, and licks her suddenly dry lips. "I know this isn't the greatest place to do that, but I don't know when we might get another opportunity. I honestly think we might never get another chance to be alone."

Hooks nods, and waits—she realizes why, and suddenly there are butterflies throwing a house music concert in her stomach.

He already told her how he feels and what he wants, last night, and now he's waiting for her to say her part.

"I..." she pauses, trying to breathe, trying to find the courage to say what she means, to be open and honest the way he was. "I do feel something for you."

She sees hope steal across his face, quickly reined in.

"I just...I'm afraid." The confession leaves her lips on a quiet breath, and she feels soft and vulnerable, there on the inside, at her core—but she feels the steel of her backbone, as well, holding her together, keeping her upright and her eyes locked on Hook's. "Love hasn't really worked out for me in the past. And I'm afraid I just might not be capable of it anymore. I'm afraid my heart might be, you know, dead, or something."

Hook steps closer, so that she can feel his body heat, feel his long coat brushing her legs.

"Your heart still works, love," he says. "I promise you, it does. If you'll let me, I'll prove it."

He face tilts towards hers ever so slightly, and Emma's lips part involuntarily.

If she kisses him now, she knows she's agreeing to something. Agreeing to what?

His eyes are a blue she could easily—happily—drown in.

Agreeing to try.

She takes the next step.

His lips are already so close it takes little effort to close the gap, and she almost melts into him the moment her lips meet his. They're warm, like the rest of him, and incredibly soft and pliant. His stubble scratches her chin, but it's a pleasant contract, and it sends a little thrill down to her core.
Hook's hand lifts. His fingers ghost along her jaw before they bury themselves in her hair. She feels his lips part against hers, and his tongue lightly traces the seal of her lips. She opens to him, and he deepens their kiss, his tongue sliding warm and wet against hers. She breathes in, and it's like breathing him in.

His hook arm gently tugs her hips more firmly against his, and she finds her own hands gripping the front of his jacket, holding herself there, holding his body to hers. She wants more. She wants to kiss him until his lips and the feeling of his fingers pressed against the nape of her neck are the only thing she knows. She wants to pin him to a tree and work her hands under his shirt, feel his skin, drag her fingers through his chest hair. She wants to feel him inside her again, she wants to feel his heat inside and out.

She feels him stirring to life below, and she wants to dive in—she wants to drown—but she resists. She gently pulls her mouth from his, grazing her teeth against his lower lip and sucking on it slightly as a parting gift, and steps back.

His eyelids are drooping, and he's gazing blearily at her as though drunk. She feels lightheaded herself. There's a fire burning under her skin—it had just been a simmer before, but it's an inferno now. She remembers their kiss in Neverland—a one time thing, she told him, and herself—but she doesn't even have the ability to lie to herself this time.

This time, she knows, it's only the beginning.

"There's one thing though," she says, and his eyes snap open, his attention suddenly focused razor-sharp. "Ian. Whatever we do, I don't want to hurt him. Henry could handle it, he's old enough, he gets it—and he'll figure out what we're doing pretty quick. But...if we dated and it didn't work out...it would break Ian's heart."

And if Ian's heart breaks, so will hers.

"You want to keep it a secret from Ian?" Hook asks.

"For now," she says. "We can, you know, be friends in front of him. But I don't want him to know that we're trying to be more."

Her heart gives a flutter at the idea of more—of her and Hook being more.

"Aye, love," Hook says. "I agree-

A scream shatters the woods, and they both jolt and whip around, towards the sound.

"That was really close," Emma says. The wind roars to life, tearing through the trees, bringing them to life—where moments before the woods were still and hushed, now everything's in motion. The treetops sway, the bushes shake, and stray leaves swirl through the air.

There's another scream, even closer, and it sounds familiar.

"Robin," Hook says.

Shit.

Emma scans the trees, searching for the source, trying to concentrate over the noise and buffeting of the wind.

"This way," Hook barks suddenly, and tears off to the right. Emma doesn't even think to check her
phone, she just follows, running as fast as her legs will carry her.

Robin screams again, and again—until he's cut off abruptly.

Hook skids to a halt, and Emma stops beside him, slipping a bit in the mud.

"Where is he?" she pants. The wind's died down, and the woods are quiet again, but she can't hear anything over the sound of her thundering heart beat and her own heavy breathing.

"I don't know," Hook says, rotating slowly on the spot. Emma turns with him...

And then she sees it.

"There!" Emma says. One hand shoots out to grip his forearm, while the other raises to point ahead and to the left.

"Bloody hell," Hook breathes. "It's like Dark Hollow all over again."

Fifty yards away is a dense spot of woods, where the trees are clustered close together, and the ferns are thick and high. It's dark, of course, only there's something peculiar about it—it's too dark, and the darkness doesn't dissolve around the edges and fade naturally back into the light; it looks solid.

"We've gotta go in there," Emma says. "Robin might still be okay, if we hurry."

Hook looks doubtful—and from the way Robin screamed, Emma understands why—but he nods. He pulls a pistol from his coat (Emma's grateful Ian only found the knife and not the gun), crouches down, and creeps off towards the Shadow's lair.

Emma draws her own gun from its holster at the small of her back, and follows. She feels a little bubble of fear quivering inside her.

The Shadow.

It's really real, and she's afraid—a afraid because the last time they fought the Shadow, they needed magic to defeat it, and Emma's hasn't felt even the barest whisper of her own magic inside her since they arrived. She doesn't know what they're going to do, or what they can do.

They reach the edge of the strange darkness, and step into it. The heat increases instantly, and the humidity vanishes, as if they're inside an oven, and it's nearly pitch black. Emma blinks, trying to help her eyes to adjust to the dim, murky light; trying to locate Robin and the others.

They slink further in with cautious footsteps, feeling their way towards the center. Emma ignores the scrape of branches against her exposed skin, and the eerie caress of ferns and leaves she can't see. She focuses on Hook, and tries not to reach out and grab him.

She feels more than sees Hook drop down and to the side, and then she feels the cool metal of his hook slide around her wrist. He tugs her down to squat beside him, and whispers, "There."

There's a small clearing ahead of them, barely teen feet in diameter, and in the middle is a pile of bodies, heaped over each other like discarded dolls. On top is Robin, his sandy hair a slightly pale patch in the darkness.

"Emma," Killian says. "I'll grab Robin and get him out. I need you to go back the way we came and call for the others."

"No, I'm not leaving you-"
She doesn't get a chance to continue arguing, because with an unearthly shriek, Pan's Shadow swoops down upon them from behind. She ducks on instinct, but Hook's arm is over her shoulders, pulling her lower. The Shadow passes so closely overhead it bumps the back of her head. Hook removes his arm and they scramble to their feet.

The Shadow's hovering before them, over its mound of victims. Hook raises his pistol, but Emma's frozen. All she can do is stare—stare at the glowing eyes like twin flames that leave streaks of light behind her own eyes.

Fury erupts in her chest. This creature helped Pan torment Henry, it watched Ian sleep through the window last night, it kidnapped innocent people from their beds, and it hurt Robin. The Shadow curls in on itself, and then darts forward. Emma raises her gun to meet it, and-

Several sets of glowing eyes blink to life in the darkness, startling her, drawing her eyes away from Pan's Shadow.

"Get down!" Hook shouts, and shoves her roughly out of the way. In her surprise she stumbles and lands on her ass in the mud. Her gun falls from her fingers and hits the ground with a thump somewhere to her right. There's a crack of gunfire above her, and a burst of light, and she looks up to see the Shadow descend upon Hook.

He yells, trying to fend it off with his hook, but it dodges the blow and reaches its arms into Hook's chest. Hook screams as, with a terrible sound like fabric being ripped, the Shadow gives a mighty heave and the upper part of Hook's shadow is jerked from his body. It struggles madly for a second, and then the Shadow heaves again, pulling it even further from Hook's body, nearly down to his waist.

Fuck, not again!

Emma's seen this before, she's been here before.

She stands and faces the Shadow. Around it and Hook are other Shadows, hovering, watching.

Not again!

Hook's screams fill her ears as there's another sound like rending cloth and his shadow is pulled free to his knees.

NOT AGAIN!

Something's boiling under her skin, something bubbly and pleasantly cool, something that fills her up and makes her feel jittery, something that's begging to be released.

So Emma releases it.

With a roar she clenches every muscle in her body tight, and then let's go. A wave of shimmery white light bursts from her, illuminating the clearing. The Shadow recoils as Emma's magic approaches, and then it shrieks and writhes as it passes through, raising white patches all over its body that glow and hiss and ooze steam. With a final screech it tumbles backwards, and Emma thinks it's over, only instead of falling to the ground, it zooms away, out into the woods, and disappears.

Emma's entire body is tingling, but her grip on her magic is gone, as if it was never there in the first place. The light dies, but it takes the unnatural darkness and the other Shadows with it, leaving behind just the normal gloom of dense northern woods. Hook's lying crumpled on the ground, and
Emma falls to her knees beside him. She takes him by the shoulders, rolls him onto his back, and shakes him.

"Hook!" she yells. "Hook! Come back to me!"

His head lolls from side to side as she shakes him, and her fingers tighten on his jacket.

*I was just kissing you, you asshole! Wake up! Don't do this to me!*

"**KILLIAN!**" she bellows.

With a shudder, he jerks back to life, and stares around wildly, disoriented. Then his eyes fix on hers.

"Emma," he says.

There's shouting in the woods from all around, approaching fast.

"Here!" she calls. "We're in here!"

She turns back to Hook—he's still blinking up at her—and then she lifts her head to look at the pile of bodies lying at the center of the circle of trees.

"*Fuck,*" she says.
My apologies for the long wait. My summer job's over, and I've gotten a few Cygnets chapters out of my system, so I'm ready to get back to work on this beast. The next chapter should be finished fairly soon, but after that updates will probably go back to being about one every two weeks, hopefully not longer!

Hook says they're all still technically alive, but they don't look alive.

Nor do they look like they're sleeping, or in a coma.

They look *dead*.

Emma's seen death before, and this is it. Death is cold, gray skin, death is a slack face and limp limbs, death is not opening your eyes when someone's shaking you and screaming your name in your ear.

Yet, when David rolls Robin off the pile of other bodies and presses his fingers to Robin's neck, just below his jaw, he looks up at Emma and says, "He has a pulse."

So, not dead.

But very close.

It takes hours to get all the people—Emma tries not to think of them as *bodies*—out of the woods and into the hospital. Emma's pushed to the side as the Merry Men and the dwarves form teams and carry each person carefully from the clearing—and that's fine, because Emma doesn't want to look.

She *can't* look. She can't fucking look because every time she does she thinks: *That could have been Henry; that could have been Ian.* And then her mind *imagines* it, conjures up a picture of Henry and Ian's lifeless bodies, lying like discarded husks in the mud and the ferns.

She's seen Henry near death twice before, first with Regina's poisoned apple turnover, and then when Pan stole his heart. And Ian...

*Ian.*

*Her baby.*

There was that accident, at the public pool, when she thought- *No.*

*Stop.*

But her brain doesn't listen, her brain dredges up the memory of the sudden hush that fell over the room, of the frightened, teenaged life guard with a face as white as a sheet, and the kid he was pulling from the water, whose skin was even paler...
Henry again, eyes closed, looking peaceful-

Something brushes her arm and she startles—nearly screaming. Hook's standing there, one hand upraised. He's watching her like some wild, scared animal he's trying to calm, and she can't imagine what her face must look like. He reaches out again, but she shrugs him off and shakes her head—her skin's crawling, and if someone touches her right now she's going to explode.

They've apparently reached the road without her realizing it—probably why Hook was trying to get her attention. There's a line of ambulances awaiting them, and Emma can't believe she didn't see the flashing lights or hear the idling engines before just now. Paramedics jump out with stretchers and rush to relieve the Merry Men and the dwarves of their burdens. Emma keeps her back turned, staring out at the trees, at the strange, hypnotic way the ambulance lights illuminate the leaves in alternating bursts of red and white.

"Emma."

That's David, somewhere close behind her.

"C'mon. The ambulances are all set. We're going to follow them to the hospital."

Emma nods but doesn't say anything, nor does she meet anyone's eyes as she walks to the squad car and gets in the backseat. Hook slides in beside her, and she sees him looking at her, feels the air between them tense suddenly with the words he wants to say—but he closes his mouth and remains silent.

Part of her is relieved, but part of her wants her to crawl over and bury her face in Hook's collar.

At the hospital, David convinces Whale to section off a discreet corner of the 3rd floor and clear out an adjacent waiting room for them. Emma knows her dad wants to avoid spreading panic, but she thinks it's unlikely all the people in the ER waiting room on the first floor missed the five gurneys being wheeled in at once.

While Whale and a team of doctors and nurses file from room to room, examining Robin, Little John, and the three other victims—one elderly woman, one man who looks to be in his fifties, and one lady close to Emma's age—Emma and the others wait in the hall.

She's coming back to herself a little bit, but that just makes the nightmarish images in her head harder to bear, because now they feel more solid, more real, so she paces, hoping to somehow outrun her own thoughts. She can feel Hook watching her, but every time she looks over he's occupied with the removal of dirt from beneath his nails—which Emma spares a few brain cells to note is an absolutely ridiculous pursuit considering how muddy the rest of him is.

After a while, the Merry Men shuffle off to the waiting room, and David relieves the dwarves.

"Thanks for all your help today," he says, clapping Doc on the shoulder. "I'll keep you guys updated, okay? See you tomorrow."

They're silent as they trudge in a group down the hallway and around the corner—not even Leroy has anything to say. David watches them leave, then turns to Ruby.

"What do you think the Shadow wants?" Ruby asks in a low voice.

Emma keeps her eyes down and her feet moving, but she listens.
"I don't know," David says. "What's the point of ripping out people's shadows, anyway? I thought it only did that on Pan's orders?"

"Could Pan still be alive? Do you think he cast the Curse?"

"No," Hook says. "If Pan were alive, we doubtless would have heard of it by now."

"Yea, I agree," David says. "Plus, if Pan cast the Curse, we wouldn't have our memories."

"Aye, we'd all be slaves in his 'New Neverland', and he our lord and master."

"Ugh," Ruby says, with a shudder in her voice. "Fuck that little creep."

"Indeed."

"So, what then?" David asks. "Shadow army?"

"Perhaps," Hook answers slowly. "The Shadow is an ancient creature that occupied that island long before Peter Pan ever showed up. Not much is known about it, although it was a popularly held belief amongst my crew that the more shadows it gained, the more powerful it became."

Emma stops abruptly, and everyone's eyes jump to her. "There had to be hundreds of lost shadows in Dark Hollow," she says. "If that's true, and Pan's Shadow was really powerful, then why did it let Pan boss it around?"

"I'm not certain," Hook says. His voice is steady, but there's worry in his blue eyes that Emma knows has nothing to do with Pan's Shadow. She tries to summon up a smile—or at least a less anguished expression—but it's as if her face is made of stone.

"Well," Ruby says, "can we at least assume that the Shadow's on its own now, and making up for lost time?"

Before anyone can answer her, Whale steps out of the room nearest them. He drops his clipboard to his side and sticks his pen in the breast pocket of his white coat. "Do you want the bad news first, or the good news?" he asks.

David glances at Emma. She presses her lips together, and says tersely, "Bad."

"The bad news is that one of your victims didn't make it."

Emma feels as if someone plunged their hands into her abdomen and squeezed her insides.

"Who?" Ruby asks.

"Adelaide Brown," Whale says. "She was elderly."

Emma pictures the small, frail body of an old woman they removed from near the bottom of the pile. She had a long, white nightdress matched by long, white hair, and one pink slipper—Emma can't imagine how it managed to stay on. The Merry Men had taken care not to lose that slipper as they carried her from the clearing, as if the slipper was somehow important.

Fuck.

The fingers digging into her intestines clench a bit tighter.

"It's likely she died from the initial trauma of having her shadow removed," Whale says.
"Aye, some people do," Hook says quietly.

Emma wonders how many comrades he lost to the Shadow—how many friends.

David scrubs his hand along his brow. "What's the good news?" he asks tiredly.

"The good news is the others did survive."

Emma snaps her head up and stares. "That's it?"

"What were you expecting?" Whale asks.

"I don't know. Can you revive them? Can you—" she waves her hands around, floundering, "Put them on life support or something? Hook said we can reunite them with their shadows as long as their bodies don't-"

"Life support would be pointless," Whale cut in snidely. "They're not coma patients, Ms. Swan. They've had their shadows removed, and that's not something science or medicine can cure. I truly can't predict what will happen, in the long run. All we can do is keep them and monitor them until hopefully you find their shadows."

Emma turns away. Hook's a few feet behind her, leaning against the wall with his thumb hooked through his belt. Ruby and David are standing a little to the side with their arms crossed over their chests. All three of them are watching her, waiting.

She wants to shout, Why aren't you saying anything? Why are you still letting me lead?

Emma can't do this thing—this fucking Sheriff-Savior thing—it isn't her anymore. Her failure to find the Shadow soon enough got three innocent people kidnapped, and it was her shitty plan that got Robin hurt.

She looks to her dad, pleadingly. She sees his brows contract, and a little crease appear between them, but then his expression clears, settles into something hard, authoritative, and he turns to Whale.

"Do everything you can to keep them alive," he says. "We'll find their shadows."

Whale nods. "I'm going to have to contact their families. Is there anything in particular you'd like me to tell them?"

"Let me worry about that," David says. "Just get them to the hospital. I'll explain."

Whale leaves, walking back up the hallway towards the nurses' station at the end.

"Shit," Ruby swears suddenly.

"What?" Emma asks.

"Roland," Ruby says, eyes darting between Emma and David. "What are we going to tell him?"

Emma tries to think what she would want, if she were in Robin's situation. She sure as hell wouldn't want the boys to see her half-dead, but it would be worse if something happened to her and they never got a chance to say goodbye.

Then she looks at Hook. If Hook was lying in one of those hospital beds right now, she wouldn't have the heart to keep it from Ian.
She turns back to Ruby. "You can't hide his dad from him," she says. "Just...lie. Tell him Robin will be alright. We're searching for a cure. It's just going to take some time."

"Alright," Ruby says.

"Who's going to take care of him while Robin's in the hospital?" David asks.

"Belle and I can," Ruby says, then shrugs. "We're basically his moms anyway. And I don't trust a bunch of idiots who smell like pine cones to take care of that kid. He's too sweet for sleeping in tents and bathing in mud puddles. If Little John were here it'd be different, but..."

She trails off.

"You guys are all friends, huh?" Emma asks.

"Yea," Ruby says. Her lips compress. "Me and Belle, Robin, your parents, Little John...we're close."

And now it's all falling apart, Emma thinks. Whoever cast the Dark Curse and fucked up everyone's lives likely did it to get to Emma, and now she was fucking things up worse with her incompetence.

The images are back: Henry's body, Ian's body...

That could have been them.

Something's welling up inside of her, something uncontrollable, and she can't tell if it's tears or puke or just sheer panic, but she knows she needs to get out of that hallway, away from Hook and Ruby and her dad.

"Be right back," she says, and pushes brusquely past Ruby and David.

"Where are you going?" David asks.

"To clean up," she manages to say, just as she turns the corner. She can see the sign for the rest rooms up ahead, and she focuses on it, keeps her eyes locked on the tiny stick figure in a dress until she throws open the door and stumbles to the sink. She grips the edges, feeling the cool porcelain quickly grow warm beneath her palms.

She gets that strange bubbly feeling just below her skin again, and before she can stop it or even recognize what's about to happen, her magic bursts out of her in a blinding wave. She staggers backwards and raises her arms to shield her face. Around her, she hears snapping and banging, thuds and crashes, in a continuous tidal wave of noise. She holds still, eyes squeezed shut, waiting...

Finally, there's silence. Emma opens her eyes, and gasps. The mirrors are cracked and hanging sideways; one has fallen and lies smashed on the floor in a glittering pool of broken glass. All the sinks and most of the pipes have come away from the wall, knocking off tiles and creating gashes in the plaster. The stall doors are dented, and two are hanging off one hinge. The lights overhead are blinking erratically, and Emma hears an electric buzzing that definitely wasn't there before.

"Swan."

She spins. Hook's there, staring around at the ruined bathroom, stunned.

"What are you going in here?" she hisses. "This is the lady's room."

"Aye," he says with a grin. "I gathered that from the sign on the door. I'm quite perceptive, you know."
"Not perceptive enough to know when not to follow me," she huffs.

His expression soberes, and his blue eyes regard her seriously. "Do you feel better?"

"What?"

"This," he says, and gestures around. "Do you feel better now, Swan?"

Emma wants to be angry, she wants to be annoyed—but she isn't. She has to admit, she actually does feel calmer now, somehow. She has that peculiar feeling of relief you get after you've thrown up everything in your stomach, and you know you can finally relax because the worst is over. She feels empty, but in a good way.

She lets out a deep breath. "Yea."

"Good," Hook says. "I mean—not good for this privy, but good for you. I know what you were thinking, Swan. None of this is your fault. There's nothing you could have done for that woman."

Emma shakes her head, drops her eyes to her boots.

There is something she could have done—she could have fucking found that thing before it snatched three innocent people from their beds.

Hook takes a step forward, and Emma almost jumps backwards.

"Don't," she says, holding up a hand. He halts, and the hurt that flashes across his face sends a spike of agony through her chest. "I'm sorry, I just—I can't. Not when Robin and the others are lying in hospital beds because of me. It doesn't feel fair."

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to those people."

"Can't I?" she spits. He opens his mouth, his intent to argue clear on his face, but Emma bulldozes right over him. "I'm getting the boys out," she says. "Before they end up here too."

She clenches her fists and glares a challenge at him, trying to pretend like she isn't as surprised by her own words as he is.

Fuck.

She's been thinking it this whole time—ever since Leroy announced to her 5-year-old that there's a monster in the woods. And after today...she can't ignore that voice anymore. She can't ignore the part of her that knows she can't keep the boys here, not when there's a safer alternative.

"You're leaving," Hook says, and there's desolation in his voice.

"No," she says firmly. "You are."

He blinks, expression shifting from pain to confusion in an instant. "Pardon?"

"I want you to go with Ian and Henry to Boston," she says, slowly and clearly. "I have to stay here and clean up this mess, but they can't stay. It's not safe."

She can see him considering it.

"Please, Hook. There's no one else I trust to go with them and protect them."
He ducks his head, eyelids fluttering half-shut. "Emma, I'll go. Of course I'll go, but," he pauses, licks his lips, "I have to ask, love: is this your way of getting rid of me? Do you regret what happened earlier?"

He raises his eyes to hers, hesitantly, and she gazes back steadily.

"No," she says. "I haven't changed my mind."

*I want you.*

The thought shivers through her, warming her from the top of her head to her core to her toes and fingertips.

*I want you more than I've wanted anything in a long time.*

Yet, she can't find the courage to say it out loud.

Not yet.

Hook nods tightly, unaware of her burning thoughts. "When would you have us leave?" he asks.

"As soon as we get out of here, which-" she looks around. "Shit. What am I gonna do about all this?"

"Can you fix it with magic?"

"No."

*Not unless I get really, really angry again—or scared. Or both.*

"Then I say we leave quickly and pretend we had nothing to do with it," Hook says.

Emma chokes back a laugh. "Are you serious-"

But he's already scampering out the door. He holds it open for her with his hook, raises one eyebrow questioningly, and jerks his head back towards where David and Ruby are still waiting. "Coming?" he asks.

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"Is everything alright?" David asks, forehead crinkling. "We thought we heard-"

"Nope, everything's fine," Emma says briskly, striding right past him and Ruby. "C'mon. Let's get back to the loft before mom starts worrying."

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Back at the loft, they find Snow and the boys sitting at the kitchen table. Snow looks up when Emma, Hook, and Ruby enter.

"Where's David?" she asks.

"He's back at the, um, place. He had to talk to a few people," Emma says.

Henry nods a greeting before re-burying his nose in a what looks like some sort of medieval fencing manual. Ian doesn't look up at all—he's drawing, concentrating hard on his paper with his tongue
poking out, stuck between his teeth. Spread across the table is a jumble of Crayola markers, and
Emma's trained eye spots at least four different types.

She raises as eyebrow. "Really?"

"What?" Snow asks innocently. "We didn't have anything to draw with."

"So you bought one of everything?"

"Well, I was informed that each pack has a unique set of colors, and only the neon pack has the right
color for your hair," Snow says.

"Laser lemon," Ian says, without looking up.

"And only the bold colors pack has your eye color."

"Emerald," Ian mumbles.

Emma would be lying if she said she'd never been coerced by that argument before. She's seen
enough of Ian's classmates' artwork to know that her kid has something most other kids don't when it
comes to drawing, so she doesn't feel guilty indulging him when it comes to art supplies. She can
probably recite the list of every Crayola marker color in every pack and their various uses: Infra Red,
for instance, is apparently the color of One-Eyed Jim, whereas Classic Red is more for Hellboy.

"I thought I told you you're too young to read Hellboy," she said, when he told her.

Ian looked her straight in the eye and answered, "I don't read it. I just look at the pictures."

Emma technically couldn't argue with him, but she did tell Henry to put his Mature-rated comics
somewhere Ian couldn't access them—not that it worked.

She turns to Henry. "And what did grandma buy for you, hm?"

Henry grins. "She checked these out of the library for me," he says, indicating the stack of books at
his elbow—all with titles relating to sword fighting, fencing, and one about archery. "They're not a
replacement for actual lessons, but they're interesting."

It's surreal, almost, seeing the boys so at ease while Emma has the memory of what happened only a
few miles away in the woods excruciatingly fresh in her memory. She's reluctant to drag reality into
the loft and end what looks like a tranquil afternoon for them.

Five more minutes, she tells herself. Five more minutes and then I'll tell them they're going back to
Boston.

Emma sits at the table across from Ian, and almost groans at how good it feels to give her legs a rest;
two and a half days of slogging through the woods has her entire body sore and exhausted. She
needs a lava hot shower and about 12 hours of sleep—she wouldn't say no to a glass of wine, either

Hook takes the chair next to her, and leans carefully across the table, eyes on Ian's paper.

"May I ask what you're drawing?" he says.

"Mom fighting a dragon," Ian says. "It's for grandma."

"That's what you want a picture of?" Emma asks her mom.
Snow shrugs. "We didn't have any pictures of you in the Enchanted Forest. We tried commissioning a painter for a portrait, but that didn't turn out so well since all he had to go on was our descriptions. I think Ian's actually doing a way better job so far."

Ian pulls his head up suddenly. "Mom, what color was the drag-"

He catches sight of Ruby and his mouth drops open. His face goes totally red—even his ears turn scarlet.

Ruby sees, and grins wolfishly. "Well, hello there," she says, arching an eyebrow.

"Hi," he breathes.

Ruby puts her elbows on the table and bends nearly in half to bring herself down to Ian's level. She's wearing a very low-cut shirt, Emma notices, and she's not exactly lacking in the lady-attributes department—nor is her lacy red bra anything near what Emma might call wholesome or tame.

"What's your name, cutie?" Ruby says, and Ian actually seems to shrink in place. His eyes widen, but only a squeak comes out of his mouth in answer.

"Oh my God, Ruby," Emma hisses. "He's five, he doesn't need to see that much cleavage. Will you put your boobs away, please?"

Henry's biting his lip and shaking with silent laughter. Emma reaches over and smacks his arm.

As if I know you're not enjoying the show too, bud.

Ruby smirks sideways at Emma and starts to stand-

"IAN!" Ian shouts. "My name's Ian."

"Nice to meet you, Ian," Ruby says. "I'm Ruby. I'm your mom and your grandma's friend."

"Are you real?" Ian asks.

Henry loses it—he snorts and doubles over, laughing hysterically into his book.

Ruby smirks smugly, and looks pointedly Killian. "Like father, like son, huh?"

Now Killian flushes crimson.

"Ruby," Snow says sternly.

"I know, I know," Ruby says, rolling her eyes. "Let me have a little fun, mom. Geez."

Ian's still staring. Keeping his eyes on Ruby, he turns his head slightly towards Henry, and whispers, "Henry, who is she?"

Henry recovers enough to clear his throat and say, "You're gonna like this one: she's Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf."

Ian makes a face. "Both?"

"Yea. Her red cloak has a magic spell on it that keeps her from turning into a wolf during the full moon."
Ian regards Ruby for another moment, then squints at her and asks, in a tone of complete and utter disbelief, "Can you really turn into a wolf?"

Ruby just winks, which seems to remind Ian that he's lovestruck, and he returns to blushing and gawking mutely.

Smiling exactly like the cat that ate the canary—or the wolf that ate the grandma, whatever—Ruby turns to Snow. "Where's Belle?" she asks.

"Oh," Snow says. "She left with Roland. She thought she was meeting you at the—the, uh, the place."

Ruby sighs and slips her cell phone out of her jeans pocket. "I love her, but sometimes...if I had written my message in a book instead of texting it, then she would have gotten it."

Something clicks into place.

"Wait," Emma says. "Are you and Belle—at the hospital, when you said 'you and Belle', you meant you and Belle?"

Henry frowns at Ian with mock sympathy. "Sorry, Ian. Ruby's got a girlfriend. Looks like she's already taken."

"Oh, I don't know," Ruby says appraisingly, lifting her eyes from her phone screen to look at Ian again. "Belle might share-"

"Okay," Emma says sharply, rising from the table. She takes Ruby's shoulder, spins her towards the door, and pushes her in that direction, muttering, "Please don't make me have to explain polyamory to my 5-year-old right now."

I've got to get him past mommy and Hook are dating, first.

"Ruby, let us know if you need anything," Snow calls after them.

As Emma steers Ruby onto the landing and closes the front door behind them, she hears Ian whispering to Henry. "Can someone have a boyfriend and a girlfriend?"

Christ.

"I like him, Emma," Ruby says. "He's a cutie."

"He is," Emma says, smiling. "Thanks."

Ruby cocks her head. "Hook looks pretty enamored, as well."

"With me, or with Ian?" Emma asks, before she can stop herself.

"Both, obviously. But I meant Ian."

"Yea," Emma says, nodding slowly. "I think he's in it for real."

"Good. Because if he hurts you or that kid, I'll hurt him."

Emma chuckles. "I don't think you have to worry about that, but I appreciate the sentiment." She folds her arms over her stomach, where anxious little butterflies are tickling her insides—she has to go back in there and tell the boys they're leaving, and she's suddenly nervous.
"Hey," she says, "will you and Belle really be okay taking care of Roland?"

"Yea, we'll be fine. We really are basically his moms. Ooh, maybe we can do one of those play dates where we hang out together with our kids. I seem to remember that being a thing in this world."

"I can't picture you being that domestic," Emma says skeptically.

Ruby smiles wickedly. "I never said there wouldn't be margaritas involved."

Emma laughs and hugs Ruby goodbye. She waits until she hears Ruby leave the building before she goes back inside the loft. Everyone's still at the table, only Ian's managed to insinuate himself onto Hook's lap and is now proudly showing him his stack of drawings.

"This is One-Eyed Jim and Roger," Ian says. He holds up a picture of a red octopus and an orange crab, tentacle and claw locked in friendship, and then produces the stuffed animal for comparison. "I accidentally did too many legs though. But I think I did his eyes good."

Hook just looks in awe, and the whole thing warms Emma's heart. First off, she mentioned One-Eyed Jim once; once and Hook remembered—he remembered and then thought to buy Ian another stuffed animal to have around as a friend. Secondly, she knows it can be hard for people (especially guys) not used to kids to interact with them, but Hook just...he just does it—and it's genuine.

Ruby was right: Hook's enamored. Finding out they had a kid together wasn't a burden or a disappointment to him...it was a miracle.

"Who's that?" Hook asks, delicately touching the drawing with a forefinger.

"That's me," Ian says brightly.

"Why are you so small?"

"I'm not. Roger and Mr. Jim are just really big. That's what they'd look like if they were alive."

Hook chuckles. "That's brilliant," he says, and Ian beams. Then he notices Emma.

"Mom! Do you wanna see my drawings?"

"I sure do, kid," she says. "Can you show me after dinner though? Henry and I are going to take a walk to Granny's and pick up something to eat."

Henry looks up quickly from his book, and Emma gives him a meaningful look, which he catches.

"Uh, right," he says, and stands up from the table.

"Can I come too?" Ian asks.

"Why don't you stay here with your dad and finish showing him your drawings?" Emma suggests.

"Aye, lad. I've love to see the rest," Hook says.

"Okay," Ian says. Emma goes to him and drops a kiss on top of his head.

"Grilled cheese and fries?" she asks.

"Yea!"
"Hook?"

"I'll let you decide, love."

"Mom?"

"I could really go for some lasagna, if you don't mind," Snow says. "Can you get your father a cheeseburger? I'm sure he'll be hungry when he gets back."

"No problem," Emma says, and follows Henry from the loft.

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As soon as they're outside, Emma takes Henry by the arm and pulls him into a hug. He's taller than she is, and he has to bow his shoulders for her to be able to tuck her chin over them.

"Mom, what happened today?" he asks.

She squeezes him tighter. "Are you sure you wanna know?"

"Yea."

Emma steps back, and tells him. Henry's not nearly as surprised as Emma thinks he should be. He actually looks like he expected it.

"Ian said he had a dream about a shadow with glowing eyes," Henry says, as they start heading towards Granny's. "I kinda figured it might be real."

"Yea. It is," Emma says. "I'm sorry."

Henry shrugs. He's silent for a while, staring at the cement as they walk, chewing the inside of his lip. "So, your magic's back?"

"Sort of," Emma says. "I can't really, um, control it. Like, right now?" She lifts both hands, palm up, and wiggles her fingers. "Nothing."

"We should find someone to teach you how to use it, you know? Like a master sorcerer or something."

"How? Put an ad in the paper?"

"Actually...yea. There's gotta be someone here who can use magic. And, I mean, Regina's not here, so..."

They fall back into silence. The sun's low, throwing long shadows across their path, and it makes Emma shiver. This should be a peaceful time of day, what with the beautifully painted orange, yellow, and pink sky, and the streets nearly deserted because everyone's inside eating dinner—but instead, it feels ominous.

Emma halts and turns to face Henry. "There's something else we need to talk about."

Henry stops too. "What?"

"Storybrooke's in a lot of danger right now—you and Ian are in a lot of danger. The Shadow's still out there, and we already know it was watching us through the window last night."
"Yea," Henry says, voice hard—yet, underneath, she hears a small quaver.

"If something happens to you or Ian, I will die—I will literally die. Or I'll kill everyone in sight. Or both. Whatever. But I can't let anything happen to you two."

"What's your point?" Henry asks apprehensively. He can tell she's leading up to something.

"I want you and Ian to go back to Boston."

"Mom-

"Listen," she says. She grabs his arms, and squeezes them reassuringly. "I can't lose you again. And I can't lose Ian. I won't."

In her mind, she sees Henry at 10-years-old, lying in a hospital bed, and then when he's 12, crumpling to the ground as Peter Pan walks away with his heart; she sees Ian, soaking wet and sprawled beside the pool, and the terrified lifeguard performing chest compressions...

"Please, Henry," she says. "It's not forever. It's just until I know it's safe here again. Then you guys can come back."

"I want to stay here," he says.

"Henry-

"No, I mean—I want to live in Storybrooke. Not now—I get that we need to leave so you can protect the town from Pan's Shadow. That's fine. But I mean after that. I want to live here."

"I know you do," she says.


"Y'know...

She drops her hands from his arms and folds them over her chest. "Do you really want to have this conversation right now?" she asks.

He nods stubbornly. She sighs and turns away, and watches the clouds for a moment while she gathers her thoughts. Finally, she looks back at Henry. "I don't know if I can live in a place where we're constantly in danger. I don't know if I can..." she trails off, huffs out a breath, "I don't know if I can be the Savior anymore. I think those days are long behind me, kid. Now...I don't want to be some hero. I just wanna be your mom. That's all."

"But what about Hook?" he asks insistently.

Emma wishes he wasn't so perceptive, or clever.

She shrugs. "I don't see why Hook has to stay in Storybrooke. He can move to Boston with us. There're plenty of apartments and plenty of jobs—even for a guy with one hand."

"What about grandma and grandpa?"

"They can move to Boston too."

"They can't. These people are their people. They're not just going to abandon their kingdom."
"Alright, then they can visit. Boston's not that far, and I'm sure even Kings and Queens get vacations."

Henry licks his lips. He looks hesitant to say what he's about to say next. "What about Regina?" he asks quietly. "And my dad? I know...I know Neal's not like Hook, and I know Regina's not great either, but...I still want to know what happened to them—if they're still even alive."

Henry doesn't share much—he's like her, he keeps everything on the inside. He seeks out information, absorbs it, and processes it internally. Very rarely does he seek out advice, or look to her for solace. His maturity and his wisdom are things Emma's always admired, and things that have made raising him and Ian on her own so easy—she could always count on him to be there, to understand what she needs from him, what their little family needs from him, and to step up.

She looks at him. He resembles Neal a bit, more than he resembles her, but she thinks these past few years he's grown to look like David, as well—he's definitely going to be as tall as David, or taller, and he's got a bit of the muscular thing going on from track and pole vaulting.

He almost looks like an adult, but deep down inside, Emma knows he's still a kid—a kid who was forced to grow up too fast.

And part of that's on her.

"Henry, we will find out what happened to them," she says. "I promise."

I won't let you down.

He looks away, emotions warring on his face, and Emma hugs him again. His arms go around her a little too quick this time.

"Everything's going to be all right," she says. "I know there's a lot going on right now. Let's just...let's try to take things one at a time, okay?"

He nods.

"My first priority is keeping you and Ian safe. After that...we can figure out the rest."

"Yea," Henry says. He pulls away and steps back. He wipes his eyes discreetly on his sleeve and Emma pretends not to notice.

When he's composed himself, she says, "There's one more thing."

"What?"

"Hook's going with you to Boston."

---

Her parents aren't happy that Emma's sending the boys away, but they get it.

"I think that's a good idea," David says, and his eyes stray to Ian. "It's not safe here right now."

Ian's confused, and suspicious, but Emma knows just how to convince him.

"Henry's going," she says. "He's going to drive you and Hook back to Boston, and you guys can hang out in the apartment for a few days."
"Can I take Roger?"

"Definitely. You have to introduce him to Mr. Jim, right?"

"Right," Ian says solemnly. "Can I take my new markers?"

"I think you should leave those here for when you come back. You have markers at home."

"Okay. Can I show my dad my room?"

"Yep. And you can show him how to use the TV, and the microwave, and all the other things they don't have on pirate ships."

Ian crinkles his nose in a smile, and Emma kisses his forehead.

"I'm gonna miss you," she says. She has her hands on his arms, and she rubs her thumbs back and forth, over the knobby elbows and the fuzzy baby hairs.

"I'm gonna miss you, too."

"Will you keep an eye on Henry for me? Make sure he eats all his vegetables and goes to bed on time?"

Ian grins savagely. "Yea."

They eat dinner together, Emma, her parents, the boys, and Hook, and then they go outside so David and Snow can say their goodbyes. They hug Ian and Henry tight and kiss their cheeks before releasing them into the backseat of the yellow bug.

"I'll be right back," Emma says.

"We'll be waiting," Snow says. She and David are standing on the sidewalk, arms around each other's waists. Snow has her hand resting on David's chest, over his heart.

"Be safe," David says. "We'll see you in a little bit."

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It's dark by the time they reach the town line. Emma pulls the bug over to the side of the road, and parks it. She cranes around to peer into the backseat. Ian's already asleep, lying with his head in Henry's lap, using Roger as a pillow.

"Stay here with Ian for a sec," Emma says. "I'm gonna talk to Hook really quick. Keep the doors locked, alright?"

"Okay," Henry says.

She gets out, and Hook follows. The woods are pitch black, save for what's illuminated by the bug's headlights, but she keeps her eyes purposely fixed straight ahead, not allowing herself to wonder what might be in the trees, just out of sight. They walk up to the 'Welcome to Storybrooke' sign, putting some distance between themselves and the bug, and stop.

There're a million thoughts racing through her brain: Don't let him eat too much junk food; don't let him go to bed later than 9; make sure he takes a bath every night and actually uses soap; don't let him wear the same pair of underwear two days in a row...
The list goes on and on, but when she raises her eyes to Hook's, everything falls away, and all she can say is, "Thank you for doing this."

"Of course."

She takes a deep breath. "I called Ian's school and told them there's a family emergency and he won't be back for the last two weeks. Henry graduated already so he doesn't have school either." She smiles. "All you guys need to do is have fun."

"I think we can manage that," Hook says, grinning back.

"Do you have any questions? I mean, Henry and Ian can pretty much tell you anything you need to know-"

"Would you mind if, perhaps, Henry showed me some pictures? Of Ian, when he was younger?"

There's a desperate eagerness in his voice, and although Emma's first thought is that she'd prefer to be there when he does see those pictures, so she can tell him about each one, and see his reactions, she says, "Yea. We have a ton. Henry can show you where to find them."

He smiles then, excitedly, and Emma wants to kiss him, but she's aware of Henry watching—or not watching, really. Knowing him he probably has his eyes politely turned away, but it just doesn't feel right to make-out right in front of him, especially since she hasn't really talked to him about her and Hook potentially dating (not that he doesn't clearly already suspect a few things).

"Call me when you get there, okay?" she says.

"Aye," he says, nodding, and she sees in his eyes the same thing, the same longing to reach out and touch.

It takes a massive effort to turn away from him and force her legs to carry her back towards the car. She reaches for the door, but as soon as her fingers touch the door handle, there's a rumble behind them, and the ground suddenly heaves beneath her feet, pitching her sideways. She lands hard on her hands and knees, but throws herself back to her feet immediately, only to be knocked down again immediately, this time onto her ass.

There's a terrible sound like an avalanche, or a rock slide, and Emma looks up to see a massive wall rising up out of the ground, rising higher and higher, climbing towards the sky as if eager to reach the stars. She hears crashes from the forest that tell her the wall is spreading, surrounding them—surrounding Storybrooke.

"Mom!" Henry yells.

"Stay in the car!" she shouts back.

She can't see Hook, but she guesses he's somewhere on the other side of the bug.

Finally, everything stops shaking, and Emma stands up.

Hook appears, racing around the front of the car to gain her side. The ground gives one last shiver, and she wobbles a bit, tilting into him, but hand and hook dart out to steady her by her arms.

"You alright?" he asks, eyes wide.

"Yea, I'm fine."
They turn together, to look at the enormous rock wall now blocking the road.

"Looks like we're not going to Boston, after all," Hook says.
Not gonna lie, I've been struggling with this one for a few days, and I just can't get in the mindset to really get in there and flesh out the details and make it LIVE, but I don't think I'm ever going to get there and I'm really tired of wrestling with it, so I'm posting it as is, and saving my energy for the next chapter. In any case, THANK YOU SO MUCH for all your wonderful comment on the last chapter!!! They really brought joy to my heart :)

Four days later

"I thought you said we were going on a stakeout," Ian says.

"We are," Emma answers. "See? We're in the squad car and everything. Stakeout."

Ian looks out his window and then back at her. "This is the beach."

"Yep."

It's a tiny, rundown old beach, and it's one of Emma's favorite spots. It's far enough north of the town center—and far enough away from the larger, more usable beaches—that no one seems to bother with it much, except for the occasional dog-walker. It's the perfect place to park and enjoy a peaceful breakfast. Here, they have an unobstructed view of the horizon; no boats, no people, just sand, sky, the ocean, and a light breeze.

"Mom," Ian says, "Why are we at the beach?"

Henry's been waking up early to practice fencing with Hook in some abandoned boat warehouse at the docks, and Emma, in an effort to keep Ian from growing suspicious about his brother's whereabouts, is distracting him as best she can.

Because the last thing she needs is Ian begging her for sword-fighting lessons.

"Well," Emma says, "we're at the beach because there's a pretty shady gang of seagulls that hang out around here, and I wanna see what they're up to."

Emma knows there's a day coming soon when Ian's questions won't be so easily deflected by a goofy, made-up story, but luckily, today's not that day.

He grins at her with his gap-toothed smile that seems to be growing less gap-toothed by the minute, and says, "I bet they wanna steal all the Doritos in Storybrooke."

"Mmm," Emma hums seriously. "We'd better keep an eye out then. Do you wanna eat inside the car, or on the beach?"

"Car."

"Thought so," she says with a smile.
As if she really needed to ask. Ian's *in love* with the squad car; Emma's pretty sure he'd rather live in here than in the loft. She pops open the box of donuts resting on the seat between her and Ian, and waits until he's made his selection—the gooiest double chocolate donut Emma's ever seen—before she pulls out the bear claw.

"Let me know if you see anything," she says as she takes a massive bite.

He nods dutifully and keeps his eyes on trained on the beach as he munches his breakfast. Emma watches him, thinking.

It's been a week.

They've been in Storybrooke for a week, and it's now officially June.

Normally, she'd be counting down the final days of school, getting ready for Ian's birthday in July and Henry's in August, planning beach days and trips to the zoo and the aquarium and a thousand other family activities to fill up the empty summer hours...but this year? This year she's just trying to keep them all safe—and oblivious, in Ian's case, though she doesn't think that's going to last much longer; between the monster in the woods, Roland's dad in the hospital, and the gigantic wall blocking their way out of Storybrooke, Emma has her work cut out for her.

"Hey, I see some seagulls," Ian whispers suddenly.

"Oh, yea? What're they doing?"

"They're talking..."

Emma can just barely make out the chatter of seagulls over the sloshing of waves along the beach.

"Can you hear what they're talking about?" she asks.

"No, but I can read their lips."

Emma has to fight down a laugh and school her voice to stillness before she says, "What're they saying?"

He's silent for a moment, staring out the window with squinted eyes, then he turns to her. "Can I have my milk?"

Emma blinks in surprise. "The seagulls are drinking milk?"

"No. I'm asking. Can I have my milk? I'm thirsty."

"Yea, sure. Hold on." She reaches down and digs the small plastic bottle of milk out from beneath her seat, where it rolled to at some point while she was driving. Ian takes it, opens it, and downs half its contents in several large gulps.

"Better?" Emma asks.

"Yea," he says, letting out a deep, satisfied sigh. "Can I have another donut?"

"Oh my God, you ate that whole thing?" she asks, a bit horrified—she's only halfway through her bear claw. Did she forget to feed him dinner last night?

"Uh-huh. It was really good."
Emma snorts. "I bet," she says, then slides the donut box towards him. "Yea, if you want another one, have another one—don't make yourself sick though, okay? We can save the donuts and eat them later. They won't disappear if we don't eat them right now."

"I know," he says, and selects his second donut: a cakey one with pink frosting Emma guesses is strawberry flavored, and rainbow sprinkles. "Want a bite?"

"No, thanks, kid. That's all you," Emma says, and lifts her bear claw to indicate that she's still currently occupied with her own breakfast. She watches Ian take a dinosaur bite out of the donut and wash it down with another swig of milk. "So, what were the seagulls saying?" she prompts.

"Oh, they flew away. But the one seagull said to the other seagull that the big boss seagull is flying in from New York tonight, and they'd better have his Doritos ready when he gets here."

"That sounds pretty intense," Emma says. "What do you think we should do about it, partner?"

"We should put out an APB for a seagull with a mustache smoking a cigar."

Alright, you need to stop watching Law & Order with Henry.

"Do you wanna call it in, or should I?" she asks.

Ian brightens excitedly. "Can I do it?"

"You sure can," she says. She finishes off the bear claw and wipes her sticky fingers on a napkin before she pulls the radio walkie from its clip on the dashboard and hands it to Ian. "Just press down the button and talk. Your grandpa should be on the other end."

Donut in one hand, Ian raises the radio walkie to his mouth with the other, and says, "Hey, grandpa?"

"What's up, Ian?" says David's voice, a bit muffled by static.

"Can you put out an APB for a seagull with a mustache and a cigar? He wants to steal all the Doritos in Storybrooke and I think we should stop him."

David hesitates only a second before he says, "Sure thing, kiddo. Anything else?"

"Nope."

Ian hands her the walkie back, and Emma hangs it up.

"Hey, mom," he asks, "do you think I can be the Sheriff one day?"

"You wanna be the Sheriff?"

"Yea."

Emma takes a cautious sip of her coffee—hot, but not too hot. "What happened to wanting to be a marine biologist? I thought you were gonna be the world's first octopus whisperer?"

"Can I be both?"

She smiles. "Yea, kid. You can be both."

There's a brief screech of static from the radio, and David's voice says, "All units, please be advised
and on the lookout for a seagull with a mustache and a cigar. Suspect might be seen hanging out near convenient stores, picnic baskets, and dumpsters. Over."

Emma and Ian look at each other, and they laugh.

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After she and Ian finish their breakfast, they drive to Granny’s. Henry's on the patio, sitting at a table by himself next to an empty plate Emma assumes formerly contained his breakfast. He's lounging in the chair with his ten-foot-long legs stretched out in front of him and his nose buried in one of those fencing books from the library. He has that post-workout glow going on—exhausted but blissful.

"Why are you so sweaty?" Ian asks as he and Emma take the two vacant chairs at his table.

"I went running," Henry replies, without lowering his book.

"Oh. You should change your clothes."

"You should change your clothes," Henry mutters.

"I don't smell," Ian retorts.

"You smell like a donut."

Ian makes a face at Henry that Henry doesn't see—or just ignores.

"How was, um, running?" Emma says, giving Ian a very pointed warning glare—she can tell he's determined to get a rise out of Henry today. Maybe he's not as oblivious to Henry's sword-fighting lessons as she thought.

"It was good," Henry lowers his book just enough to look at Emma. "I feel like I'm getting better."

"At running?" Ian says, one eyebrow drawn down quizzically.

"Did you eat enough for breakfast?" Emma asks. "We have some donut leftover, if you're still hungry."

"No, I'm good." Henry sets his book in his lap and pulls a face. "Hook tried to get me to order boiled mackerel for breakfast. I told him that's disgusting."

"Yea, that does sound pretty disgusting," Emma agrees. "Where is he, anyway?"

The bell over Granny's front door tinkles, and Emma turns around to see Hook striding down the steps.

"Good morning, love," he greets her with a grin.

Emma presses her lips together to keep a breathy swear from escaping, but Hook's smirk only intensifies—the bastard looks good in his new clothes, and he knows it.

Three days ago, after his first fencing lesson with Henry, Hook approached her in a linen shirt and velvet vest drenched in sweat, and requested she help him purchase a modern wardrobe. Emma—completely selflessly and with no ulterior motives whatsoever—obliged. The result is something contemporary and yet somehow still Hook.

Today he's wearing the black pants Emma picked out for him, the ones that look like leather but
aren't, the ones that are definitely more form-fitting than his usual trousers, the ones that mean
Emma's gonna have her eyeballs glued to Hook's ass all day.

He flashes her one last, knowing grin before he turns to Ian. "Morning, lad," he says, reaching down
to ruffle Ian's hair. "How was your morning?"

Ian looks at him with a smile that could outshine the sun. "Good," he says. "We ate donuts and spied
on seagulls."

Hook chuckles. "Sounds wonderful. Are you excited to spend the day at the beach?"

"Yes," Ian says, and suddenly his whole face flushes red.

Emma and Hook exchange glances, both struggling to keep from laughing—Ruby and Belle, as
acting moms, jumped aboard the "keep the kids distracted from possible impending doom" train; they
volunteered yesterday to take Roland and Ian to the beach, and Ian's basically been lost in a
daydream ever since.

"You know," Henry says slyly from behind his book, "what would your girlfriend say if she knew
you were flirting with Ruby?"

Ian scowls, but his blush remains.

"You've got a girlfriend?" Hook asks, interested. "What's her name, lad?"

Ian's annoyance evaporates, and he presses both hands to his cheeks so his fingers nearly cover his
lips. "Sienna," he mumbles. "She's lives down the street."

"Oh? What's she like?"

"Her skin is like hot chocolate and her hair is like a bunch of black snakes and her eyes are the same
color as the marker I use to draw sharks and she has freckles on her nose just like me."

He says it all in a rush, and Hook just stares, bewildered.

"He means all that in a nice way," Emma says.

"Ah, well," Hook says. "I didn't realize you were such a, erm, poet."

At the word 'poet', Ian's eyes slide over to Henry, who glowers back.

"Don't," he says darkly. "I swear to God, Ian, don't you dare."

Hook looks back and forth between the two boys, then to Emma. "I don't understand," he says.

Emma shakes her head. "I'll explain later-"

"Henry wrote poems for Violet-" Ian blurts, then has to leap out of his chair as Henry lunges and
makes a grab for him. Hook backs out of the way quickly as Ian hits the ground and scuttles behind
Emma.

"You're dead," Henry hisses, slowly rising from his chair.

Ian giggles nervously and slides his arms over Emma's shoulders to circle her neck.

"Mom can't save you," Henry says, in a voice of absolute calm. He steps forward, and Ian darts to
the side, ducking under Hook's arm. "Hook can't save you either."

"Alright, you two," Emma says. "Stop."

"You know, Henry," Hook says. "If you're not seeing anyone-"

"He's not," Ian says, then has to scurry out of the way to Hook's other side as Henry makes another swipe for him.

"As I was saying," Hook says pointedly, putting his body in between the two boys, even as Ian leans around him to stick his tongue out at Henry. "There's a lovely young woman who runs the ice cream shop that looks to be about your age. Perhaps you'd like to go and introduce yourself?"

"Ava!" Ian says.

"Ava Zimmer?" Henry asks, straightening.

"Yea! You should marry her so we can have ice cream all the time!"

Henry snorts. "I don't think so," he says. He goes back to his chair, sits down, and picks up his book again, but Emma watches him, and sees his eyes glued to the page, unmoving, and a pink tinge to his cheeks.

Hook apparently sees too. "Are you certain?" he asks. "She was quite nice."

"And she has ice cream," Ian chirps.

"I'm sure," Henry says lightly.

"She was very pretty," Hook wheedles.

"Ice," Ian says slowly. "Cream."

"Oh my God!" Henry yells, slamming his book down on the table "Will both of you stop threatening me with the ice cream lady!"

"I'm not threatening you, lad. I just thought you might be interested to know that there's someone in town your age-"

"Obviously there're kids in town my age. I probably grew up and went to school with most of them."

"All the more reason to go introduce yourself," Hook says. "Or, re-introduce yourself, rather. I'm certain you all have much to catch up on."

Henry turns to Emma pleadingly. "Mom."

"I think he's right," Emma says, shrugging. "Maybe it would be good for you to go out and meet people your own age. You remember Ava from before anyway, right?"

Henry's expression settles into one of betrayal. "Really, Brutus? You, too?" he says.

Emma gives another shrug. "I'm just saying you're a teenager and she's a teenager and two teenagers would probably have more fun hanging out together than they would hanging out with adults or with their little brothers..."

Huffing indignantly and growling something under his breath Emma can't make out, Henry gathers
his things and makes to leave. She knows he's more embarrassed than angry—and she also knows he's going to spend the next two hours thinking about Ava and maybe going over to her ice cream shop to say hi.

"Hey, Henry?" she says, and he stops. "If you stop for ice cream, can you pick up a few pints for the loft?"

His eyes widen furiously. He whirls around and stalks away, down the sidewalk. Emma watches him and waits for him to reach the corner before turning to Ian. "You," she says, crooking a finger at him. "Over here."

Ian slinks to her side. "Yea?"

"You have to stop teasing Henry about Violet."

"But it's funny," he whines defensively.

"Henry doesn't think it's funny. It actually hurts his feelings a lot."

*The only reason he hasn't thrown you off a building is because you're his brother and you're 5-years-old.*

"Okay," Ian says, dropping his eyes to his hands, twisting restlessly atop the arm of Emma's chair. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize to me. You should apologize to Henry. Can you do that, next time you see him?"

Ian nods. "I will."

"Maybe you can find a cool seashell for him at the beach today, and bring it home?"

"Okay."

"Thank you," Emma says, and kisses his forehead. "Now, let's go get you ready for Ruby. It's a good thing your grandma bought you swim trunks."

---

Ruby picks up Ian from the loft, all smiles and enthusiasm, and then Emma and Hook go to the woods. Beneath the trees, the lightness she felt all morning vanishes, and a heaviness settles over her. The wall was a message, a message she's not going to pretend she doesn't understand: she and the boys aren't leaving until whoever wants her to stay gets whatever else they want—or until Emma ends them, which is, frankly, the option she's leaning most strongly towards.

She carefully tucks away Emma Swan, mother, and drags out Emma Swan, the lady with a job to do. For now, that job is finding the Shadow and restoring its victims. After that, Emma's going to track down the person or persons responsible for casting the Dark Curse, and then she, Henry, and Ian are getting the hell out before anything else bad can happen.

Emma and Hook follow one of the trails about an hour into the woods, and then they veer off to the west, following a smaller path that, if the lack of boot tracks along it are any indicator, they haven't explored yet.

Her gaze sweeps restlessly back and forth, on the lookout for any dark spots the Shadow might be
hiding in. The forest is quiet in a way she can't seem to get used to. The silence feels empty and yet threatening at the same time. She thinks it might have something to do with knowing that, aside from the Shadow, it's just her and Hook out there—if something happens, there's no backup.

It was her decision to call everyone off the search four days ago. David wasn't happy, but this is Emma's mistake; she's going to fix it, and she's not going to let anyone else get hurt in the meantime. Emma's pretty sure she hurt the Shadow with her magic, and she's pretty sure she can do it again. The only problem is, she can't really control what it does or where it goes, and she doesn't want any more collateral damage than there has to be.

As for Hook, well, he insisted on accompanying her, despite her protests.

"I'm a survivor, love," he said. "No need to worry about me."

They're only a few minutes down their new road when, behind her, Hook clears his throat.

"Emma?"

"Hm?" she says, without turning around.

"I was thinking..."

His tone has her instantly wary. Her footsteps slow in anticipation, but his long strides only bring him closer, and suddenly he's right behind her.

"I—I've only gleaned a little of the way things work here," he says, and Emma can hear the nervousness in his voice, "but it seems as though courting rituals are a tad different in this world than in the Enchanted Forest, and..."

He takes a deep breath, and Emma knows what's coming.

"Swan, I was wondering if perhaps you'd like to go on a...a date."

"I don't know," she says, still without looking at him. Her stomach squirms a bit at the thought of how much this is letting him down, but he just has the worst timing. "There's a lot going on right now. A lot to deal with. We're kind of in a crisis."

"We're always in a crisis, love," Hook says, exasperated, and Emma can picture perfectly in her mind the look on his face. "And that's a poor excuse besides, as you're going out with your mother and Ruby and Belle tonight."

"That's different."

"How is that different, Swan?"

"I don't know—it just is."

She can feel his scowl against her back, but she keeps moving and she keeps her eyes trained forward.

"Can we please just focus on finding the Shadow?" she says. "We can talk after Robin and the others are back to normal."

She knows it's not what he wants, but she can't give him anything more right now. It's been a long four days of putting distance between herself and Hook, and it's not just because she can't think about herself and romance when there are people lying in hospital beds because of her, it's because
Hook actually makes her feel safe, and for this—for finding the Shadow and destroying it with her magic—she doesn't need safe; she needs *angry*.

She's keeping that anger locked up tight, deep inside. It'll take only the tiniest nudge to bring it to the surface, to release it, but she's saving that, saving it for the Shadow.

"How're Henry's lessons going?" she asks, because he's silent behind her and she doesn't want to shut him down completely. "Henry doesn't talk about it—I told him not to, in front of Ian, but he seems to be pretty happy."

"Aye," Hook says. "The boy's agile and has decent reflexes...I think with time and practice he could be quite good. If he has the dedication, that is."

*Oh, he does.*

Henry had surprised her his freshman year when, without any previous athletic experience, he joined his high school's cross country team and quickly became one of the top runners, then moved on to track and field and was an instant pole vaulting star. For four years he balanced that with honors classes and AP classes, literature club, and the school newspaper—and he excelled at all of it. She hadn't realized it, at the time, but being in Boston—being in a new place, a place that wasn't Storybrooke...he came out of his shell and he *flourished.*

"He does those exercises you told him to do," Emma says.

"Good. Those will help."

"Yea," Emma says, and then she stops walking. They've reached the edge of the tree, and beyond are open, rolling fields that stretch out for at least a mile before they hit another line of dark trees.

Hook stops right behind her. "Should we turn back?" he asks.

"I don't know..." she says slowly. It makes more sense that the Shadow stuck to the forest, as Emma can't see many possible hiding places in that field, but for some reason she feels pulled towards the low hills spread out before her. "C'mon, let's check it out."

"You certain?"

"Yea."

The first hill is a gradual incline, but it's long and it takes two full minutes of slogging through brittle, knee-high yellow grass to reach the crest. Beyond it is a farm. Emma stops to catch her breath, and surveys the property while she does: at the end of a gravel road, nestled amidst a small cluster of trees, is a farmhouse, and just behind it is a huge, dilapidated barn.

"Huh," Emma pants. "I didn't know this was out here."

As she stares, unease prickles along her skin.

"Something wrong, Swan?" Hook asks.

"I don't know," she says, shaking her head slowly. "Something doesn't feel right—this *place* doesn't feel right."

He doesn't question her, or call her crazy, he simply draws his cutlass.

"Should we wait? Do you want to call for backup?"
"No," she says firmly. "We're already here. We may as well have a look."

They jog side-by-side down the hill towards the farmhouse, keeping as close to a crouch as they can, even though it's a bit ridiculous—the grass is tall but there's very little cover. Anyone looking out the window will see them right away. They reach the house without incident, and Emma creeps up the steps. The boards are worn and creak heavily beneath her boots, but there's movement or noise in response from inside.

It doesn't seem as if anyone's around, but Emma can't shake that uneasy feeling sitting heavy as a stone in her gut. She presses her back flat to the wall of the house, and sidles over to the first window to peer cautiously inside. It's a kitchen, with an old-fashioned stove, a small table and hutch made of the same, worn-looking oak, and a few chairs.

"There's definitely someone living here," she says in a low voice, eyeing the plates and mugs scattered around the various surfaces. "It looks empty now though."

"Then why are we whispering?" Hook whispers. He's pressed against the wall of the house beside her, with just enough space in between them for him to be able to use his sword arm, if required. She peels away from the wall, and starts tiptoeing towards the next window, near the corner of the house.

"Good hideouts always look empty," she says. "Trust me. I spent a lot of time tracking down people who don't want to be found. I know about hiding out."

The other window shows her a living room, entirely bare save for one couch sitting right in the center of the room, facing a bare wall. She passes by quickly, unnerved by how creepy it felt, and steps up to the corner of the house. She leans around it carefully, but the porch is empty.

She lets out a sigh. If they don't find anything, then they may have to sit on this place until whoever's living here returns. She straightens and looks back out at the fields surrounding them, looking for a likely spot for her and Hook to hunker down and stake the place out—but then she sees the storm cellar. It's about fifty feet away, nearly hidden from view by a small clump of bushes.

Hook sees it too. "Shall we?"

Emma draws her gun in answer.

It's a short, quick jog to the storm cellar. Emma reaches for the handle immediately, but finds a hook wrapped around her wrist.

"Wait, wait, wait," he says, tugging her back a step. "It's one thing walking around a deserted farmhouse, it's quite another descending into a one-way cellar with no way out."

Emma pulls her arm from his hold. "Scared?" she asks, lifting her chin challengingly.

He rolls his eyes skyward. "There's a difference between fear and strategy," he says. "You don't survive as long as I have by throwing yourself into every dangerous situation you come across headfirst."

She drops her eyes to the cellar. It's padlocked, and she doesn't have her set of lock picks. Still, she could probably shoot it open...

"Do you truly think Pan's Shadow is down there?" Hook asks.

"No," she says.
He nods. "Then I say we come back tomorrow with your father and a few of the Merry Men. We can search the cellar and the rest of this place."

She wants to take his advice—she really does—but instead, her mouth moves on its own and says, "I'm going down there. You can either come with, or wait here."

His eyes bulge a little, and Emma sees him clench his jaw tight. Before he can argue, she explains, "Look, if we leave now we might miss our opportunity. Whoever's hiding out here might find out we found this place and split before we have a chance to figure out who they are and what they're doing."

He looks at the farmhouse for a moment, and then back at her. "You think this might have something to do with who cast the Dark Curse?"

"Yea. I don't...I don't know how to explain it. I just have a feeling."

"Fine, then," he says, reluctantly. "Let's get this lock open."

Emma's about to raise her gun when Hook swoops in and breaks the padlock open easily with a single, swift blow from his hook.

"Wow," she says. "I didn't know that thing was so useful."

"Trust me, Swan," he says as he tosses the lock aside and pulls open the cellar door, "you have no idea."

"I don't even know what to say to that," she mutters, and sweeps past him down into the cellar.

She keeps her gun in front of her, but she can tell right away the room is empty. It's small, and cramped by the shelves that line the two walls to the left and right, stocked with canned foods, bottles of waters, and blankets. At the back there's a cage that stretches from floor to ceiling, with a large vase sitting in the center, and it's odd, but that's not what Emma notices.

What Emma notices are the dream catchers hanging from the rafters.

Hook comes down behind her and goes to the cage. "Some sort of urn," he mutters. "What do you think, Swa-" He catches sight of her, standing frozen with her mouth hanging open, staring up at the dream catchers.

"Swan, everything alright?"

She can't speak, she still can't be absolutely sure that what she's seeing is real.

Hook steps closer, and raises his hook to tap the frame of one of the dream catchers. The web shimmers, and an image appears; Emma thinks it might be of Belle.

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe this is where everyone's missing memories went," he says. "Dream catchers, though. Odd choice..."

*It's really not, she thinks. Not for Neal.*

He's here, and if he has everyone's missing memories trapped in dream catchers then that means he has something to do with the Dark Curse that brought everyone here.

*But how?*
Hook's tapping the dream catchers one by one, bringing them to life. He's squinting at them, trying to make sense of the jumbled pictures. Emma should look too, she might be able to help, but she can't bring herself to move. Her thoughts are racing too fast.

Neal doesn't have magic, so how could he cast the Curse?

He couldn't.

_But Regina could_, her mind whispers.

They both wanted to get back to Henry, so they must have teamed up.

Only...only they're back now, right? So, why haven't they shown themselves?

Her cell phone rings, and she jumps, dropping her gun to the floor.

"Fuck," she hisses. She fumbles her phone from her jeans pocket and sees David on the screen before she raises it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Emma? You need to get back to town."

"What's wrong?"

"It's Henry-"

"What happened to Henry?"

Hook pauses in the act of retrieving her gun from the floor to throw her a piercing look. "What happened to Henry?" he asks gruffly, but she closes her eyes and shakes her head, trying to hear what David's saying.

"He fell and—Emma, I think he might have broken his wrist. He's at the hospital right now getting an X-Ray."

---

The jog back to the car passes in a whirl. David wasn't clear on specifics, and Emma's brain is a storm of terrifying possibilities, and through it all there's one word:

_Neal, Neal, Neal._

Over and over again, like the drumbeats of an enemy army, looming in the distance, still far away, but drawing closer with every second.

On the way to the hospital, she drives way over the speed limit and ignores several stop signs. She sees Hook throwing her sideways glances, but he's smart enough not to comment. She parks outside the emergency room entrance, and just as she and Hook are getting out of the car, David and Henry walk out.

"What the hell happened?" Emma demands as she runs up to them. Henry's left arm is in a splint and bandaged tightly from his knuckles to well above his wrist. Her anger flares at the sight of him physically hurt.

"Mom, I'm fine," Henry says calmly, catching sight of the look on her face. "It's just sprained. See? No big deal." He holds his arm out for her to examine, and she takes his hand delicately in hers. His fingers look a little puffy. "The doctor said all I need to do is put some ice on it and not use it for a
few days. He said it'll heal on its own."

"What happened?" she repeats.

"Nothing. I just tripped over the garbage can-"

"It's my fault," he says. "Henry finished de-bugging the station computers early, so I suggested we practice sword-fighting. I...I was sort of jealous." Emma hears a note of confession in his voice, but he doesn't shrink away from his guilt, instead he squares his shoulders and lifts his head, owning it. "I thought I should be the one giving Henry fencing lessons, not Hook. I wanted to show Henry that I was a good teacher. I got a little carried away, and Henry got hurt. I'm sorry."

Emma's anger breaks.

"Dad," she says.

"Don't feel sorry for me, Emma. I acted like an idiot."

She gets it, though. Ian and Henry have been spending a lot of time with Hook these past few days, and Emma's been searching the woods with him, and that's left David adrift and probably feeling useless.

Emma catches Hook's eyes, and gives a meaningful lift of her eyebrows. Hook raises his eyebrows to answer, then turns towards David.

"Perhaps you'd like to join the boys and I for stargazing tonight?" he says, with a forced cheerfulness that nearly makes Emma cringe. "We're taking a boat out to Heron Island, and we've room for one more."

"No," David says, shaking his head. "That's your thing. I don't want to intrude."

"It wouldn't be an intrusion, I assure you."

"Why don't I stay home with grandpa and have a movie night?" Henry suggests.

They all look at him, and he shrugs. "I'm supposed to rest my wrist, anyway. Plus, I have to start catching grandpa up on all the movies he's missed in the past seven years."

"Is that alright with you?" David asks Hook, with a look of mild surprise on his face.

"The boy's decision is his own, and I can do naught but respect it," he says. To Emma's ears, his voice sounds stiff, but when David turns away, Hook offers Henry a wink, and Henry smiles in return.

---

David left for the store ("Guess it's time to finally buy a TV," he said), and Emma drives back to the loft with Hook and Henry. Along the way, they make a stop.

"What are we doing here?" Henry asks, looking at Hansel & Gretel's Ice Cream Shop with wide, panicked eyes.

"Ice cream," Emma says. "What do you think we're doing here? You've got an injury, right? And what's the best way to fix an injury?"

"Ice cream," Henry says, and smiles a smile that's only a little bit nervous.
"What flavor do you want?"

"Can I have maple walnut?"

"Yea, just keep it away from your brother, alright?"

"Alright—wait, do they even have maple walnut?"

"Aye, they do," Hook says. "I've seen it. Why don't you two wait here, and I'll get the ice cream?"

"Thanks," Emma says.

"You want it in one of those containers, right? Not on a cone?"

"Yea. Can you get a strawberry one for Ian?"

"Aye. Anything else?"

Emma bites her lip, and grins at him. "Can you get some rocky road for me and my mom?"

He chuckles. "Of course. And for your father? Or are you mad at him?"

"I think grandpa likes cherry vanilla," Henry says.

Emma raises a skeptical eyebrow at him. "Grandpa likes it, or you like it?"

"I mean, I've seen grandpa eat it," Henry says. "So I'm assuming he likes it."

Hook gets out of the car, closes the door, then leans back in through the window, smirks at Henry, and says, "Shall I give the young lady Ava your phone number?"

Henry stares.

"What? Was that not correct? That is what you people do here, isn't it? Give girls you're interested in your phone number?"

The front door of the shop opens, and Ava Zimmer runs out. Hook moves to the side just as she takes his place at the window.

"Emma!" she says. "Hi!"

"Hey!" Emma says, looking the girl up and down. "Oh my God, I can't believe you're all grown up! And you own your own business now, huh?"

Ava shrugs. "Nick and I had a cart selling sweets in the Enchanted Forest...when we got here we had an ice cream shop. Sort of an upgrade."

"I'll say. I'm happy for you," Emma says, and she is. This Ava's a far cry from the little girl Emma helped all those years ago. She grew from a clever but mistrustful kid into a confident, clearly intelligent young woman. She understands now why Hook was so keen on setting Henry up with Ava.

"Oh," Emma says abruptly, as if she only just realized, "you remember my son Henry, right?"

Ava turns her smile to the backseat, and Henry almost melts into the upholstery.

"Yea, I remember Henry. I think I met your little brother. Ian, right?"
"Yea, Ian," Henry says.

"He comes in with his dad all the time."

Emma looks at Hook, but he looks away and pretends to be observing the sky.

"You should drop by the shop sometime," Ava says. "You need to tell me what it was like living out there in the real world."

Henry finds his voice. "Probably not as cool as living in the Enchanted Forest."

Ava snorts. "You say that, but have you ever tried using leaves for toilet paper? Yea. This place is way better."

Henry smiles then too, and Emma doesn't think she's seen him smile at another human being like that since the last time she saw him and Violet in the same room together, a few months ago before Violet started dating Avery.

"We're open all day tomorrow because it's Saturday. It's gets a little slow right before dinner time though. Why don't you come by then and we can hang out?"

"Okay," Henry says. "Yea. I'll be there."

"See you then," she says, then straightens and turns to Hook.

"Rum raisin, right?" she asks as she leads him back into the shop.

"Um, aye," Hook says falteringly. "Erm, actually, I've got an entire order."

He turns just before he goes into the shop and grins at Henry.

"You don't think he's going to give Ava my number, do you?" Henry asks in a hoarse whisper.

"Honestly? I don't know."

"Mom," he says, turning towards her, and he's all seriousness. "My phone's still at the station. We need to stop and get it before we go home."

---

Emma has no problem going into the station to get Henry's phone, the only thing is that once she gets into the station, she's alone, and once she's alone, her thoughts begin roiling again.

Neal's here.

Fuck.

Emma wants to scream, but she doesn't.

Fuck, she doesn't know what to do. Hook saw her reaction to the dream catchers; he's going to know something's up, and when he gets a chance, he's going to ask her questions she doesn't want to answer yet. It's going to be hell trying to avoid him while she figures things out.

Can she avoid him?

Yes. She'll have to be a huge asshole to do it, but yes.
Should she avoid him?

Probably not, but she's probably going to do it anyway.

She takes a deep breath, and forces her legs to walk and carry her into the office. Right away, she sees the garbage can Henry tripped over, lying on its side in the middle of the floor. She picks it up, and sets it back against the side of one of the desks.

Another deep breath, another few steps forward.

The wooden swords are lying on the floor, too, and she picks those up as well. She considers tossing them in the dumpster behind the station, or maybe donating them as firewood, but thinks better of it. It's not the sword-fighting's fault Henry got hurt. It was just an accident. That could have happened while he was pole vaulting, or riding his bike, or walking down the stairs. Little accidents are normal. It's fine.

Emma carries the swords to her and her dad's shared desk in the glass-walled cubicle, and puts them on top of the filing cabinet. They're a little shorter than the ones Henry and Hook are using for their lessons, and Emma thinks these ones might be the same ones Henry played around with when he was eleven.

Shaking her head, she turns towards the desk, and stops dead.

Sitting on the desk right next to Henry's phone is a coconut.

Feeling as if she can't breathe, as if the air in the room has evaporated, Emma walks forward, slowly. The top of the coconut is speckled with holes.

It's Neal's star map from Neverland, and next to it is a note: Thought you might need this.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I start teaching again tomorrow, but since my bf's outta town and I'm all alone until Sunday, I may actually have time to finish and post the next chapter within a week. After that, though, updates will go back to being about every two weeks, adult responsibilities permitting :)

As always, THANK YOU for reading, an enjoy!

Henry gleefully drops his wooden practice sword onto the ground and throws himself down next to it.

"Holy shit," he pants.

Chuckling, Hook (who's not even breathing hard, the absolute bastard) sits down on a stack of dock pilings.

"You didn't know learning swordplay would be such a workout, did you?"

"No," Henry says. "I like it though."

His thighs feel as if they're made of jelly, and he can barely lift his right arm, but it feels good; he's been idle since track ended right after graduation, and he hadn't realized how much he missed physical activity.

"That actually wasn't bad," Hook says. "You're getting better."

"Ya'think?" It comes out of his mouth too fast to stop, and he almost dies because of how stupidly thirsty he sounds. "I mean, you know, are you really saying that? Or are you saying that just to be nice?"

"I wouldn't compliment you unless I meant it. Your form is infinitely better than last week."

Henry nods to himself, satisfied.

"How's your wrist?" Hook asks.

"Oh, it's fine," Henry says, shrugging. To demonstrate, he rolls the wrist in question back and forth along his knee and flexes his fingers. "It's not like I've been using it or anything, so I think it's healing pretty fast."

When he tripped over the garbage can at the station, he was lucky he put his left hand down to catch himself instead of his right. He's still wearing the splint and the bandage, although it's more because his mom insists than because he feels like he actually needs it; after a weekend of icing it and resting it, his wrist feels pretty much back to normal.

If he's honest with himself, he sort of doesn't mind keeping it wrapped up—Ian was adamant that Henry's sprained wrist in a splint be treated like a broken arm in a cast, and so after he spent an hour
drawing a magnificent Chinese-style dragon that twined up Henry's arm and spewed flames across his knuckles, Ian dragged Henry around the loft by the hand and demanded that everyone else leave their mark on his bandage. Henry was left with a work of art that he's actually grown pretty fond of, and he'll be sad to lose when the time comes.

"You know," Hook says, "if you'd rather fence with your grandfather, I wouldn't-"

"No," Henry says firmly. "I want you to teach me. Grandpa's too...nice."

Hook quirks an eyebrow at him. "Now you're saying I'm not nice?"

Henry grins. He's learned a few things about Hook over the past week. Henry expected him to be a ruthless teacher, but he's not; he's definitely strict, and he pushes Henry pretty hard, but he's not cruel. Henry likes that Hook doesn't coddle him like David does—Henry loves his grandpa, but for David, fencing is an exercise in family bonding. When Henry's with Hook, he doesn't feel like Henry Swan, son of Emma Swan, he just feels like Henry, a kid who's getting his butt kicked by a master swordfighter every morning and loving it.

Hook's still eyeing him.

"You're a pirate," Henry explains. "Being not nice is like your job description. You can't earn a reputation by being nice; if you were a nice pirate, then you'd be a dead pirate."

"You know, I'm rather keen on reading this so-called report you did on piracy."

"Maybe if we ever get to Boston," Henry says.

Hook's mood changes visibly from content to contemplative, and he turns his gaze from Henry to stare out at the sea. They practice in one of the old boat warehouses by the docks that nobody uses anymore, and aside from being so out of the way that no one bothers them, it has a lot of space, and the whole front opens right onto the water. It offers a pretty calming view for when they've finished and they're both collapsed on the ground, cooling off.

Henry can tell that the sea is what grounds Hook, the same way taking a long walk or going for a run calms Henry, or the way sandwiching his whole body in between the couch cushions calms Ian.

He almost feels guilty breaking in on Hook's thoughts, as if he's interrupting an extremely private moment, but he has to ask, "Do you know why my mom's been acting weird all weekend?"

For a second, Henry thinks Hook's going to deny that anything's wrong, but then he says, "No, I don't."

"She didn't seem upset about the whole wall thing," Henry says. "I mean, she was annoyed, yea, but not upset. And then—I don't know, she's been weird since Friday, only I don't think it's because I got hurt. I think it's because of something else."

Hook's silent, but he's clearly not as relaxed as he was before; in fact, he seems to be very carefully avoiding Henry's eye.

"You know something," Henry says.

Hook sighs, and his shoulders slump. "Alas, Henry, I do not. I have suspicions, aye, but I know nothing for certain."

"And even if you did, you wouldn't tell me, would you?"
"No, lad, I wouldn't," Hook says, throwing him an apologetic half-smile.

Yea, I get it, Henry thinks. He knows Hook wouldn't do something he saw as disrespectful to Emma, and telling Henry a secret he thinks Emma is keeping would be just that.

That's another thing Henry discovered about Hook that's a bit of a surprise: he's actually a gentleman. He's sarcastic and he teases Henry a bit, but he's not a totally intolerable pain in the ass. Apparently the cocky, flirty pirate act is merely another tool in his repertoire, used both as a method of persuasion, but also as a defense mechanism.

When Emma Swan puts up walls, it's in the form of cold eyes in a blank face, but when Killian Jones puts up walls, it's with a smirk and wink.

It's interesting, to say the least.

More than once Henry's been tempted to open the story book and find out exactly what happened to make Hook this way, but it feels like prying, somehow, and he's actually grown to like the guy a little bit, so he's left it alone.

"So, what about other types of fighting?" Henry says. "Can you teach me those, too?"

"How do you mean?"

"Like with your fists and stuff."

"You want me to teach you how to fist fight?" Hook asks, in a tone of disbelief.

"Yea, why not? You're already teaching me how to use a sword."

Hook's hesitant, shaking his head as if trying to convince himself it's a bad idea. "I don't know, lad. Fist fighting's a bit more...savage."

"Uh, sword fighting isn't savage? I'm not stupid, I know real sword fights don't end at first blood. They end when you put the pointy end through the other guy—all the way through the other guy."

"Aye, but I'm teaching you sword fighting purely for defense."

"And what if something bad happens but I don't have a sword? How am I supposed to defend myself then?"

Hook snaps his mouth shut, and Henry sees the corners of his jaw bulging as he clenches his teeth tight. "You make a fair point," he says finally, grudgingly. "Perhaps...perhaps I could show you a few things."

"Thanks," Henry says cheerfully.

"Not until your hand fully heals, understand?" Hook adds sternly. "I'll not have your mother after me because you were hurt on my watch."

"Aye aye, captain," he chirps, which earns him a solid glare. Henry only grins in response, and starts to stand. "We should probably get going. Grandpa's going to be looking for me soon."

Hook nods, and rises easily to his feet. He collects the wooden practice swords and stows them beneath an old scrap of canvas tucked against the side of the warehouse, then retrieves his hook from where he left it hanging from the side of a longboat.
Henry's eyes shy away from the blunted end of Hook's arm as he slips the leather brace over his wrist and tightens the straps. He's not sure if he should be looking—although he assumes Hook doesn't care if he looks, since he chooses to practice every morning with his hook off and his sleeves rolled up past his elbows.

Still, the puckered scar there looks absolutely brutal, and it makes Henry's stomach churn. Hook's hand was clearly not removed surgically, and Henry, knowing what he knows about medieval medicine, well...the thought makes him shudder.

They walk from the cool shadows of the warehouse and into the sunshine outside, and Henry focuses on the way it warms his head and shoulders until the faint quiver of nausea he gets from seeing Hook's empty wrist passes.

"Did your grandfather say where he's taking you and Ian?"

"Nah, he said it' a surprise," Henry says with a shrug. He reaches up and pushes his sweat-soaked bangs off his forehead. "My guess is the barn he tried taking me to a few times, back when I was eleven. He wanted to teach me how to ride a horse, but he never really got around to it."

"He's going to teach you two how to ride?"

"Maybe. Or maybe he'll just have us brush their hair and braid their tails until they feel like talking to us."

Hook gives him a look like he thinks Henry might have lost his mind, and Henry laughs. "Long story, sorry. He'll probably put Ian on a pony and lead him around a bit, and maybe there's a nice, calm horse I can ride around the arena or something. You know, beginner stuff."

"Ah, I see."

They walk a bit more, their footsteps crunching on gravel until they reached the paved parking lot where the dock workers and he fishermen leave their cars every morning. They pass through, and within another two minute reach the main road.

"Will you be seeing Ava today as well?" Hook asks.

Henry feels a heat flush across his skin that has nothing to do with the workout he just got. "Um, maybe later," he says, in what he hopes is a casual way.

He met Ava at her shop on Saturday, like she asked, and then he spent some time with her yesterday evening, Sunday, down by the beach. She was fun to hang around with, and she wasn't fake—she didn't care about how the books she's read make her smarter than other people, or how her particular taste in music means she's more mature...she's just Ava, an 18-year-old who runs an ice cream and candy shop with her twin brother and wants to know how the Harry Potter series ended and what the hell an iPhone is, and around her, he can just be Henry, an almost-18-year-old who would rather talk about Star Wars than classic literature.

God, he was such an idiot, letting Violet convince him to forget who he was.

And fuck, Ava's gorgeous.

Her eyes...her lips...

She looks tough and yet somehow delicate and sensitive at the same time.
Henry abruptly becomes aware that Hook's grinning at him, and probably has been for some time.
"Shut up," he says.
"You are remarkably like your mother, you know that?"
"Whatever—just shut up."

He hears Hook chuckle to himself. Henry wants to let his thoughts stray back to Ava, but he's not going to give Hook the satisfaction of watching him daydream some more. He seizes the first topic that comes to mind that has absolutely nothing to do with Ava or can lead the discussion back to her.

"Are you going to teach Ian how to use a sword, too?" He asks because he's been wondering what'll happen when Ian finds out about Henry and Hook's morning practices.

"Perhaps when he's older, and if he wishes to learn," Hook says, but his voice is flat and his expression closed, and Henry can tell he's opposed to the idea—which is another thing Henry really didn't expect. Hook treats Ian like he's precious, as if he's both mystified and awed by his very existence. When he's around Ian he goes from being a ferocious, broody pirate to being sort of gentle.

Buried beneath layers of steel and stone, Captain Hook has a soft heart.

They're nearing Granny's, where they'll part ways so they can both return to their respective, current places of residence and shower. Henry can smell hash-browns and bacon from down the block, and it sets his mouth watering. Maybe he could stop in for breakfast before going back to the loft...

"Oh," Hook says suddenly, and he stops and turns to face Henry. "Speaking of your brother, he told me you could also use a little help with your shaving technique."

Henry rolls his eyes. "Okay, I've cut myself a few times, sure, but I've never had to go to the emergency room because of it—unlike someone." He still has a very clear memory of Ian running out of the bathroom crying, and their mom freaking out because half of Ian's face was covered in blood and blood-stained shaving cream, and she couldn't tell how badly he'd hurt himself.

Hook's checking out the stubble on his chin and jaw, and Henry self-consciously tucks his chin down.

"Shaving's hard," he says. "Ask any other guy my age."

"Does that mean you'd like me to teach you the proper way to do it?"

"Do you even have a shaving kit?" Henry realizes immediately that it's a stupid question, judging by Hook's neatly trimmed beard.

"Of course, I do. I bought one the other day, when you, Ian, and your mother took me shopping."

"Oh, yea," Henry says. How could he forget Hook's face when Ian ran up and dumped several packages of boxer briefs into his arms?

"What are these, lad?"

"Undies."

"This isn't underwear. This is some sort of chastity belt-"
Emma had elbowed Hook hard in the ribs, hard enough to make him double over, and then she shuffled Ian off towards the toy section before he could ask what a chastity belt was.

"I'll think about it," Henry says.

"Alright, lad. Let me know."

They start walking again, and they don't stop until they reach the sidewalk in front of Granny's.

"Will you be alright getting back to the loft on your own?"

"Yes, mom. I will. Do you want grandpa and I to give you a ride to the station?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine walking."

"Alright, see ya."

He leaves Hook at Granny's and picks up the pace, heading down the street towards the loft at a swift walk. When there's a block in between himself and the diner, he slows, and he lets his mind wander, back to Ava.

Showered and in fresh clothes—the modern clothes Emma bought for him—Killian leaves Granny's and heads towards the Sheriff's station. As he walks, Henry's question from earlier floats up from the dim recesses of his mind and into the forefront of his thoughts.

"Are you going to teach Ian how to use a sword, too?"

This isn't the first time he entertained the possibility; he knows how little brothers are, and he knows how Ian is—once he gets wind that there are secret sword fighting lessons going on without him, he'll want to join up as well. Only, Killian doesn't want the lad to learn, not just yet. He's not ready to drag Ian into that world. He's only five, he's too young for all that. Let him be a child a while longer. As long as possible, really.

Killian has no such qualms about teaching Henry, however. Henry's nearly a man, he should know how to defend himself—especially around this place. As for the fist-fighting? He was initially opposed to the suggestion, but Killian has to admit it would be useful. His own fists kept him alive more times than he can count.

He scrubs a hand roughly through his damp hair.

What to do with Ian?

The boy needs to learn how to protect himself as well. Killian won't teach him to use a sword, not for another few years, if he can help it, but he could teach him a few other techniques—what to do if someone grabs him from behind, for instance, and key places to strike any attacker in order to buy enough time to make a quick escape.

He can almost feel Liam frowning at him from the afterlife—Liam never wanted Killian to fight, and refused to teach him. Everything Killian learned he learned in back alleys, watching sailors brawl amidst the mud, puddles of piss, and broken glass.

Killian doesn't want Ian or Henry to learn certain things the hard way, as he did.

He reaches the station and goes inside. Emma's in the office, sitting at the desk nearest the two jail cells. She looks over when she hears him enter, and she's clearly surprised to see him walking in
alone. Her body language changes immediately. She slides her feet off the top of the desk and plants them firmly in front of her, then her arms curl in and fold themselves snugly across her middle.

Part of him aches to see her so defensive in response to his mere presence. He ignores it, however, and hangs tightly to the other part, the part that's irritated by her shutting him out—he knows what she saw in that storm cellar shook her to her core, what he doesn't know is why, or why she's trying to hide it from him and everyone else.

They haven't told anyone about the farm or what they found there, nor have they gone into the woods to search for Pan's Shadow since then. In fact, Emma spent all weekend steering well clear of him—he hasn't been in the same room with her for more than five minutes since Friday, and never alone.

He forces himself to walk over and take the chair adjacent to her desk, on the short side. "Good morning, Swan," he says, cheerily.

"Hey," she responds flatly, more to the stack of files in front of her than to him.

This charade is to continue, then.

His patience is wearing thin, holding on by a thread, ready to unravel entirely. He takes a moment to compose himself, to ensure his forbearance won't dissolve entirely, then leans forward, catches her eye by sheer force of will and holds it.

Her eyes are perhaps the darkest green he's ever seen them, and they're troubled.

"Are you ready to tell me why you've been avoiding me?" he asks, as calmly as he can manage.

"I'm not avoiding you," she says, with a small shrug. "I'm just dealing with...stuff."

"Regardless of what you appear to think, Swan, I'm actually quite perceptive. Don't tell me you're not avoiding me, because this," he says, gesturing back and forth in between them, "this is avoiding me."

She doesn't answer, she just holds his gaze steadily.

"Emma, I know it has something to do with those dream catchers. I saw the look on your face, love. Now, what aren't you telling me?"

She looks away—Killian thinks her eyes flick to one of the desk drawers, but he can't be certain.

He sighs heavily. "If you won't tell me what you're hiding from me, will you at least tell me why you wanted me here today?"

Emma tosses her hair over her shoulder, and faces him once more. "I want to make a deal."

"A deal?" Killian asks, and he can't help his incredulous tone or that his eyebrows lift nearly to his hairline.

"Yea. A deal."

This is beyond foolish.

He searches her eyes, searching for some sign that her request is merely a poor joke, but she's serious.
Anger kindles inside him. "And what do you propose, Swan?" he grounds out.

She doesn't flinch at his tone. "I'll answer all your questions," she says, "but only when we're on the other side of that wall."

Now his eyebrows draw down so far his forehead hurts. "I don't understand. The wall surrounds the entire town, save for the harbor, but we agreed it was too risky-

"I'm not going around the wall; I'm going through it."

"How?"

"Magic."

"Magic? Your magic?"

She nods.

Curiosity, for the moment, has overwhelmed his anger. "Does that mean you can control it? Have you been practicing?"

"No, not exactly."

"What precisely does 'not exactly' mean?"

"Not exactly as in pretty much the only thing I know I can do is blast a hole in that wall big enough to get Henry and Ian through."

"Emma, that can't be safe."

"Look, I'm doing this today. It's gonna work. And then," she pauses, worries her bottom lip between her teeth. "And then, I still need you to go to Boston with the boys."

"Oh, now you need me?" he scoffs, his fury returning in a rush. "After nearly three days of pretending I don't exist, save to pass off our son, now you need me?"

His hand balls into a fist, and it takes all his self-control not to slam it onto the desk.

"Yes," she says quietly. "I'm getting Henry and Ian out, and I don't care who I have to piss off to make that happen. They're the most important thing in my life. Nothing else matters more than them. I cannot let them stay here and risk getting hurt. I'm asking for your help because I trust you."

His anger fizzles and dies, like a candle doused with water.

"What is it you're so desperate to run away from, Swan?"

She looks sad, suddenly. He understands that she's anxious to get Henry and Ian somewhere safer, but something still feels off, there's something she's not telling him, and it has to do with those dream catchers.

"Emma, I-"

"DAD!"

Ian bursts into the office and runs over. Killian has just enough time to brace himself and shield certain valuable body parts before the boy leaps into his lap.
"Guess where grandpa's taking us?"

"The moon?" Killian replies immediately.

"Nope," Ian says, wrinkling his nose in a smile. "Guess again."

Any remaining anger Killian might have been clinging to disappears. The boy's face is three inches from Killian's, and Killian can see every variation of color in his eyes: the flecks of gold that surround the pupil, and an iris as blue as a crystal clear sky over the ocean that fades to dark gray just around the edges. They're precisely the same as Killian's eyes.

"Is he taking you to explore the interior of a volcano?"

"No."

"How about to excavate a sunken ship, then?"

"He's taking us to ride horses!" Ian says, his small hands enthusiastically drumming Killian's chest.

"That sounds exciting. Have you ever ridden a horse?"

"No, but I've always wanted to. I hope my horse is black—ooh, or black-and-white, like an Oreo."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Emma smile—he wants to turn his head and see it fully, bask in its radiance, but he has a lapful of an excited Ian who needs his attention.

"What color horse do you think Henry should have?" Killian asks.

Ian thinks for a moment, furrowing his brow and twisting his lips to the side.

"Brown," he declares.

"Brown? Why just brown?"

"Because his hair's brown."

"Well, what about you, then? Shouldn't your horse be gold, like your hair?"

Ian reaches a hand up to touch his hair, but he shakes his head. "No, I want a black horse."

David enters the office, sees them, and slows his steps, giving them their moment.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?" Ian asks Killian.

"A few times, aye."

"Do you know a lot about them?"

"Er," Killian says, glancing at David. Truthfully, he's a bit jealous that David's the one to share this new experience with Ian, especially since Killian's attempt to take the boy stargazing on Friday was sabotaged by dense cloud cover. However, he understands he's not the only person in Ian's life—David's Ian's grandfather, and if there's one thing Killian can appreciate about David, it's how much he loves and cherishes his family. He's missed just as much of Ian's life as Killian has, and he deserves some time with his grandson.

"No, lad, I don't," he says. "You'll have to fill me in when you return."
"Ready to go?" David asks, right on cue.

Ian whips around. "Yea!" he says. Before he climbs off Killian, he turns back to him once more and asks, "When are we going stargazing?"

"Soon, lad, I promise," Killian says, smiling. "Whenever we get a clear night."

Ian nods, then races to take David's offered hand. "Bye!" he throws over his shoulder, just as David leads him out of sight.

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Emma doesn't waste any time. As soon as David's truck is out of the parking lot and down the street, she and Killian get into the squad car. They pick up Ruby from the little house she shares with Belle, then drive to the town line.

His sour mood returns almost instantly, and his thoughts churn with images of Emma's troubled green eyes, her blank expression, the way she closed up tight when he entered the room. He tries to keep his agitation from showing, but he's fidgeting in his seat and Emma's throwing him questioning looks by the time they arrive.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine, love," he growls. "Let's get this over with."

She gets out of the car and moves towards the wall. Killian exits the passenger side door just as Ruby slips gracefully out of the backseat.

"Hey, nice new duds," she says.

He startles, surprised out of his muddled thoughts. "Pardon?" he asks, blinking at her in confusion.

"Your clothes," she clarifies with a grin. "They look good. The whole modern man thing suits you."

"Oh," he says. "Thank you. I, erm, can't take the credit for it, however; Emma picked out most of my new wardrobe."

"Yea, I know," Ruby says. "I've seen her checking out your ass in those pants."

At any other time, Killian would have blushed.

Shopping had been an ordeal. He almost changed his mind about the whole thing entirely when he tried on the pants he's currently wearing for the first time—they were a strange material, snug in odd places, the zipper was a hassle, and his undergarments did not fit comfortably inside, but bunched up rather nastily around his privates. He was about to rip them off—with his hook, if necessary—when Emma found him, and the look on her face and the way her cheeks turned pink decided him.

He would suffer whatever was necessary to have her looking at him in that fashion, and, as it turned out, the underwear Ian picked out for him made the pants bearable.

"Hey, about your kid," Ruby says, suddenly serious, and Killian freezes.

"What about Ian?" he asks.

"He's pretty cool," Ruby says. Her smile is warm and pleasant, not at all wolfish, and Killian relaxes. "I know you didn't raise him or whatever," she continues, "But he's definitely got some of you in
"Oh?"

"Yea—and it's not just the whole trying to flirt with me thing—"

"He's flirting with you now?"

"No. You know what I mean. He's...I don't know, any kid that can break Roland out of his shell and convince him to fling himself into the ocean alongside sharks and jellyfish is an okay kid in my books." She pauses then, and looks at Emma, but her expression tells Killian she's focused on something much further away. "Granny raised me on her own, and I know how hard that was on her. Emma...she raised both those boys by herself, and we're talking middle of the city, busting her ass to get to work every day, and also make sure Henry and Ian go to school and do their homework and play sports and make friends...that's a lot."

Killian looks at Emma, where she's standing near the rock wall, examining it—or just staring it down—with her arms folded over her chest. "I know," he says softly.

Ruby looks at him, and nods. "Good. Just wanted to make sure you do know."

He feels torn. He knows how fiercely Emma loves her sons, and he knows all she desires is for them to be safe and happy, and all Killian wishes is to help her achieve that...but this plan, using her magic—which for the moment is unpredictable, at best—to blast a hole through an enormous rock wall is dangerous and ill-conceived.

"Ruby, I...I appreciate that you look out for her. And that you're here right now."

"She's my friend. She's also my best friend's daughter. I guess that makes me a little bit protective. I mean, I know she's tough as hell and doesn't need it, but—"

"But she should still have it, aye."

"Looks like we have something in common, Captain," she says, grinning at him.

He grins back. "Aye, that we do. Thank you as well for helping watch Ian."

"No problem. Like I said, he's a pretty cool kid."

"He is," Killian agrees.

Emma turns towards them then.

"Alright, I think I'm ready," she says. "You guys should move back a bit."

"Emma," Ruby says, "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

Emma's only answer is a tight nod.

Killian hears Ruby swear viciously under her breath as they both round the rear end of the squad car, and take several steps back.

*My sentiments exactly,* he thinks.

They watch Emma face the wall and square her shoulders. She drops her hands to her sides, and gives them a little shake, then she goes completely still. An aura appears around her, pale white, like
the moon's glow in a velvet black sky.

"Wow," Ruby breathes.

The light around Emma grows brighter. She lifts her arms, both palms held outwards. Her magic shifts, flows down her arms and coalesces around her hands, and then it surges forward, towards the wall.

Killian tenses and holds his breath. Emma's magic hits the wall in a focused stream and spirals, spirals, spirals until the face of the wall suddenly gives way.

"She's doing it!" he gasps.

The jet of white light slowly works its way deeper and deeper into the rock, creating a tunnel. After a solid five minutes, Emma drops her hands, and her magic winks out. Killian and Ruby wait, unsure if she's going to start up again, unsure if they should stay out of her way or run to her side.

Emma takes a hesitant step towards the wall, then stops. "I think I see something," she says. "I think I might have gotten through to the other side. I'm going to check it out. Be right back."

"Emma!" he yells, but she's already clambering into the mouth of the tunnel.

"Should we follow her?" Ruby asks.

"Aye," he growls.

They've only closed half the distance when the wall rumbles and the ground quakes beneath them. Killian catches Ruby's wrist with his hook, halting her.

"Wait," he cautions, in response to her sharp look. "Wait for the tremor to pass."

But the tremor doesn't pass, it grows. They hear a crackling sound, and look up to see the top of the wall crumble. Several large hunks of rock break away and plunge to the ground.

"EMMA!" Killian yells again, and hurtles forward—but it's too late. With a thunderous crash, the rock pieces hit the pavement and break apart, sending huge boulders flying in all directions like shrapnel. Killian drops to a crouch and raises his arms to protect his head.

Over the noise, he hears Emma shout, and then there's silence.

Emma crawls on her hands and knees, fingers scrabbling along the ground, amongst dirt and loose pebbles, until she hits the side of the tunnel. She turns and sets her back to it, then lets out a deep, shaky breath, trying to force herself to calm down—that's difficult when she can't see anything, when she doesn't know how badly the tunnel collapsed, or if it's going to happen again.

After a minute, she hears voices somewhere to her right—Hook and Ruby, their cries muffled by the rock barrier that now separates them. She wants to call back, tell them she's alive, but she's afraid to create any vibrations that might cause another rock slide, so she remains silent.

Their voices fade, and she can only assume—*hope*—that they're going for help.

She moves a bit, carefully, trying to get into a more comfortable position, and trying to gauge the damage to her body. When she fell she thinks she hit her shoulder pretty hard, but other than that there's no apparent serious damage, other than some cuts and bruises.
She got lucky.

The tunnel is pitch black. She can't see the pinprick of light anymore, the one she thought meant she managed to tunnel through to the other side of the wall. She wonders if she ever saw it at all or if she just imagined it.

She tilts her head back, resting it against the wall, and closes her eyes. Her arms and legs feel like limp noodles. Using her magic like that took way more out of her than expected—it had taken every ounce of her strength to concentrate, to bend her magic to her will and keep it focused on one spot, on one purpose.

At the end it had merely slipped through her grasp, and disappeared, and Emma doesn't think she has the energy to search for it again.

She's done.

This was definitely not one of her better ideas. She'd been so stupidly desperate to get away, to hide Henry from the truth, until she could figure out what was going on and what she was going to do about it.

She curses herself for being so reckless. She should have listened to Hook, she should have just told him-

"Hey, Em," says a voice out of the darkness.

Fear rips through her, and Emma sucks in a quick breath.

She knows that voice.

"Neal?"

"Yea," he says.

A small flame flickers to life, and in its faint orange glow, she sees him.

Terror floods her, filling her up until it shivers out over her entire body. Sweat breaks out along her skin, but she feels ice cold.

The dream catchers, the stupid coconut—she was hoping she was wrong, hoping it wasn't real, hoping he wasn't here, that he wasn't behind the Dark Curse that tore her and Henry and Ian from their lives in Boston—but seeing him...

And then she actually sees him. The flame in his hand isn't from a match, or a lighter, or even a candle—it's hovering above his palm.

She notices his skin next, glimmering a faint, sickly green, and textured, like scales.

"Holy shit, Neal," she hisses. "Are you the fucking Dark One?"

He ducks his head a little, and she hears him chuckle. "Yea, Em. I am."

"Is there someone we can call?" Killian demands. His voice is high-pitched and strained. His heart feels as if it might explode out of his chest if it beats any faster.

"I'd say call 911 except Emma is 911," Ruby says, and her voice isn't much better. She's pacing back
and forth before the wall, her hands resting against her face, massaging her temples. "What about
David?"

Killian shakes his head. "He's with Henry and Ian. I don't want to risk upsetting them, not unless
David has some magical device with him that can break through rock-"

Ruby stops and snaps her fingers. "That's it. The dwarves' pickaxes. They can break through
anything."

"What are we waiting for then?"

They sprint back to the squad car and pile inside. Ruby turns the vehicle around with a chorus of
squeals from the tires, then speeds down the road, back the way they came.

"Can't this thing go any faster?" Hook says, after a minute. He half expects a retort, but Ruby moves
her leg, and the car jumps forward.

They reach Granny's and screech to a halt several feet away from the curb.

"Are you certain Leroy's here?" Hook asks as he jumps out.

"It's lunchtime," Ruby says. "I'm certain."

Killian yanks open the door so hard he fears he may have permanently damaged the tiny bell
overhead. He spots Leroy at the counter, and stalks over. Leroy catches sight of him, and noticeably
blanches before his face contorts into a scowl.

"What do you want?" he demands.

"Leroy!" Ruby says. "We need your pickaxes. Now."

"What for?"

"Where are they?" Hook asks.

"Um, the mines?" Leroy says, as if it should be obvious. "But I'm not lending them to you until-"

Hook grabs him by his shirt, lifts him off his stool, and drags him several steps to slam him against
the wall. To their right and left, patrons vacate their chairs and flee towards the door, and Killian
hears Granny shouting a protest somewhere very close, but he ignores it.

"We don't have time for your attitude, dwarf," he spits, baring his teeth. "Emma's trapped and in
trouble. Possibly hurt. Now help us get those axes, or I'll introduce your spleen to my hook."

For emphasis, he presses the cold steel of his hook just under Leroy's chin.

"Leroy, answer him," Granny says, now right behind Killian. "Or so help me God, I'm gonna let
Hook do whatever he wants to you, and then I'm going to make you clean your own blood off my
floor."

Emma draws her arms and legs in, trying to create space between her and Neal. He watches her, and
his gaze feels slimy and reptilian.

*Now I know why Hook called Gold the "Crocodile".*
"Neal, what the hell happened?" she asks.

He's doesn't answer.

"Neal," she pleads, because as disgusted and horrified as she is right now, she can't help the small quiver of grief inside her—she doesn't know him, anymore. The Neal she remembers would never do this; this isn't him, this is someone else, and the other Neal, the one that's Henry's father, might be lost beyond reach, gone forever.

Reluctantly, he says, "It's a long story."

"Then you'd better start talking. I need answers."

That seems to hurt him. "I thought you'd be happy to see me."

Her anger surprises her, rearing up inside of her like a ridiculously pissed off snake.

"You thought I'd be happy to see that you became the Dark One?" she asks, incredulously.

"Well, no, but...I'm still me, Em."

"You really expect me to believe that?" she asks. "Neal, I know what you have to do to become the Dark One—you have to kill the previous Dark One. Last time I checked, that was your dad."

He recoils from her words as if struck by them physically, but she doesn't care. Her brief mourning is over, and all she has left is fury—fury and a frantic need to get out of here and back to Henry and Ian.

"I'm gonna ask you again," she says slowly and clearly, "What the hell happened? I thought Gold was dead."

"He was."

"Was?"

"You know, you don't have to be so hostile-"

"You know, what? Yes, I fucking do. Because you're the Dark One, and I'm starting to believe that rock slide wasn't an accident."

He doesn't deny it.

"Great," she says, leaning her head against the wall. "Just great. This is all great."

Whatever Hook and Ruby are doing, she hopes they do it fast.

Hook.

She wants him there, she wants the way his presence makes her feel safer, more solid. She wants his blue eyes and his deep voice and his hand, strong and capable yet gentle at the same time.

Neal always drags her back to that place where nothing feels certain, where she doubts herself and everything she's done. And now? It feels like the world's collapsing around her.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Emma. I just want to talk."
She jerks her head up. "And you needed to trap me inside a wall to do it? You're asking for my understanding and my trust, but you're acting like a fucking lunatic!"

She sees him convulse, a ripple that passes through his entire body, and suddenly the cave rumbles. She yells wordlessly in shock, pressing herself harder into the rock wall, and he gasps. He slumps a bit, and the shaking stops.

She holds still for a moment, but the tremors don't return. Neal drops his head into one hand, cupping the small flame in the other, and remains that way.

"Was that you?" she asks.

"Yea," he says quietly, dully. "These powers—this whole Dark One thing...it's difficult to control."

"That's not exactly reassuring."

"I know. I'm sorry—here." He sits up straight. "I'll tell you anything you wanna know, okay? Just...just give me a chance, Em. Hear me out."

"I'm listening," is all she says.

He takes a deep breath. "Seven years ago, after we all got sent back to the Enchanted Forest, I went to my father's castle to try and find a way back to you and Henry."

"Belle went with you," she says, remembering the bits from Henry's story book he showed her.

"Yea. Belle came with. We thought if we could bring my father back, then he could help us. I figured if anyone knew a way to get to this world, it had to be him. After a while—a year, I guess—Belle gave up. I don't know," he says, and sighs. "We weren't really getting anywhere, and I guess she thought it was time to move on, so she went to join the others at your parents' castle. That's when Regina joined me; Belle told everyone what I was up to, and Regina thought it was possible, so she came to help."

The dream catchers, Emma thinks. Those must be the memories they contain—everyone's memories of what Neal was up to.

"I take it you and Regina figured it out?" she says.

"Yea. I mean, it took another five years, but yea, we figured it out. All we needed to do was reopen the Dark One's vault. It would release the Darkness again, and revive its most recent host."

"That's it? Just open a vault and the Dark One's back?"

"Well, you need the key. And you need to find the vault. All that took a while."

"And then?"

"And then we did it. Regina opened the vault, and..." he trails off, and Emma sees his face twist in anguish.

"And you killed him," she finishes. She's silent for a moment, letting that settle in, letting the knowledge that Neal killed his own father settle deep, deep inside her, and then, "I don't get it. If you thought Gold knew how to get back to this world, then why kill him?"

"Because we already figured out how to get back," Neal says. His voice is barely above a whisper,
but to Emma's ears it's blaringly loud. "We still needed my father, just not...all of him."

"His heart," Emma says, and several things click into place at once. "You and Regina wanted to cast the Dark Curse to get back to this world, but you needed the heart of the thing one of you loves most to do it. For Regina that's gotta be Henry, and she would never, so you..."

She laughs then, harshly.

Of course.

"What?" Neal asks.

"Nothing, I just should of known that the thing you love most is your father. It sure as hell isn't me. And I guess it's not Henry, either."

His face darkens, like gathering storm clouds, but she keeps going.

"What do you want, Neal?" she says coldly.

"What do you mean, what do I want?" he asks. "I just told you. I did all this to get back to you and Henry-"

"I mean, what do you want from me? Why are talking in a cave right now?"

He doesn't say anything right away. She sees him visibly reigning in his anger, forcing his hands to unclench, and his shoulders to relax. Finally, "I want to see Henry again."

Emma doesn't hesitate. "No."

That startles him.

"No? Emma, I'm his father."

"And I'm his mother. I'm telling you no, Neal. Not when you're the fucking Dark One."

"Henry will understand, once I explain-"

"You want to tell him that you found a way to resurrect your dad just so you could kill him two seconds later?"

"Well, when you put it that way-"

"What way? That's the only way to put it. That's what happened!"

"But I did it for you! I did it to get back to you guys!"

"If you wanted to do something for us you should have fucking stayed in the Enchanted Forest and left us alone, instead of becoming the fucking Dark One!" she snarls. "We were fine without you!"

As she says it, she thinks of Ian, about him being reunited with Hook, and how she doesn't actually want to change that...

And then she realizes.

Ian.

Neal hasn't said anything about Ian. Does he know about him? Does he know about Emma and
Hook?

Her anger ebbs, replaced once more by fear.

"Have you been watching us?" she asks.

"Yea, a little bit. These powers...I told you, they're difficult to control. Sometimes I can make them do what I want, sometimes..." he trails off and shrugs. "When I saw you about to leave Storybrooke the other day, I panicked. The wall just sort of...happened."

She hears the apology in his tone, but fuck if she's going to accept it.

"Do you have anything to do with Pan's Shadow?" she asks.

"No. I can't control it anymore."

"Anymore?"

Neal spread his hands, helplessly, and the tiny flame he still holds casts wild shadows dancing around the cave. "All our personal possessions got sent back to the Enchanted Forest when we did. I found my star map from Neverland in my father's castle. The Shadow was inside."

"I thought we killed it."

"No, but pretty close."

"Ok, so...what? You let it out?"

"Yea. It was weak, Em. I knew it couldn't hurt me. It helped me around the castle."

"You made the Shadow your servant?"

Now who does that remind me of?

"I know how it sounds. I'm not like Peter Pan. I didn't make it hurt anyone. It just...kept me company. I got kinda lonely in the castle sometimes. Regina's not exactly a friendly person, you know? Having the Shadow around helped."

"Do you know where it is now?"

"Yea, it's hiding in that big barn on my farm. You hurt it pretty bad. It's trying to recover."

"Is that why you left the coconut on my desk?"

"You mean my star map? Yea. I saw what the Shadow did to those people. That one guy's your dad's friend right? I thought the star map might help—you can capture it again, kill it, and return all the shadows it stole."

Emma hears a sudden, sharp tapping. She freezes, and listens.

Someone's hitting the rocks.

"Your rescuers," Neal says. He's staring at the source of the noise, then suddenly he sneers. "Hook, huh? He still into you?"

She doesn't say anything, just meets Neal's gaze steadily until the crooked smile slips from his face.
"When can I see Henry?" he asks.

"I don't want him seeing you like this."

"Well, I can't change this, Emma. It's not that easy. This is just who I am now."

A narrow shaft of light appears, slicing across the space that divides her and Neal like a laser beam.

"Where's Regina?" she asks. "You guys cast the Dark Curse together, right? If you're here, she's gotta be here too."

"She's...she's not."

"Where is she?" Emma hisses.

More tapping, and more light floods the cave. Emma squints, stunned by the sudden brightness.

"Emma!" someone yells.

Hook.

He sounds so close.

"Emma! Are you in there?"

"I'm here," she says. "I'm alright."

She opens her eyes, only to find herself alone. Neal's gone.

"Hang on!" Hook calls. "We're coming to get you."

"Don't move," says Ruby's voice.

Hands reach in. Emma recognizes Hook's, and she takes it, holding onto it with all the strength left in her body.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I really, really apologize for the long wait. I do this thing to myself at the beginning of every school year where I plan lessons for my students the require a ridiculous amount of outside prep work on my part, so it's been a crazy, busy month. Hopefully this chapter is worth the wait...it's a bit sparse on Emma/Hook moments, but I promise the next two chapters will more than make up for it! :D

Emma can't sleep.

She's sharing a double bed with Ian, so she can't toss and turn, either; she can only lay still with both him and Roger the stuffed crab curled up in her arms, stare at the wall, and listen to the worried whispers of her parents, Hook, and Henry from downstairs.

Everything's a mess.

This whole situation is a big, fucked up mess.

The list of people she can't make eye contact with without feeling a nauseating twist of guilt has grown long: Hook, because she's been lying to his face every time he asks her what's wrong; Henry, because she's keeping Neal a secret from him; David, because he's devastated she didn't trust him enough to share her plan to break through the wall with him; and Snow, because she's convinced Emma's desperate escape attempt had something to do with running away from them, her family.

The only thing that seems to have worked out in Emma's favor is that somehow, miraculously, Neal doesn't know about Ian. Or, he at least hasn't made the connection between the little blonde kid she's always hanging around with and her uterus.

She tugs Ian closer and presses her nose into his hair. He smells horsey, and a bit like apples. He came home with a smile like sunshine, gushing about how the pony he rode was pink and how cool is that, until he saw Emma curled up in the armchair looking exactly like she'd gotten into a fist fight with the Thing from Fantastic Four, and his happiness evaporated.

It was ridiculously easy to convince him that the scrapes on her hands and arms, the bruise on her cheek, and the inability to move her shoulder without hissing in pain are from nothing more severe than a tumble she took in the woods. He believed her, surprisingly, though he was adamant that she start carrying Roger around with her at all times from now on—as a source of comfort, but also to prevent any further accidents.

The sentiment is cute, and the orange crab actually does make her feel a little better. Mostly, Ian's just making her feel better. Emma agreed to the nap everyone insisted she take purely to get away from them and have a moment to herself; Ian followed, naturally, and Emma didn't have the heart to send him away when he jumped into bed next to her and snuggled against her side.

Now, she finds herself clinging to him the same way he clung to her when he was a toddler and needed soothing.
She listens to his deep, even breathing, and tries to match it. Maybe if she can relax she'll be able to get some rest-

The voices from the kitchen abruptly grow in volume. Hook and David are clearly arguing about something, but before Emma can make out the words, there's a loud "Shh!" from Snow. Silence falls as they wait for some indication that they woke her up, and then the whispering begins once more.

Emma squeezes her eyes shut.

She wants to tell them all the truth, but she can't. She can't say the words—she's afraid to, because she doesn't know what will happen when she says them out loud and everyone knows.

She's afraid of what it'll do to Henry; she's afraid of what she'll have to explain to her parents, what she might finally have to tell them about dear old Neal; and she's afraid of how Hook will react.

*Hook.*

She can distinguish his voice easily from the others, even from upstairs. It's deeper that Henry's and David's, but softer around the edges.

Emma followed that voice from the cave in the wall directly into Hook's arms, and for a moment, Emma held to him, letting his warmth and the solid feeling of his body against hers drown out everything else...until reality crept back in, until the thought of Neal watching—watching them—made her skin crawl.

Emma hadn't *shoved* Hook off of her, but it had been a near enough thing, and the bewildered, wounded look on his face was pure agony to behold.

"*You look as if you've seen a ghost, love. What happened?*"

"*Nothing.*"

His confusion hardened quickly into suspicion.

"*Emma, what aren't you telling me?*"

"*I already told you: nothing. Nothing happened. Everything's fine.*"

It hurt to shut him out like that. *Fuck,* it hurt. Every angry flash of his eyes pierces her to her core and makes her insides shrivel.

Henry knows she's acting weird, too, but so far he just seems to think that she's running away from being the Savior—and, for now, she's fine with him thinking that. It's better that than him knowing his dad's the Dark One, and that Regina-

Emma pushes that thought away with a jerk of her head. She doesn't know anything for certain yet, and she doesn't exactly believe Neal's the most reliable source of information—not in general, and especially not now.

Ian twitches suddenly in his sleep, and mumbles something.

"*No,*" he says, then groans. He huffs out several quick breaths, then starts shaking.

Emma knows when he's having a nightmare, and this is it.

"*Ian,*" she says, running her hand gently up and down his arm. "*Ian. Ian, wake up.*"
His eyes blink open and flicker erratically around the room before coming to rest on her. "Mom?"

"Yea, it's me."

He frowns, and rolls into her, tucking his head underneath her chin.

"Bad dream," he mutters.

"I know," she says softly, stroking his hair. "I know. You're okay. I'm here."

He's silent, but she can tell he's still awake.

"Wanna talk about it?"

After a moment, he says, "I was in a barn."

"A barn? You mean with horses? Like you went to with grandpa and Henry?"

"No horses." He snuggles closer. "A shadow."

"A shadow?" she asks.

"Yea. With glowing eyes."

Fear has her stomach wriggling.

"It was in a barn?"

"Mmhm," he says, nodding into her shoulder.

Her breath hitches as her heart starts pounding in her chest.

_It's just a crazy coincidence, right?_

Only...Ian dreamt of a shadow before they even knew about Pan's Shadow, and, as far as Emma knows, Ian hasn't had access to Henry's story book without supervision, nor has she or anyone else read him anything about Neverland—they've been extremely careful with that sort of thing.

Ian shouldn't know about the Shadow, and he can't possibly know about the Shadow hiding out in a barn.

_It's a coincidence. It's gotta be._

And yet, she can't shake the feeling that it's really not.

"Hey," she says, "do you remember when you dreamed about a shadow watching you sleep?"

"Yea."

"That was just a dream, right? Or did you see it in real life?"

"Dream," he says, then, "Only the window was different. And the bed. And there was a bald guy with a wrinkly face. And a lady with pink slippers—I thought they were grandma and grandpa, just really old."

"The lady had pink slippers?"
"Yea. She kinda didn't look like grandma though, so maybe it wasn't grandma."

In her mind, Emma sees the body of the elderly woman they removed from the Shadow's lair in the woods—Adelaide Brown, the poor lady in her nightgown and one pink slipper.

"Did you dream about the shadow doing anything else?"

He shrugs. "I used to dream about it being in the woods," he says, then pulls his head from beneath her chin to look up at her. "It's not the monster that hurt Robin, right? Henry said there aren't really any shadows with glowing eyes here."

"Right," Emma says quickly. "There aren't. It's not real. It's just a dream."

She hadn't been able to keep what happened to Robin a secret, not when Roland knows and he and Ian are spending so much time together—though they hadn't told Roland about Pan's Shadow, so Ian couldn't have gotten that information from him, either.

Which means Ian's dreams aren't actually just dreams.

"Mom?"

Emma startles. She realizes her whole body's clenched tight, and she's squeezing Ian a little too hard.

She forces her limbs to loosen from around Ian, and asks, "Yea?"

The sun is setting outside, and, with the curtains closed, the room is dim. In the semi-darkness, Emma sees him frown.

"You're gonna catch the monster, right? So Roland can get his dad back?"

"I will," she promises.

"When?"

"Soon."

He nods and tucks himself back beneath her chin.

"The monster didn't hurt you, right?" he asks tremulously.

She kisses the top of his head. "No," she says into his hair. "I just fell. It was an accident."

"I don't want you to get hurt," he says, so quietly she can barely hear him.

She gathers him closer. She feels Roger the stuffed crab squished in between them.

"I'm not gonna get hurt, Ian. You don't have to worry about that, okay?"

"Okay."

He's silent for a split second, and then, "Hey, mom?"

"Yea?"

"I'm hungry."

She almost laughs, but she stops herself when she hears someone coming up the stairs.
The footsteps are too heavy to be Snow's, but not heavy enough to be David's. It's not Henry, either—he's perfected a light, near-silent tread from years of having to sneak around the apartment early on Saturday and Sunday mornings in order to have the TV to himself for an hour before Ian wakes up.

Which leaves Hook.

He stops just short of the landing. "Emma?" he calls quietly. "Are you awake?"

Ian rolls away from her, grinning. "We're awake," he says.

"Ah." Hook comes into view. "I thought I heard your voices."

He lingers near the stairs for a moment, waiting for Emma and Ian to sit up and swing their legs off the bed before he walks forward.

"Did you sleep well?" he asks.

"Yes," Ian says, mouth stretching open in a huge yawn. Chuckling, Hook reaches down and tousles Ian's already wild hair before turning his eyes to Emma.

"Emma," he says, "Did you sleep, love?"

She's about to say yes reflexively, but she gets that twist of guilt in her gut that makes her want to vomit. She hates lying to him; she hates that his feelings are collateral damage in the shit show that is their current crisis.

He doesn't deserve what she's doing to him.

He really doesn't.

"Hey, Ian," Emma says, nudging his arm. "Why don't you go downstairs and ask grandpa to make you some mac and cheese?"

"Okay," he says, and slides from the bed. Instead of walking away, however, he spins back around and pulls Roger from the tangle of blankets. He stuffs the crab into her hands, says, "Here," and gives her a stern look, as if daring her to refuse the guardian he's assigned her.

She dutifully tucks Roger against her chest and tries to look serious while doing it. Ian grins, and bolts. Emma and Hook both watch him until he's out of sight, thundering down the stairs, and then Hook turns back to her, one eyebrow raised inquiringly.

Emma pats the bed next to her, and he sits down without hesitation. The mattress dips as he adds his weight to it, and Emma sways sideways, into him. Her arm hits his with a soft thud, and then her hip, and then somehow her leg from knee to thigh is pressed hard against his, and her cheek is resting on his shoulder.

She melts into him, tension leaving her body like air rushing from a balloon. She feels boneless, but at the same time every ache and pain—her shoulder, her scraped palms, her bruised cheek—suddenly seems sharper.

She's tired. She's tired of pushing him away, tired of lying to him. She wants to go back in time to when they kissed in the forest, to when the scariest thing she had to look forward to, after taking out Pan's Shadow, was dating him and finding out just how deep her attraction to him went.

His hand is resting on his thigh, and he rolls it so that it's palm-up—an offering.
Emma threads her fingers through his.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs. "I'm sorry for not trusting you. I'm sorry for shutting you out."

His hand tightens on hers. He turns his face towards her and his lips brush her hair, breath ghosting along the top of her head, and just like that, the barrier between them—the barrier Emma purposely created, the barrier that made her feel separated from him by a sheet of ice—is gone.

Emma closes her eyes. She can't deny how nice it feels, having him there, leaning on him—nor can she deny how nice it feels to give in to how nice it feels.

"Your parents suggested that I take the boys out stargazing tonight, so that you might gain some rest," Hook says.

"Okay."

"Perhaps, when I return—if you're feeling up to it—you can tell me what's been going on?"

"Yes," she says into his shirt collar. She wants to tell him now—she wants to open the floodgates and let it all out, she wants to be able to look into his eyes and not see all the pain she inflicted. She wants to kiss him again, and feel his arms around her, feel his warmth around her.

"Emma," he says, "if you'd rather I—if you'd rather the boys stay here, I can—"

"No," she says firmly, and sits up. "Ian's been wearing those pajamas with the constellations on them to bed all weekend and making me quiz him on their names. You have to take him."

A ghost of a grin flits across Hook's face. "Aye, then we shall go."

"Good."

She smiles at him, tentatively, and he smiles in return.

"I won't keep them out too long," he says.

She nods. "Be careful," she says quietly. "Pan's Shadow is still out there."

*And Neal.*

His smile fades, and he grows serious. "I assure you, Emma, nothing will happen to the boys while they're in my charge."

She holds his gaze steadily. Even in the gloom, his eyes are bright blue.

"I know," she says, and squeezes his hand.

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Emma tells Hook that she'll rest.

She tells Henry, when he comes upstairs to get jackets for him and Ian, that she'll rest.

She tells Ian, when he comes upstairs to make sure Roger's still guarding her (and to ask if he can wear his constellation PJ's out stargazing), that she'll rest.

But Emma has no intention of resting.
Emma has a Shadow to capture.

She waits upstairs and listens to Hook and the boys getting ready to leave. She hears Ian's chatter, Henry's interjections, and Hook's patient responses to Ian's questions; she hears Snow telling them to have fun; she hears David remind Hook to make sure the boys wear life jackets, and Hook's oath that the boys will be safe in his care.

She waits until the front door closes and Hook, Henry, and Ian's voices have faded, and then she goes downstairs.

Her parents are in the kitchen with their arms around each other. Snow is tucked against David's chest, and David is rocking her gently from side to side with his lips against her hair, murmuring something.

Emma freezes at the sight, like a little kid who walked in on her parents in the middle of a very handsy make-out session, and tries to retreat back to her bed noiselessly, but the stairs have other plans—they groan loud as thunder in the silent loft, startling David and Snow.

They turn to face her, somehow managing to keep their arms around one another as they do, and Snow asks, "Emma, honey, how are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," Emma says, and when that makes Snow look more worried, she adds, "Really, I am. I'm okay."

Snow's hands come together and begin twisting nervously.

"Do you need anything?" she says.

"Yea, actually I do," Emma sighs. She tucks her hair behind her ears, and slips her hands into her back pockets. What's coming next will be difficult, but she needs to do it—she needs to explain herself, and to set things right between herself and her parents. "I need to talk to you guys."

David and Snow exchange looks of dread.

"We should sit down," Emma says. "I have a lot to tell you."

She takes a chair on one side of the kitchen table, and her parents seat themselves on the other, across from her. Their hands are joined atop the table, and David's thumb rubs back and forth along Snow's knuckles.

They're watching her warily, with a touch of sadness in their eyes, and Emma knows what they're thinking. She's been keeping her parents at a distance the same as she's been keeping Hook at a distance, and she hasn't exactly been coy about her mixed feelings concerning staying in Storybrooke, so they have every reason to assume that, right now, she's about to tell them she's leaving.

Emma's not leaving—not today, at least. She might yet, one day, if she ultimately decides that Storybrooke's not a good environment for Henry and Ian, but even though that's a ways off, she needs her parents to understand now, once and for all, that it's not them she wants to get herself and the boys away from, it's this town and the constant pile of shit it's buried in.

"Okay," she says, taking a deep breath to center herself. "First of all, I'm sorry."

Their expressions soften a bit in response, and that eases the hard knot of worry inside her.
"Ever since the attacks in the woods started, I've been afraid—afraid for Henry and Ian."

They're silent, listening, and she sees understanding in their eyes. That gives her the courage she needs to continue, to spill everything.

"I've been angry, too," she says. "All I want to do is be a mom, and before we came here, when we were in Boston, that's all I was, and it was great. This whole being the Savior thing...I didn't ask for it—I don't want it."

Snow flinches then, and her face crumples. "Emma, I'm so sorry—"

"No, no, no!" Emma says quickly. "Please. I know it's not your fault—I didn't mean to make it sound like I think it's your fault."

She reaches out and takes her mom's free hand.

"You had no choice. You did what you had to do to keep me safe. I get that. I just...the last seven years in Boston were good—really good. Henry and Ian were happy, and we weren't in danger. Here, in Storybrooke, they'll be constantly in danger. I can't put their lives at risk, not when there's another option."

"Does that mean you're leaving?" Snow asks. Her voice is calm, and Emma sees her strength then, sees what must make her a magnificent queen.

"I don't know," Emma says, and smiles ruefully. "Not yet. I can't leave until I figure things out here —"

"We," Snow says firmly, eyes glinting. "Not until we figure things out. I told you before, Emma, you're not in this alone. Your father and I are here beside you."

"We couldn't save you from your fate," David says, voice low but clear. "Our choices set you on the path to becoming the Savior, and we're going to help you bear that burden. You are not alone."

Emma slides her other hand forward across the table and her dad takes it.

"I love you guys," she says. It's a struggle to keep her voice steady, to keep the tears that spring to her eyes from clogging her throat as well. "I really, really do. Please don't think that I was running away from you two today. Wanting to leave has nothing to do with wanting to get away from you. I don't want to leave you. It's just—"

"You have to make sure Henry and Ian are safe," David says, hand squeezing hers. "We understand, Emma; you're their mother, and you have to do what's best for them."

He offers her a proud smile.

"Thanks," she says, then takes another deep breath. She can't stop. She has to keep going. "I have to tell you something else."

They nod, encouragingly.

"The reason I was in such a hurry to get Henry and Ian out of Storybrooke is because I found out who cast the Dark Curse."

"You did?" Snow asks, eyes wide.

"Who was it?" David says.
Emma tells them. She tells them about her and Hook finding the farm, and about finding the storm cellar and the dream catchers with everyone's memories. She tells them about the coconut with the note left on her desk at the station. She tells them about meeting Neal in the cave in the wall and about what he told her, but she stops before she can drop the "Neal is the Dark One" bomb, because her mom's looking at her with a wrinkled brow.

"Wait, Emma...why did you want to run from Neal? I know you said he broke your heart, but I thought you two-"

"There're some things I haven't told you about Neal," Emma says. "A lot of things."

And she tells them about Neal, too. *All* about Neal.

She unlocks the vault in her heart where she's kept all those secrets for all these years. Most of these things she's only told Henry—about the age difference (God, she had felt so mature at 17, but she knows better now, she knows how very immature she was, how lost she was and how unprepared for an adult relationship she was), about how he was going to leave her to run away to Canada, about how quickly he changed his mind when she offered to risk her own safety to help him, about how as soon as August told him who she was, what it was her destiny to do, he split and never once looked back, about how she went to jail as a teenager—a pregnant teenager—because of him.

She watches her parents' expressions shift from shock to disgust to horror and finally to rage.

"I can't believe I let him into my home!" Snow hisses.

"I can't believe I didn't kill him," David growls. Both of his palms are flat on the table, fingers splayed and fingertips pressed so hard into the wood that his nails are white. He's staring fixedly at his hands, face scrunched tight with fury.

"Emma, I'm so sorry. If we had known, we never would have-" Snow pauses, bites her bottom lip. "Why didn't you tell us sooner?"

Emma shakes her head, eyes flickering down and away. "I didn't want you feeling sorry for me," she says.

That, and she lived for so long with that cold anger inside of her—holding it close and clinging tightly to it—that she didn't know how to live any other way.

"It happened so long ago," she says dismissively. "It doesn't matter anymore-"

"Emma, it *does* matter," Snow insists. She takes up Emma's hand with both of hers, and Emma raises her eyes to her mom's. "If you didn't want Neal near you or Henry you could have told us and we would have."

"I didn't have a choice," Emma says, shaking her head again. "Neal found out about Henry, and Henry found out about Neal. Henry was so angry with me for lying to him about his dad that I...I couldn't tell him no. I couldn't break his heart again."

David sighs heavily. "You're right," he says. "In that situation, you didn't have a choice."

Snow nods, more to herself than anything. "I agree with David, Emma. I just wish you had told us. We could have helped."

"I know," Emma says. "I'm sorry."
"You have nothing to be sorry for. We're sorry," Snow says. "We didn't read the situation well at all, and—oh my God..." Snow closes her eyes and raises one hand to cover her mouth. "We told you to give him another chance."

Emma chuckles. "It's alright. You didn't know."

Snow shakes her head, fingers still pressed to her lips as though she might throw up. Then she drops her hand and looks quickly to David. They exchange some sort of silent communication, and then Snow turns back to Emma.

"We have to ask," she says slowly. "Hook..."

"I want him here," Emma says firmly. "Hook's not Neal. He's a good man. And he's good for Ian."

"And?" Snow prompts, tilting her head to the side, the eager gleam of the matchmaker back in her eye.

"And maybe I like him a little bit," Emma says, and she lifts her chin challengingly.

Snow smiles smugly. David looks less angry, and Emma assumes that's the best she's going to get from him, for now.

"Okay," Snow says, with an authoritative air that means the conversation is moving away from Emma's love life and getting back to the business at hand. "So, Neal and Regina cast the Dark Curse. Regina's not here, though, and Neal didn't say where she was—wait!" Snow gasps. "Do you think Neal crushed her heart to enact the Curse?"

David throws Snow a skeptical glance. "Don't you have to crush the heart of the thing you love most? I doubt for Neal that was Regina."

"It wasn't," Emma says, and she sees them both tense at the apprehension in her voice. "There's...there's actually one more thing I have to tell you."

Her stomach squirms furiously.

"Neal's the Dark One."

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Her announcement doesn't send her parents into a panic, as she feared it might, but instead sends them into battle mode.

"We have to alert everyone in Storybrooke," David says. "They need to be aware and be on the lookout."

"Right," Snow agrees. "We should establish safe zones, as well, in case of an attack."

"And maybe guards on the streets, keeping an eye out. Emma and the boys should have protection at all times, also."

"Yes, and someone a little less conspicuous than the dwarves, David. The Merry Men, maybe?"

"Okay, I'll talk to them."

"Let's talk to Marco and Leroy and see if they can construct another enchanted prison down in the mines."
"Do you think there's enough fairy dust down there this time to do it?"

"I don't know, but we should get some squid ink, too."

"Were we going to get that?"

"Gold's shop, maybe? Or Regina's vault—although, we'd have to figure out a way to break in first, since it's magically locked..."

Emma sits patiently and listens for a break in their conversation, and then she says, "We have to take care of Pan's Shadow, too."

"Oh, I almost forgot about that," Snow says.

"We should try to capture the Shadow, first," David says. "We don't have enough resources to fight on two fronts. Let's get everyone we can together in the morning and scour the woods, put an end to this thing-"

"No need," Emma says, cutting him off. "I know exactly where the Shadow is. We can go get it right now."

---

Emma doesn't tell her parents about Ian's dreams, but she doesn't need to—they understand the urgency of the situation. Snow stays behind in order to be close to Henry and Ian, should trouble arise, and Emma and David grab their coats, hop into his pickup truck, and head towards the station to retrieve Neal's star map.

Despite how hot the day was, the evening is crisp and chill. Emma rolls the window down and lets the breeze work its cool tendrils through her hair and beneath her collar. She already feels better—lighter, and more refreshed—than she has all weekend. She hadn't realized how heavily her secrets weighed on her until now.

She rests her head against the door frame, and lets her eyes drift shut.

Hook, Henry, and Ian should have reached Heron Island by now, and are probably gazing up at the stars at this very moment. Emma smiles to herself at the thought.

"Did you tell Hook what you told your mother and I?" her dad asks quietly.

"No," Emma says, without opening her eyes. She wanted to, upstairs, when they were alone, but she's actually sort of glad she didn't—if she had, he wouldn't be out there now, enjoying an evening out with the boys.

"Emma," David says, with a note of rebuke in his voice. "You shouldn't lie to him."

Emma sits up, and scowls at her dad. "I didn't lie to Hook," she says defensively.

"Not telling him something purposely is the same thing as lying."

Emma can't exactly disagree with that, so the only thing she's got left is, "Since when do you care what I do or do not tell Hook?"

David shifts uncomfortably and glances at her. "I care because he's my grandson's father, and he makes my grandson happy." David pauses, and Emma senses more coming, so she keeps her mouth shut and waits. "I also care because, well..." David throws her another awkward look. "He seems to
make my daughter happy, too."

Emma's a bit stunned, and the scowl slips from her face.

"Look, all I'm saying is, you should tell him the truth," David says.

Emma looks away, and slouches back against the seat. "I will," she says. "He said he was taking the boys out, and I just didn't want him to worry. I want him and the boys to have a nice night together."

*Before shit gets crazy.*

"I understand," David admits. "I...I actualy probably would have done the same thing."

Emma smiles. "Thanks."

He smiles back, that sunny David smile that reminds Emma a bit of Ian, then returns his eyes to the road.

They pass by Granny's, and Emma tries not to look *too* longingly at the couples and families seated outside, enjoying their meals beneath the warm glow of the patio lights, probably talking about nothing more pressing than work and school and whether or not they think Granny's beer is overpriced.

She wonders how long it will be before she's able to have a moment like that again with the boys. Or with Hook.

A blush springs to her cheeks, heating her entire face.

*God,* he asked her on a date.

Could they still do that? Could they still figure out *them* with Neal lurking around like a big fucking creep-o?

"Emma," David says, and she jumps. She blinks, and realizes they're at the station.

She turns to him reluctantly, expecting him to see her blush and tease her about daydreaming, but he's regarding her gravely.

"When are you going to tell Henry?" he asks.

"I don't know. I don't know how to."

"If you want your mother and I to be there when you talk to Henry, let us know," David says.

"Okay."

She has her hand on the door handle, but she stops herself.

"Dad, can I ask you something?"

"Yea, of course."

"How come you and mom never had any more kids?"

She sees her question hit him. His shoulders sag, and his face settles into well-worn lines of grief.
"I mean," Emma says quickly, "I thought that's what you two wanted. When we were in the Echo Caves in Neverland, mom said-"

"It is what we wanted," David says. "But we were envisioning a scenario in which you, your mother, and I were all together. When we got back to the Enchanted Forest, and we thought we'd never see you again...it just felt like replacing you, Emma. We couldn't do it."

Emma remembers how much Snow's admission in the Echo Caves had hurt, how it had made her feel like she wasn't enough—but this is worse.

"You didn't have to do that," Emma says. "It would have been okay. I want you guys to be happy."

"We wouldn't have been happy, Emma. Not without you there."

David reaches across the space between them, and pulls her forehead to his lips. Emma leans into it. She missed things like this; she missed her dad's reassuring forehead kisses, and her mom's soothing hugs. She knows how to be a parent, but she forgot what it was like to have parents. She's so used to being the source of comfort that this...this is strange.

Strange, but nice.

"I know this is hard, Emma, but you can do it. We're gonna get through this."

Emma nods. His fingers press briefly into the back of her neck, and then he releases her.

"Do you want me to come in with you?"

"Nah, I've got it," she says. "Be right back." She opens the car door, hops down from the passenger seat, and jogs into the station, carrying the feeling of being loved inside her chest like a warm bubble.

---

The coconut is in a locked drawer in the desk nearest the cells. Emma retrieves it, and carries it back to the pickup truck. As David drives, Emma practices lighting it.

It's truthfully the only thing she really knows how to do with her magic—other than releasing it all at once in a devastating wave. After blowing out the tiny candle flame for the tenth time in a row, Emma closes up the coconut, and cradles it on her lap in her cupped palms.

Her nervousness grows as they drive deeper and deeper into the trees.

What if it's not weakened? a voice whispers inside her. What if you can't capture it? What if it hurts David? What if it gets away and goes after Henry? Or Ian?

She tries to ignore it, she tries to focus on the scenery, but it's too dark outside the car window, and she's only met with her pale reflection in the glass.

David takes a turn onto a side road, and has to slow down as the truck's wheels encounter gravel and pitted dirt. They bump and rock inside the cabin for another ten minutes, until they leave the trees and the road becomes a bit smoother amongst the open fields.

"What are you thinking?" David asks.

"Boston," Emma says, because she doesn't want to admit she's thinking about how scared she is.

"Emma, if you decide to move back to Boston...that's okay. You mother and I would miss you, but
that shouldn't affect your decision. And we'd understand. We want what's best for you and the boys, too."

"Thanks, dad," Emma says. "And, you know, if we do go back to Boston, you and mom could always come with..."

"The people of Storybrooke are our people. We can't just leave them."

"Yea, Henry said you'd say that. What about visits? Are monarchs allowed to take a vacation every now and then? Say, around Christmas and certain grandsons' birthdays?"

David chuckles. "I'm sure we could arrange something. What about Hook?"

"What about him?"

"What would he do if you and the boys moved back to Boston?"

"Hook could move to Boston too," Emma says, shrugging. "I told mom the same thing. There are plenty of jobs and plenty of apartments. We could help him get settled. He'd be fine."

"So, is there a...a thing between you and Hook?"

Emma rolls her eyes. "There's no thing," she says dryly.

"Do you want there to be a thing?"

"Okay, is this you asking, or mom?"

David's furtive silence is all the answer she needs.

"Well, tell mom that if she has a question she can ask me directly. This isn't 4th grade."

"Alright, but now this is me asking: are you certain you want to be with Hook?"

"Dad," Emma huffs. "Just...whatever Hook and I decide to become is up to us, okay? No offense, but butt out."

David grins. "Funny, Hook said the same thing."

Emma makes a tsk noise. "Would you stop giving him a hard time."

"Nope," David says. "I'm your father. It's my job to give your boyfriends a hard time."

Emma grinds her teeth at the word boyfriend. "We are not." she begins hotly.

"And anyway, how am I supposed to tell whether he's worthy of you or not if he can't endure a little gentle ribbing for the sake of your hand?"

"My hand?" Emma splutters. "As in marriage? Dad!"

He stops the car, and turns to her. "Are you still nervous?" he asks.

"Um," Emma says. "No? No. Wait, was that whole thing just to take my mind off of the Shadow?"

"Yes, did it work?"

"Yea."
"Ok, good. Because I think we're here. And I think we're expected."

Emma follows his gaze to the road, where the headlights are illuminating their path. Ahead of them, spanning the gravel drive, is a gate, and the gate is open.

"Are you ready?" David asks.

"Yea," Emma says. "Yea, I'm ready."

---

It ends up being little pathetic how easily they capture Pan's Shadow.

They park the truck at the bottom of the driveway, just inside the gate, and walk the rest of the way. There's no breeze, and the only sounds, aside from their footsteps, are the crickets and a few early cicadas.

The farmhouse is dark and still. Emma side-eyes it apprehensively, afraid Neal will stroll right out of the front door. David's stomping along beside her, making enough noise that if Neal were around he'd definitely hear, and he's glaring at the little house as if he's wishing Neal would show his face.

But he doesn't.

And then Emma's angry.

Why the hell doesn't Neal just take care of the goddamned Shadow? It's hiding on his farm, and it's his fault that it's free in the first place. He said he couldn't control it anymore, but he's supposed to have all these amazing Dark One powers, and she's pretty sure she injured it, so what's his problem?

The barn is another fifty yards or so past the farmhouse, surrounded by a swath of grass that's more dirt patches than actual grass. Up close, it's bigger than Emma first thought, and way more ramshackle. The siding is gray and weathered, and riddled with gaps where the wood panels fell off or were pried off; the roof is buckled and full of holes as well, and one section—a long, low building that looks like it might hold stalls for horses—is totally collapsed.

The towering doors are open—or missing, Emma can't tell—and the only thing she can see of the inside is an impenetrable wall of pitch blackness.

She should be creeped out, she should be afraid of what she'll find inside, but she's not.

David's there, for one thing, and for another, now that she's here, about to face down the Shadow, she realizes can't really afford to be scared: Ian's having dreams about the Shadow, and Emma doesn't know what that means, but she knows she doesn't want to wait around long enough to find out it means something bad.

She needs to finish this, and she needs to finish this now.

She glances up at the sky one last time. The moon is only a slim crescent, and, this far away from the electric lights of main street, the stars are clearly visible, bright and glittering against a velvety purple-black backdrop.

It's breathtaking, and Emma smiles to herself once more, knowing that, out there, Hook and the boys are enjoying it together.

The front wall of the barn rears up suddenly in front of her, blocking her view of the sky.
This is it. They're here.

Emma doesn't hesitate to walk inside. The air is warm and stagnant. It's too dark to see much, but she see enough to know that the interior is a big, open space, and it's empty.

David's at her shoulder, his gun drawn and held in front in front of him but pointed safely at the ground. Emma opens the coconut, and holds it at the ready, one half in each palm. She feels her magic shudder to life—not because she asked it to, but because somehow it knows she needs it.

Emma walks directly to the center, because the center seems like a nice, vulnerable spot that the Shadow might like to attack her in.

And it does.

Two pinpricks of light appear in a corner, and that's all the warning they get before it swoops down and rushes towards them.

"Emma?" David says, raising his gun and taking aim at the Shadow.

"I got it," she says, and raises both hands.

She takes a deep breath, and holds it—when the Shadow is close enough, she lights the candle.

A tiny flame bursts to life, and the Shadow's glowing eyes widen suddenly. It flip-flops in midair, backpedaling and trying to swoop back the way it came, but it's too late. It shrieks as it gets sucked into the flame, arms flailing, clawing the air frantically, seeking purchase it can't hope to gain.

With savage joy, Emma slams the coconut closed just as the Shadow disappears inside. It vibrates in her hands, violently at first, and then more and more sluggishly as the Shadow ceases struggling.

She keeps still for a second, and furtively scans the barn, searching for more pairs of glowing eyes, but there's nothing.

She's about to breath an actual sigh of relief when, from behind her, Emma hears, "Hey, you did it," from a voice that's not her dad's.

She and David whirl around.

Neal's standing in the barn doorway, a dark silhouette save for one shaft of moonlight that cuts over his shoulder, illuminating half of his face to reveal the scaly, greenish skin, one strange gold eye, and a self-satisfied smile.

Emma's about to ask him what the hell he wants—or maybe she'll just throw the coconut at his stupid head—but David's rushing past her too fast to stop.

Neal has one second to look confused, and one second to look surprised before David's on top of him and cracking him across the jaw. Emma hears how solidly David's fist collide with Neal's face, and she thinks there's no way Neal didn't just lose a few teeth.

Neal stumbles backwards, and falls. "What the hell was that for?" he spits up at David.

"That's for everything you did to my daughter," David bellows. He reaches down, grabs Neal's jacket, and hauls him to his feet. He pulls his arm back, ready to deliver another blow, but Neal jerks his head, and David is knocked brutally to the side as if by the invisible hand of a giant.

"Dad!" Emma yells, and runs after him. David hits the dirt and rolls, but as soon as he stops he's
back on his feet and stalking back towards Neal.

Emma intercepts him, and plants one hand and one coconut on his chest, halting him in his tracks.

"Dad, stop," she pants.

David's glowering over her shoulder, and doesn't seem to hear her.

"Dad!"

He looks down at her, pleadingly, and then back at Neal—only his eyes widen in shock. Emma turns to look, only to see that Neal's gone. She stares around, wildly, but it's just them and the crickets again.

"We should call your mother," David says in a low voice, eyes still fixed on the place Neal disappeared from. "And then we should call Henry and tell them to get back to the loft."

"Okay," Emma says. "I'll call Henry, you call mom."

---

They race back to the car, and then David pushes the truck to its limits as they speed back up the gravel road, through the woods, and into town.

Emma was only able to reach Henry's answering machine, but he's already home when she and David return to the loft. Ian and Hook, however, aren't.

"Where's your brother?" Emma asks.

"I don't know," Henry says, eyes slowly widening as he takes in her frantic expression. "We got back to the docks an hour ago, but then I went to go hang out with Ava. I haven't seen them since. Grandma came and found me and told me I needed to come home. Mom, what happened?"

Emma glances at the clock, even though she already knows it's late, and Hook and Ian should be home by now.

"Did Hook say anything? About where they might be going?"

"Ian said something about hot chocolate-"

David and Emma look at each other, and then they both look at Snow.

"Granny's," they say together, and Emma spins around and sprints from the loft.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Alright, there are probs quite a few grammar mistakes, but I'm going to post it now and cruise through and do corrections tomorrow afternoon. Also, it'll probably be at least another two weeks until the next update, so I apologize in advance!

At the Charmings' suggestion, and with Emma's encouragement, Killian takes the boys out—both to afford Emma an opportunity to rest, and to provide Henry and Ian with a distraction. The early evening air is cool, and, for the first time since he watched Emma disappear behind a curtain of falling rocks, Killian feels like he can breathe again.

Emma's bruised and weary but otherwise uninjured, and she's not shutting him out anymore—she still hasn't told him what's been bothering her, but she will, and that's enough to lift the crushing weight from his shoulders.

Killian retrieves a few items from his rooms at the inn and stuffs them into a satchel, then, after a brief dinner at Granny's, during which Henry and Ian debate the pros and cons of something called 'ketchup' versus something else called 'barbecue sauce', the three of them head to the docks.

Ian grips Killian's hook and swings it gently back and forth between them as they make their way down the street. He's humming to himself, a tune Killian is unfamiliar with but which sounds suspiciously like some sort of sea shanty. Henry is on Ian's other side, walking with his hands shoved in his trouser pockets, and his eyes fixed contemplatively ahead, where, in the distance, Heron Island lay.

Killian looks, as well.

Over the bay, the sky has already dimmed from cerulean to a deep navy. Killian estimates that, by the time they cross the harbor and arrive at their destination, it will be full dark. Not a single cloud mars the horizon, and given that the moon will be but a slim crescent, Killian believes they have a perfect night for stargazing ahead of them.

His heart soars at the thought. He's longed for this for what seems like an eternity—in reality, he knows it's been only a week since he first suggested the possibility to Ian, and three days since their first attempt was thwarted by an overcast sky, but it feels as if it's been much longer.

Ian's humming stops abruptly, and he says, "Hey, dad?"

Killian startles, and then an intoxicating rush of pure joy races through him.

The first time Ian referred to him as dad was two days ago. They were in a booth at Granny's together, and Ian was drawing—it was fascinating to Killian that a boy with as much energy as Ian was able to sit somewhat still and draw for hours without pause.

While he worked, Ian unconsciously probed his gums with his tongue, feeling the two new front teeth sprouting there. Killian was watching him, amused, when Ian looked up suddenly, and said, "Hey, dad? Does your pirate ship have a flag?"
Killian was about to answer when he realized that Ian had referred to him as _dad_.

It rang in his ears.

_Dad._

He would trade the Jolly Roger a thousand times over just for that moment—that _one_ moment. It felt like being given a second chance.

_Dad_ is his life now, and _dad_ is what Killian must live up to.

"Dad?" Ian asks again.

Killian looks down and sees two blue eyes gazing up at him curiously.

"Yes, lad?"

"When's your birthday?"

Killian's grown used to Ian's frank manner and his habit of speaking whatever's on his mind the moment it comes to him, so the seemingly random question doesn't throw him, and he promptly answers, "First day of the New Year."

Ian's brow crinkles. "Huh?"


"Oh, cool," Ian says. His expression clears, but then he scrunches his nose up. "No, wait. That's sad. If your birthday's in winter, you can't have a pool party."

Henry snorts. "I don't think they have pool parties in the Enchanted Forest, anyway."

"What's a pool party?" Killian asks, patiently—he's also grown used to the way any conversation with Henry and Ian involves an absurd amount of terms and phrases unknown to him.

But he's learning.

_Slowly._

"A pool party is when you have a party at a pool and everyone gets to go swimming," Ian says brightly.

"A pool?" Killian asks, slightly perplexed. "How can you swim in a pool?"

"He doesn't mean 'pool' as in, like, a puddle," Henry says. "A pool here is like-"

"It's like a _pool_," Ian interjects.

"It's like a giant bathtub," Henry says, ignoring Ian.

"Oh," Killian says, still slightly perplexed.

"Have you ever been to a public bath house where the bathtub is really big and built into the floor?"

"Aye."

"Okay, it's like that, only way bigger and it's only for swimming. You can build them outside, too,
and sometimes above ground. A lot of people with houses have pools in their backyards."

Killian shakes his head. "I don't understand; why not just swim in the sea?"

"Uh, because of this thing called winter?"

"And sharks," Ian adds.

Henry rolls his eyes. "I told you: there aren't any sharks around Boston."

"Cape Cod."

"Cape Cod is Cape Cod. Boston's Boston."

"What about Jaws? Jaws happened in Maine. We're in Maine."

"Jaws isn't real."

"It could be."

"It's not. Did you see Jaws when you were at the beach on Friday?"

"No."

"Okay, then. Jaws isn't real."

"What's Jaws?" Killian asks.

"It's a movie about a giant shark that eats a bunch of people," Henry says. Ian opens his mouth to speak, but Henry scowls at him and says firmly, "It's not real."

"I believe Henry's right, Ian," Killian says, giving his hook a little jiggle to shake Ian's arm and draw his attention. "There are no sharks in these waters. You and Roland are safe to continue swimming."

"Okay," Ian says, nodding. Then, suddenly, with a gasp, "Maybe I can have my birthday party at the beach this year, instead of the pool!"

"Your birthday must be coming up soon, then," Killian says, gladly steering the conversation away from murderous sharks.

Ian grins up at him. "Yea, July 9th," he says. "That's in a month! I'm gonna be 6! That means I'm a big kid."

"Mm," Killian hums with interest. "And what do big kids get to do?"

"They get to read Harry Potter."

"No way," Henry cuts in dismissively. "Mom's not gonna let you read Harry Potter until you're 10."

"That's not fair!" Ian whines.

"How is it not fair?" Henry asks.

"Because I wanna read it now."

"Just because you want to do something and you can't doesn't mean it's unfair."
Ian, however, just stares at Henry doubtfully.

Henry shrugs. "You've already seen the movies."

"Only the first two! And you said the books are better."

"Yea, well, they are."

"Then why can't I read them?"

"Because you're not old enough," Henry says. "Some of the stuff in the books is really scary."

"I'm not scared!"

Killian smiles to himself. Listening to the boys bicker reminds him strongly of himself and Liam, back in the day. Even before their father abandoned them, Liam was often left to take care of Killian on his own—perhaps that's why, despite the mere two year age difference, Liam always seemed infinitely more wise to Killian than himself or any other children their age.

He wanted so badly to live up to that, to be mature and responsible and capable like Liam, but Killian had too hot a head and too short a temper. He sees that a bit in Ian—the impatience, at least.

Fortunately, the boy lacks Killian's darkness; he's all light.

"Dad?"

Another warm thrill of happiness flutters through Killian. He's not certain he'll ever get used to being referred to as dad—but he doesn't think he wants to, either, because he never wants to take for granted the fact that he is this boy's father; that he, Killian Jones, has a son.

"Yes, lad?" he asks.

"How come you have your ear pierced?"

Killian tilts his head to the side, so that the dangling black jewel catches the last rays of the setting sun and glints.

"Many pirates have piercings," he says, "and many pirates believe that certain gems have special healing or protective powers."

Ian eyes Killian's earring. "What does yours do?"

"Alas, mine does nothing," Killian says, with feigned regret. His earring has no magical properties, it's true, but it does have a purpose.

Or, rather, it used to.

Killian had the earring made in the Enchanted Forest, after he won back the Jolly Roger. If one were to look closely (very closely) at the intricate silver piece that holds the black diamond, they might notice a miniscule swan—a reminder of Emma.

"Well," Ian says. "I like it. It looks cool."

Killian smiles. He thinks, perhaps, it's time to purchase a new earring; this one with a ruby—Ian's birthstone.
"Thank you, lad," he says. "Perhaps when you're older your mother will allow you to get one as well."

Henry makes a face over Ian's head that clearly says he highly doubts such a possibility, but remains silent.

---

They arrive at the docks just as the electric lamps flicker on, and Killian leads the boys along one of the piers, through alternating patches of glowing orange and murky blue, to a sturdy-looking dory.

"Is this yours?" Ian asks.

"Erm, no," Killian says, glancing at Henry, pleading silently for his compliance. "We're just borrowing it."

"Oh, okay," Ian says, and clambers gleefully inside.

Henry shoots Killian a wicked, knowing grin before he climbs into the small boat beside Ian. Killian holds it steady while they get settled, then unties the dory from its moorings, and joins them. He takes the seat opposite Henry and Ian, takes up the oars, and begins rowing them away from the docks and across the narrow channel to Heron Island.

"Hey, do you need help?" Henry asks.

"No, thank you, lad," Killian grunts. "It's only a short journey."

"Are you sure?" Henry asks, and his eyes fall to Killian's hook.

Killian chuckles. "I can manage."

It's certainly not easy for a man with one hand to row a dory on his own, but it's possible. Killian's had much practice over the centuries, and all it takes is a bit of extra concentration to ensure he maneuvers his hook the correct way with each pass of the oar so that it doesn't slip from within the half-circle of metal and fall into the water.

The boys are quiet. Henry's frowning at the horizon once more, sitting slouched over with his hands clasped loosely together between his knees. Ian's trying to see everything at once—the town behind him, the dark bank of Heron Island ahead, the sky above, the open ocean far, far to his left, and the inky black water to either side.

"Hey, dad?" Ian asks abruptly.

"Yes, lad?"

"Do you know who Todd Blackbum is?"

"Who?" Henry asks.

"Todd Blackbum. You know, the guy who lost all his fingers because his hands got frozen to the oars?"

Henry makes an impatient noise in his throat. "You mean Howard Blackburn?"

"Yea, him."
"Who's Howard Blackburn?" Killian asks, before Henry decides to throw Ian overboard.

"He was a fisherman from Gloucester, which is a few hours south of here," Henry informs him. "He got stuck out in the ocean in the middle of a winter storm, and had to row himself and another guy back to shore. It took five days, and he lost all his fingers and a bunch of his toes to frostbite."

"And the other guy died," Ian adds.

"Yea, that too."

"Well, that's rather unpleasant," Killian says. "However, lucky for us, it's not winter, and..."

Right on cue, the bottom of the dory scrapes across sand and rocks with a loud, grating squeal.

"We're here," he announces. "All ashore, men!"

---

They drag the boat onto the beach, stow the oars inside, then hike around the tip of the peninsula until the lights of Storybrooke are no longer visible.

Ian squelches as he walks—he had taken savage pleasure in leaping into the water and trudging through the shallows to help bring the dory to shore, while Henry just shook his head and said, "Mom's gonna kill you."

The boy is soaked up to his thighs, but Killian can't find it within himself to be upset—his son likes the sea, and that's more than Killian could ever have hoped for.

They find a spot on the east side of Heron Island that's relatively free of debris, save for a few tendrils of seaweed and one bleached tree trunk that looks eerily bone-white, even in the darkness. Henry places his and Ian's jackets atop the log, and Killian follows suit; he un-slings the satchel from across his chest and sets it beside the folded coats, then stoops down and reaches inside.

Ian comes up close beside them and leans in, peering at the bag Killian's rooting through one-handed.

"What's in there?" Ian asks.

Killian's fingers find what they're looking for, and, with a triumphant grin, he pulls the object out and presents it to Henry and Ian.

"This," he says grandly, "is a sextant."

Henry bites his lip, and Ian giggles.

"A what?"

Killian clears his throat. "A sextant," he says gruffly—amusement was not the response he was expecting in reaction to one of his most prized possessions. "It's a tool used by sailors to navigate."

"Oh, like a GPS?" Ian asks. He raises up on his tip toes and squints at the device Killian's holding.

Killian doesn't know how to respond, so he just mutters, "Aye," and passes the sextant over to Ian, who takes it reverently in both hands.

"It measures our position using the stars," Killian says, then swings his arm up and gestures
overhead, at the stars glittering in the sky like diamonds scattered across a velvety, purple-black backdrop.

Ian's eyes follow the motion, and he tilts his face up, his mouth falling open in wonder as he drinks in the sight above them.

"I'm not sure that's what a GPS does," Henry says, as he eases the sextant out of Ian's grasp and turns it over, examining it.

"Well, in any case, in lieu of a telescope, this sextant will aid our observation of the heavens. Shall we begin?"

Killian locates each constellation and carefully points it out. Both Ian and Henry have a good eye, and find them quickly and with only a little direction.

"There's Ursa Minor, the Little Bear."

"Oh! I know that one," Ian gushes excitedly. "That's the little dipper. It looks like a spoon."

"Aye. See the very bright star at the end of its handle? That's Polaris, the North Star."

"Cool!"

Henry is more composed than his brother, and merely nods and smiles in appreciation, while Ian bounces up and down on his toes, waiting for Killian to reveal the next constellation.

"Alright, lad, look over here," he says. He takes Ian by the shoulders and gently turns him. "Right above you, that's-"

"Lupus!" Ian says. "That means 'wolf', right?"


"It looks like its sleeping."

"Hey," Henry says excitedly. "I think I found Libra."

"Where?" Ian asks.

"Over here," Henry says, pointing. "It sorta looks like a drawing of a house, but with no bottom, and one side is longer than the other."

"Oh! I see it!"

Something's tugging at Killian—a feeling he hasn't felt in a long time—and, slowly, he allows himself to relax into it. It's a feeling similar to that of being part of a crew, and yet different. It takes him a few moments to realize it's a feeling of belonging that's welling up inside him, the feeling of being part of a family.

He turns his face up sharply, completely unprepared for the wave of agony that washes over him.

The last time he felt this way was when Liam was alive.

His throat feels tight, suddenly, and the stars shine brighter and then begin to blur together as tears fill his eyes.
"Hey, dad?"

His anguish reaches a crest and then breaks.

Liam's gone, and the bond they shared is lost forever—but Killian has something else, now.

He has these boys.

He has Ian, his son.

He has Henry, as well, and although he's not Henry's father, he's part of the boy's life now, and the boy is part of his, and he believes—he hopes—the feeling of amity is mutual.

"Yes, lad?" he asks, looking back down.

In Ian's eyes, Killian can see reflected the moon and all the stars in the sky.

"Did your dad teach you about the stars, too?"

It's a question asked innocently, and yet it drives yet another spike of misery through him when he'd only just pulled himself together.

"No, my brother Liam did," he says, then swallows hard, past that tight feeling in his throat.

"How come your dad didn't do it?"

Killian tries to answer, but only manages a sigh.

He sees Henry tense, sensing what Ian can't, and Killian knows Henry's bracing himself, ready to swoop in and distract Ian, pull the conversation in a different direction, but Killian gives a slight shake of his head.

"My father left when I was very young," he says quietly.

For the life of him, he can't remember when the last time was he said those words out loud. With Milah, perhaps?

"Left?" Ian asks, brow crinkling, one corner of his mouth lifting up in confusion.

"Aye, he left."

"What happened?"

Henry has lowered the sextant, and is watching Killian as well.

"The three of us—my father, brother, and I—were out at sea. One morning, I awoke, and our father was gone."

"Where did he go? Why did he leave you?"

"He sold us."

Even now, after all these years, the pain of abandonment is like a knife twisting in his guts.

"Sold you?" Ian's voice is gaining a frantic, high pitch. "Why?"

Killian keeps his own voice steady in an effort to calm Ian. "The man we were sold to informed us
that our father was a criminal, on the run from the law. He sold us for a small boat, so that he might escape unnoticed."

Ian's lower lip is trembling. "What about your mom?"

"My mother died when I was very young. I don't remember her very much."

Ian's face crumples. He steps forward, slips his arms around Killian's waist, and buries his face against Killian's stomach.

"I'm sorry," Killian hears him say.

"Come now, lad. There's nothing for you to be sorry for."

"You were all alone."

Ian squeezes him tighter, and Killian wraps his arms around the boy's shoulders, burying his fingers in the short, fine hairs at the nape of his neck.

"I wasn't alone. I had my brother, Liam. He took care of me, much as Henry takes care of you."

"Where's your brother now?"

Now it's Killian who's squeezing back hard.

"He died," Killian says. "A long time ago."

Henry's closer than he was before. He has a sad, lost expression on his face, and he's holding the sextant absent in his hands like he doesn't know what to do with it.

Seeing both boys looking so miserable jolts him out of his own misery.

"Come on," Killian says loudly, bracingly. "We've only a little time left before we must head back, and we shouldn't waste it worrying over me." He runs his hand over Ian's hair, smoothing it away from the boy's forehead. "Let's get back to stargazing, yea? There's still plenty I wish to show you."

Ian releases him reluctantly, but he clings to Killian's side. Henry remains nearby, as well, so that his arm often brushes Killian's as Killian passes the sextant around. It's as if both boys trying to comfort him with their physical presence, and Killian realizes, it's working.

The warm feeling seeps back inside him, and lodges itself there.

---

They stay for another hour, then they pile into the dory once again, and Killian rows them back to the docks.

They're heading along Main Street towards Granny's when Henry stops. He has his phone in hand, and the screen is lit up.

"Hey, do you mind if I go hang out with Ava for a bit?"

"I don't know," Killian says. "Will your mother be alright with that?"

Henry shrugs. "I'll be home before curfew."
"Make sure that you are."

"Bring me back some ice cream," Ian says sternly.

"Yea, yea," Henry says, rolling his eyes. "I'll see what I can do."

"Perhaps you should purchase some for your mother, as well. Do you need money?"

He reaches for his vest, inside of which he keeps a small stash of this world's paper currency, but Henry waves him off.

"Nah, I've got it. I'll get her something."

"And me," Ian reminds him.

"Yes," Henry says. "And you. I get it." He sighs and faces Killian. "Thanks for taking me tonight. That was fun."

"My pleasure, lad. Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"I will. And, um, that thing you told us? About your dad?" Henry pauses and licks his lips, then frowns, eyebrows drawing down and gaze hardening. "I just want you to know that I get it."

Killian blinks, bewildered, but before he can respond, Henry turns on his heel and strides away.

What does he mean?

Ian's tugging on his sleeve, drawing Killian's attention.

"Thank you for taking me, too," Ian says dutifully.

Killian smiles. "You're very welcome, lad. I'm happy you enjoyed it."

"Can we get hot chocolate now?" he asks.

"Aye. That sounds delightful. Granny's?"

"Yea!"

---

Despite the chill, Ian insists they sit outside. Killian fetches his long coat from his room, and then he and Ian take their drinks to the patio. There's no one else around, so they have their choice of the tables. Ian selects a small, round one against the fence, and sits in one of the two chairs with his feet on resting on the seat and his knees drawn up to his chest.

"Do they have hot chocolate in the Enchanted Forest?" Ian asks. He lifts his mug to his lips and takes a long, slurping sip that leaves him with a thick, cinnamon-speckled, whipped cream mustache.

Killian takes a sip as well, and grins behind the cover of his mug—both because of Ian's appearance, and because Granny apparently slipped some rum into his drink.

"Not as such, no," he says

"No hot chocolate and no ice cream," Ian says. "That stinks."

"It does sound like a rather depressing place, doesn't it?" Killian replies lightly, taking another sip.
The combination of both the rum and the hot chocolate has a fire burning in his belly, but Ian's next question sends several ice cubes sliding down into his stomach.

"Do you wanna go back?"

"To the Enchanted Forest? No, lad. I don't."

Ian's silent for a moment, watching him.

"What about for your ship?"

"Not even for the Jolly Roger," Killian says. He sets his mug on the table and leans forward, towards Ian. He holds Ian's blue gaze steadily with his own. "Do you trust me?"

"Yea, I trust you."

"Then believe me when I say that I'm here now. I'm not leaving." I'm not my father.

"Okay," Ian says. He nods, but he doesn't relax, and Killian notices the way he's sitting curled up tight with both hands wrapped around his mug—for warmth.

"Are you cold?" Killian asks.

"No," Ian says quickly, but he shivers as he does.

Bloody hell.

"Here," Killian says. He makes to take his jacket off, but Ian's already climbing into his lap, so Killian presses his back into the chair, and holds still. Ian gets settled firmly on Killian's thighs and tucks himself beneath Killian's chin.

Killian's frozen for a moment, unable to move, stunned by how comforting Ian's warmth and weight feels against his chest, then he gathers his coat, taking it by the massive lapels, and wraps it around his son as best he can.

"Better?" he asks.

"Yes," Ian says, and somehow leans into him more. "Hey, dad?"

"Yes, Ian?"

"I love you."

Killian presses his lips to the top of Ian's head, and his eyes fall shut. The boy smells like the sea—and apples, for some reason—but he also smells like Ian, that pleasant yet indefinable scent that reminds Killian of Emma, as well.

"I love you, too," he whispers. "More than you can know."

How his life has been turned completely upside down in a mere week and a half. Eleven days ago, Killian didn't know he had a son, and now, this boy is the most precious thing to him in all the realms.

"Hey, dad?"
"Mmhm," Killian hums against his hair.

"How come we didn't see Cygnus?"

Killian turns his face sideways, but keeps his cheek resting atop Ian's head. "She's not visible yet," he says. "We won't be able to see her until September."

"Oh. Can we go stargazing again in September?"

"We may go again whenever you wish."

"Do you think maybe grandpa could come too, next time?"

"If he so desires—ah, that reminds me. You still haven't told me about the pony you rode today."

"Oh yea! It was pink!"

Halfway through his tale recounting his exciting afternoon at the barn, Ian falls asleep. Killian holds him, feeling the bundle in his arms, feeling the soft blonde hair against his cheek, and all he can think is: Mine.

---

Killian's not certain exactly how long he sits there, too comfortable to move, too unwilling to move Ian, to wake him and end the moment, but he knows it's been at least half an hour when he suddenly hears footsteps pounding up the pavement, and he turns to see Emma racing towards them with her hair billowing wildly out behind her, and her eyes wide and panicked.

"Swan," he says, startled, and turns.

Her eyes fall to Ian's head, just visible poking out of the top of Killian's jacket, and she sags with relief. She stumbles and almost falls, but catches herself in time with her hands on her knees, and she remains bent double, breathing heavy in what, to Killian's ears, sound almost like sobs.

"Emma? What's wrong?"

She shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, Swan—if this is about the late hour, that's my fault. I lost track of time—"

"Goddamn it!" she bursts out, and straightens. She takes several rapid steps towards him, fists clenched. "You scared the shit out of me. I just got home and there was no one there but Henry!"

Killian just stares as she rounds the fence to the patio, and takes Ian's vacated chair. She plants her elbows on the table and drops her face heavily into her palms.

"It's probably time to get you a cell phone," she mutters. She's silent for a long moment, then her hands slide slowly down into her lap, and she looks at him with green eyes that are calm once more. "Please tell me you have some rum on you."

Half-grinning, Killian jerks his head down and to the left. "Hip pocket," he says.

Emma reaches into his jacket, and pulls out his flask. She pops the cork, takes a sip, a gulp of air, and then another sip. When she lowers the flask to the table, Killian picks up his mug and holds it out towards her.
"Do you mind, love?" he asks, giving the mug a shake.

She snorts but obliges, and tips a healthy dose of rum into the remainder of his hot chocolate, which has become a frothy, cinnamon-y mess.

He downs the entire thing in one go, wipes the whipped cream from beneath his nose before Emma can laugh at him, and says, "Now, Swan, did I hear you say you just got home? You were supposed to be resting."

With a sigh, she jams the cork back into his flask. "Can we go upstairs? There's a lot I have to tell you."

---

What Emma reveals to him in his room shatters his sense of reality.

He sits in the armchair, pulled up beside the bed so that Emma may sit next to where Ian's lying, and begins the painstaking process of picking up the pieces and fitting them back together.

*Neal and Regina cast the Dark Curse.*

He takes a sip of rum from the glass tumbler he's gripping so hard he's surprised it doesn't break.

*Regina's very likely dead, and Neal...*

*Neal's the Dark One.*

*The bloody, fucking Dark One.*

The rum hits his center and *burns*, but he embraces it, and takes another, biting swig from the glass.

Killian thinks of Baelfire, the boy. Then of Neal, the man.

Bae was a good boy, but Neal Cassidy is *not* a good man.

Neal Cassidy allowed a young girl to risk her safety for his crime, and then *abandoned* her—left her to take the fall for his misdeeds and get sent to prison.

Killian thinks of all the chances he'd had to gut the man Neal Cassidy with his hook—and mourns the loss of those chances.

"Hook? Are you okay?"

Slowly, Killian nods. "Aye, Swan. I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"Yea," she says, and drops her eyes to her fingers, tracing back and forth through Ian's hair. The boy's still asleep, wrapped up in Killian's blankets, with his head resting on Killian's pillow, and his face snuggled against Emma's hip.

It's strange to see Ian so peaceful, when to Killian it feels as though the world is crumbling around them.

"I'm sorry, Emma," he says.

She shakes her head. "Henry's the one who needs sympathy, not me."
"When will you tell him?"

"I don't know. I know I can't hide it from him forever, but...I don't want him to see his dad like that."

She takes a deep, shuddering breath, and raises her hand quickly to press against her lips, her face suddenly squeezed tight in pain.

Killian's out of his chair and sitting on the bed next to her in an instant. She falls into his arms, and he wraps them around her, gently cradling her head against his shoulder. Her hands dart up and grip the front of his vest.

"Everything will be alright, Swan," he says, soothingly, stroking her hair the same way she stroked Ian's.

He hears her exhale shakily. "I think he's been watching us," she says. "Hook, I—I don't know. Neal thinks he did all this for me and Henry. I don't know what he'll do if he finds out about Ian and about...and about me and you."

Killian looks up. Hanging above his bed, stuck there with tape that Granny lent him, are several drawings that Ian made for him—all signed, To: Dad.

"Neal won't hurt Ian, Emma," Killian says. "I promise. I won't let him. Nor will I let him hurt you, or Henry."

Emma sits up and gently bats his arms away. She wipes at her eyes with her sleeve, then drops her hands to his lap—she laces her fingers with his, then curls her other hand around his hook.

"Thanks," she says.

"No, Emma. Thank you. Thank you for telling me."

She gives a small, watery chuckle, and looks down. "Sorry it took so long."

He squeezes her fingers, and she lifts her eyes back to his. "There's no need to apologize, Emma. I...I understand, now. But I hope." It's Killian's turn to look down. He focuses on his thumb, rubbing back and forth over Emma's knuckles. "I hope, in the future, to earn your trust, so that you might feel free to share such things with me."

"Hey," she says, softly, and he looks up, just as she leans forward. "I do trust you."

Her lips brush his, in the lightest, briefest of kisses. She pulls away, but only just—their breath mingles, her nose brushes his, he can see flecks of hazel in the green of her eyes...

Beside them, Ian sighs in his sleep.

Killian lets out a sigh of his own, and tilts his forehead forward to rest against Emma's. "What shall we do with our boy?"

"I should take him back to the loft."

"You could stay," he says, hopefully.

"No, we should go. It's late, and we have to wake up early tomorrow to finish taking care of the Shadow. Plus, I...I don't want to confuse Ian, you know? I think, for now, he should wake up in his own bed—well, his bed at the loft."
"As you wish, Swan. Let's get the boy's shoes back on, and I shall help you carry him home."

"Thanks—oh, one more thing?"

"Hm?"

"If my dad asks, we were never up here in your room unsupervised, okay?"

"I think it's safe to say that it's in both our best interests to stick to that story."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, weekends are the only time I have enough energy to do real writing, and I was super sick all last weekend, so this took a bit longer than intended :( The next chapter will hopefully only take me another two weeks to write (unless a miracle happens and I finish earlier). Enjoy!

They decide to destroy Pan's Shadow using what Dr. Whale calls 'the furnace', a word that makes both Henry and Emma shudder. Killian doesn't understand why until Whale leads the three of them deep into the bowels of the hospital, to a narrow, dark room lit only by the flickering orange glow from the monstrous, black iron machine that takes up the entire back wall.

A shiver crawls its way up Killian's spine. There's something distinctly eerie and menacing about the device, compounded by the fact that it's located in so remote a location—and perhaps also a little because the grated door resembles a fanged mouth.

Killian swears the thing is *leering* at him.

Grimacing with distaste, Killian moves closer to Emma. She's standing near the furnace, but leaning away from it with her shoulders turned towards the door as if contemplating making a run for it. She has the coconut clutched tightly to her stomach, and a look of revulsion on her face equal to Killian's.

"Do we really have to do this all the way down here?" she asks Whale.

"The basement is where we keep the furnace, so yes." Whale says, throwing Emma a withering glare. "This isn't your parents' castle in the Enchanted Forest, Ms. Swan; there isn't a roaring fire in every room."

"Well, I wouldn't know, would I?" Emma mumbles. She seems to shrink inwards as she watches the wild dance of the flames behind the grate. "Are you *sure* this isn't where you guys burn bodies or something?"

"Does that door even look large enough to fit a body through?" Whale huffs impatiently.

His words are met with stares and uneasy silence, until Henry, half-grinning, asks, "Are you saying you've tried?"

In the dim room, Whale's angry flush looks purple.

"Look, do you want to do this or not? I'm a little busy, you know. Last time I checked, this is a hospital, and I'm a doctor-"

"You got your medical degree from a curse," Emma says.

"I got my chemistry degree from the University of Ingolstadt," Whale replies stiffly, chin jutting out and chest puffing up.

"Chemistry? Seriously? How they hell are you qualified to be operating on people?"
"He's Dr. Frankenstein, mom," Henry cuts in, "If he can sew a bunch of corpses together and make it live, he can probably remove an appendix—hey, wait! I meant that as a compliment!"

Whale turns sharply on his heel and brushes past them, making Henry and Hook sidestep quickly to let him by. "Try not to burn the hospital down," he snarls as he turns the corner into the hallway and disappears.

"Sorry," Henry says to Emma, mouth twisting in an apologetic smile.

"It's alright. I'm the one who started it," Emma says, then makes a face of her own. "We should probably stop pissing off all the people in this town we need as friends though."

Whether her comment was aimed at him or not, Killian feels the need to defend himself and his actions.

"I stand by what I did to Leroy," he says, hooking his thumb through his belt loop for emphasis. He hasn't forgotten how the dwarf treated Ian the day they met—nor will he ever; it's a grudge Killian intends to hold for the rest of his natural life.

"What did you do to Leroy?" Henry asks keenly.

Killian tilts his head from side to side, thoughtfully. "I merely informed him what would happen should he fail to aid our rescue of your mother from that wall," he says.

"So, you threatened him."

"Aye."

Henry grins.

"Anyway," Emma says, clearing her throat pointedly. "How about we get this over with so we can leave the creepy murder basement?"

Killian and Henry share a final, fleeting smirk before Killian gestures towards the furnace with his hook, and says, "By all means, love."

Emma wrenches the furnace door open. It swings wide with a piercing, metallic shriek that makes Killian grit his teeth. Without a moment's hesitation, Emma tosses the coconut into the roaring fire, and slams the door shut behind it.

Killian and Henry draw closer to the furnace, until the three of them are huddled together, peering through the grate.

"How do we know when it's dead?" Henry asks.

"I don't know," Emma says, squinting into the furnace.

Killian squints, too. It's difficult to see through the flames that engulf it, but, from what Killian can tell, the coconut's hairs have burned off, and its shell is already black. He thinks back to when they thought they destroyed the Shadow before, in the fairies' temple. They should have waited, made sure that the creature was truly gone before they moved on.

Suddenly, the coconut starts shaking, and the Shadow screams.

The sound turns Killian's stomach, and he recoils slightly, just as something bumps his hand. Cool fingers—Emma's fingers—wrap themselves around his and squeeze. She's not looking at him, but he
can feel their connection through their linked hands—feel her drawing strength from him, from his presence. He longs to slip his arm around her, to pull her body close, against his, but with the lad there it would be inappropriate, so he merely squeezes Emma's hand back, and strokes his thumb along the inside of her wrist.

None of them speak as they bear witness, and it's an uneasy silence. It's one thing to know they're killing the Shadow, it's quite another to listen to it suffering as it dies.

Killian conjures up the memory of the bodies they found in the woods; of Ian, quaking in terror as he recounted his nightmare of a shadow that watched him through the bedroom window, and the creature's cries become easier to tolerate.

Once, Killian sees Henry look away, shoulders heaving as if he might vomit, but then he shakes his head and turns back, the lines of his face set hard with grim determination.

*Tough lad*, Killian thinks.

Tough like Ian, tough like their mother.

Finally, the coconut stops shaking, and thick black smoke drifts sluggishly out of the holes in the top. As the last wisps escape, the coconut collapses inward. Flames devour it eagerly until nothing remains save a tiny, charred lump.

"Is it over?" Henry asks. His voice sounds overloud in the small room, now that the Shadow's screaming has ceased.

"Yea," Emma says, straightening. "It's over."

Killian breathes a slow, deep breath. Pan's Shadow is vanquished, the final remnant of Peter Pan gone from the earth, and Killian feels as though one dark chapter in his life is finally closing.

They start towards the door, but Henry stops suddenly.

"Hey," he says, and Emma jolts, pulling her fingers from Killian's. Killian holds still, but all Henry asks is, "Do either of you remember how to get back to the elevator?"

Hook easily navigates the labyrinth of basement corridors back to the elevator, and graciously allows Emma to skitter inside first; she's never been a huge fan of scary movies, and this basement is definitely something straight out of a horror film.

They drop Henry off on the 2nd floor to get his wrist checked out—

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with?"

"I'm fine, mom. They're just gonna tell me I don't need the splint anymore. See you in ten minutes."

and then head up to the 3rd floor, where they left Ian, Roland, and Emma's parents in the waiting area near Robin and Little John's rooms.

As soon as they step out of the elevator, Emma's phone buzzes at her from her jeans pocket. She takes it out and thumbs open the text awaiting her from David.

*Everyone's awake.*

Emma breathes a sigh of relief, a week's worth of anxious tension leaking from her as she does. Her
stomach muscles ache, as if she's been keeping them clenched tight ever since Robin and the others ended up in the hospital.

"What is it, love?" Hook asks.

Emma slips her phone back into her pocket. "My dad says the Shadow's victims are up," she says.

"Well, Swan, you did it," Hook says, and smiles a soft smile that warms Emma's already tender, heat-blasted cheeks.

What happened below—what happened in the forest over a week ago—already feels like a bad dream. Emma takes a deep breath, filling her lungs, filling her chest with the sweet, fresh air wafting in from the open windows in the bright, light-filled hallway they're standing in.

She wants to take Hook's hand again, tuck herself against his chest, let the weight of his arms around her banish that last little bit of uneasiness sitting heavy in her chest, press her nose into his collarbone to smell the scent of the sea and rum and him.

Fuck, he makes her feel safe—she doesn't know why; he just does. The surprising part is how okay she is with that.

He jerks his head down the hallway. "Shall we go get the lads?"

"Yea," Emma says, and starts walking. Hook falls in beside her, close enough that his arm and hand bump hers. Emma resists grabbing it—with her luck, the moment she does David will appear.

They're within ten feet of the waiting room when Emma's Spidey senses start tingling—she hears a peal of giggles, followed by Snow saying, "Ian, maybe you shouldn't-

"Ah, crap," Emma groans.

She sprints the last few steps to the waiting room and bursts around the corner just in time to see Ian take a flying leap off a chair and land on a table approximately four feet away. He lands with his heels hanging off the edge, and wobbles for a moment, arms windmilling before he regains his balance.

"Killian David Swan," Emma says icily. Her voice slices the air like a knife, and Ian freezes guiltily, eyes wide, clearly surprised by her arrival. If Emma had a penny for every time she saw that exact face, she could have moved the three of them out of their cramped apartment in Charlestown to a mansion up in Marblehead.

"Get down," she says. "Now."

"But we're playing 'the floor is lava!'" Ian says, weakly, in the tone of someone who knows he's doomed but is just too stubborn to give up without a fight.

"It doesn't matter what you're playing. You're not at home, kid; you can't climb all over the furniture here."

Ian wavers, torn. Hook stifles a laugh by turning it into a stern throat-clearing. Out of the corner of her eye, Emma sees Roland slinking meekly down from the chair he was standing on, but she pretends she doesn't notice.

Ian makes one last, desperate attempt to plead his case. "Grandma's playing, too!"
He points, and Emma follows his finger to find Snow, standing in the corner with both feet planted solidly on a coloring book.

"Really?" Emma says, arching an eyebrow.

"Didn't you hear him, Emma? The floor is lava," Snow answers.

Emma has a response for that—something about how Snow's unsuspecting Play-Doh in Ian's hands—but she swallows it. Somehow, Emma thinks her mom's both perfectly aware of the situation and enjoying it thoroughly.

Sighing, she threads a path through the waiting room along the trail of children's hardcover storybooks and highlights magazines that litters the floor. Ian watches her approach, braced for impact. When Emma reaches him, she takes him by the armpits, plucks him off the table, and sets him down firmly atop a wooden puzzle of the United States.

"Off the furniture," she says. "At least until we get back to the loft. And then you can climb on anything you want."

"Even on grandpa?" he asks with a sly, very Hook-like smirk.

"Especially on grandpa," Emma says. "But you have to pick up all these books, first, alright? We have to go-"

Ian gasps in horror and screeches, "DAD! No!"

Emma whips around and sees Hook hastily withdrawing his foot from the carpet of the waiting room and placing it delicately back on the hallway tiles.

His hand darts up to tug on his earlobe. "Erm, sorry," he mutters.

"It's okay," Ian says. "I just don't want you to melt."

"Right," Hook says. He takes another step, this time onto a copy of The Cat in the Hat, and pauses, one foot on the book, one foot in the hallway, to raise a questioning eyebrow at Ian, who nods vigorously.

"What's the objective of this game, precisely?" Hook asks, as he brings his other foot forward to rest on a Reader's Digest.

"The objective is: don't die," Henry says, and he skips past Hook, darting from one magazine to another and then finally jumping up onto the table.

"Hey! No fair!" Ian says.

Emma gapes. "Are you kidding me? I literally just told Ian not to do that."

Sheepishly, Henry steps down. "Sorry."

"Henry, honey, you're melting," Snow calls from across the room.

"Ah!" Henry jumps backwards, onto another wooden puzzle.

Ian and Roland giggle.

"You have no legs now," Ian says.
"What? I was on lava for like two seconds!" Henry protests.

"Yea, and you melted!"

"How am I supposed to play with no legs?"

"You could play on your knees," Roland suggests. "We could move all the books a little closer for you."

Ian makes a face at Henry like that's the last thing he intends to do.

"How about Henry only loses one leg?" Emma says.

Henry, Roland, and Ian exchange glances.

"Fine," Ian huffs, and the same time Henry also says, "Fine," and bends one leg upwards at the knee. He stands, wobbling, tilted slightly sideways, on his other leg, before hopping off the wooden puzzle and onto *Goodnight Moon*.

Emma knows she probably shouldn't be encouraging Henry and Ian to be putting their feet all over the hospital's books and magazines, either, but she can't help it—it's a game Emma's always enjoyed watching them play, because it's one of the few games that, due to their age differences, they seem to be able to play without fighting or arguing.

Usually, at home, it ends in an overly dramatic rendition of that scene from Star Wars where Obi-Wan dismembers Anakin—more than once Emma received calls from their neighbors checking to see if the sounds of two boys dying at the hands of an axe-murderer were real or just Henry and Ian playing 'the floor is lava' again.

"I believe I'm beginning to understand this game," Hook says.

Emma turns to watch him picking a path towards them, eyes fixed on the floor in concentration, stepping with exaggerated care.

"Didn't you play when you were a kid?" Ian asks.

"I don't think games were invented yet when he was a kid," Henry says.

Hook pulls his head up and splutters, "I beg your pardon-"

David interrupts him. "Hey," he says from the doorway. He has three seconds to furrow his brow at the mess on the floor and the group of adults standing on magazines, and then Ian's yelling, "Grandpa!" and bolting along a path of Dr. Seuss books into his arms.

David catches him and lifts him up onto his hip. He cups the back of Ian's head and presses a kiss to his forehead that makes Ian grin.

"I didn't get a chance to see you this morning," David says. "How was stargazing last night with Hoo—uh, with your dad?"

"It was awesome!" Ian chirps. "We stole a boat!"

"Borrowed," Hook corrects quickly. "*We borrowed* a boat."

"Did you ask before you borrowed it?" David asks through his teeth in a falsely pleasant voice.
"Erm, no."

"Then you didn't *borrow* it."

"We brought it back," Ian says.

David's gaze softens as he turns it from Hook to Ian. "Well, then I guess I don't have to arrest you, now do I?"

Ian giggles again. David sets him down, and turns to Roland.

"Alright, bud. Are you ready to go see your dad?"

"Yes!" Roland gasps, and races to David's side, mindless of the lava. David holds out his hand, and Roland takes it.

"Are you coming?" David asks Emma.

She looks at Roland's face, at his dimples and his sweet, eager smile.

"Um, no. I, um...I'll talk to Robin tomorrow," Emma says. She wants to talk to Robin—to apologize to him—but it can wait. Robin's been unconscious and Roland's been worrying for a week. They deserve their time together, alone.

That, and Emma's a *tiny* bit afraid Robin will be upset with her.

David nods, eyes filled with understanding. "Be right back," he says. Snow joins them, and they escort Roland away, out of the waiting room and up the hall.

Ian slips his arms around Emma's waist and hugs her around the middle, resting his chin on her stomach.


"Not today," she says, brushing his hair sideways, off his forehead. She traces one finger along the thin scar over his left eyebrow. "Let Roland have some time alone with his dad, okay? I'm sure he misses him."

"Okay," Ian sighs.

"How about you pick up all these books so we can go get some lunch?" Emma says.

"Can we get donuts?"

"For lunch? No, but maybe if you eat all your vegetables at dinner we can get some for breakfast tomorrow."

Ian scrunches his nose up. "I don't like vegetables."

"All little pirates have to eat their vegetables if they want to become big, scary pirates," Hook says. He cocks his head at Ian. "You want to become a big, scary pirate, don't you, lad?"

"Yes," Ian says, fiercely, grinning. "I want to be so scary that sharks are afraid to eat me."

"Better eat a lot of broccoli, then," Emma says. "Everyone knows sharks are afraid of broccoli."
"It's true," Hook says, frowning solemnly and nodding. "Broccoli's the most frightening of all the vegetables. A shark wouldn't dare swim within a mile of any pirate who ate all his broccoli for dinner. They're also afraid of little boys who clean up after themselves."

Emma thinks Hook's probably pushing it with that last one, but Ian marches off, fists clenched in determination, to pick up all the books, magazines, and wooden puzzles strewn about the waiting room.

"You know," Emma says, quietly enough that only Hook can hear, "I think you've gotten the hang of this parenting thing."

He turns his head to stare at her, eyes wide with astonishment, but before he can respond Henry shuffles over, hands stuffed in his jeans pockets.

"How's your wrist?" Emma asks.

"Oh, fine," Henry says absently, raising his left arm and twirling his hand back and forth a few times before jamming it back into his pocket. "They said I'm all good. Um, mom?"

Her Spidey senses start tingling again.

"Yea?" she asks slowly.

"I was, uh, thinking," he says.

"Uh-huh. Go on."

"Well, you know Ava, right?"

"Yes, I know Ava."

"Well, I, uh..." Henry bites his lip. "I asked her out last night, and-"

"Did you now?" Hook cuts in cheerfully. He beams, and looks happily to Emma, who glares—she knows Henry, and she knows Hook's ribbing is more likely to fluster Henry than encourage him.

Predictably, Henry blushes a dark crimson, and says in a jumbled rush, "I was thinking maybe she could have dinner with us tonight? So she could, um, meet you guys? Like, meet you for real? As my girlfriend."

He stops and holds his breath, cheeks puffed out slightly.

Emma hesitates.

On the one hand, she had been thinking, in the back of her mind, that tonight might be the right time to tell Henry about Neal, but on the other...Ava makes Henry happy, and he's been more—well, he's been more Henry than she's seen him be in months ever since he started hanging around with her.

Emma can't ruin Henry's happiness, not tonight.

"Yea, kid," she says. "You, Ian, and I can have dinner with Ava."

"Hook, too," Henry says quickly.

Emma raises her eyebrows, surprised, but not unpleasantly so.

Hook's grin grows, impossibly, even wider.

Emma smiles and refrains from rolling her eyes at Hook's obvious glee. "Alright, where do you want to go? Granny's? Or somewhere nicer."

"Actually, I was thinking we could cook."

"You mean you were thinking I could cook," Emma clarifies.

"Well, yea," Henry says, grinning his best How much do you love me? grin. "She says her dad doesn't really cook, so they eat takeout and frozen pizzas a lot. I thought it might be nice if she had a home-cooked meal."

Ian appears at Henry's elbow, and nudges him in the thigh with an armful of books. "Tell her she's only allowed over if she brings dessert," he says, then squeaks and darts away as Henry tries to slap the books out of his hands.

Emma's parents announce that they're having a 'date night', and cite a plethora of excuses for doing so—Ava's presence at dinner and their desire not to overwhelm the girl being the main one—but it's clear to both Emma and Killian that, after sharing their home with their daughter and two grandsons for nearly two weeks, they're in desperate need of some time to themselves.

"You know, Swan, Granny has a few rooms she rents out hourly," Killian says in Emma's ear, and earns himself a elbow to the ribs.

"You're gross," Emma says, but she's smiling.

Killian chuckles. "Perhaps I was merely suggesting that you and I might-"

The precision of Emma's aim is astounding as she delivers another blow squarely atop the first, nearly driving the air from his lungs. She glowers at him, and then looks pointedly at Henry and Ian, sitting together on the sofa across the loft, heads bent over two cell phones.

"Point taken," Killian wheezes, massaging his side. "My apologies, love; couldn't resist."

She shakes her head, throwing him one final glare before turning her attention back to the enormous pot of water she's filling in the sink. After a moment, she lifts her eyes to watch his hand, rubbing gentle circles over his injured ribs.

"Are you okay?" she asks quietly.

"I'll live," he says. "You're quite the marksman, Swan."

"Mom skills," she replies, smiling. "Ever try to get a spoonful of cough syrup into a toddler's mouth? You gotta be fast and you gotta be accurate."

Grinning, Killian looks back across the loft to the boys. One of the cell phone's they're holding belongs to Killian, purchased at Emma's insistence from an electronics vendor that afternoon. The other cell phone is Emma's—Henry and Ian are currently working some sort of modern world magic that will enable Killian to use his new cell phone to contact people merely by searching for their name.

Both boys had been beyond enthusiastic at the store, debating for over an hour on whether Killian
required a smart phone or a flip phone—and when they decided he should have a smart phone, they deliberated further over size, color, and whether or not he needed a protective case.

Finally, Killian ended up with a rectangular device that fit in his hand and could be manipulated easily with his thumb. It was red and black, like his "pirate clothes", as Ian so eloquently put it.

"Any other skills I need to know about?" Killian asks, turning back to Emma.

"That depends on if you plan on trying to pee on me as soon as I take off your diaper."

Killian's laugh rings out as loud and sudden as a gunshot. Henry and Ian jump and look over, startled.

"What?" Killian asks.

"Ian went through a phase when he was like a year old where he'd start peeing every time I opened his diaper to change him. The little punk knew exactly what he was doing, too—he giggled every single time."

Killian laughs harder.

"Yea, you think it's funny; you weren't the one scrubbing baby pee out of the rug and off the wall every day. That kid's real lucky he's cute..."

Her voice is a growl, but it's edged with fondness.

"Rascal," Killian agrees as he regains control of himself. He swipes the tears from the corners of his eyes with a knuckle, and clears his throat, still fighting the laughter bubbling in his chest. "I'm sorry I wasn't there, Swan."

Emma goes still, and Killian does too, heart fluttering anxiously.

He hadn't meant it like that, but he does mean it.

He's the boy's father; he should have been there.

Emma looks up at him, and then past him—Killian hears Ian and Henry talking, so he knows they're not eavesdropping.


There's a tiny crease in between her eyebrows.

"Swan."

"I mean it," she says, louder. "No matter what happens—Neal and all his bullshit—I'm glad you're here."

She's staring at him steadily, and Killian's drowning, drowning in the dark green of her eyes. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, running down her back in a cascade of blonde waves, and he wants to bury his hand in it, press his face against her neck and run his lips along her skin; he wants to tell her how much-

His heart flutters again.

He wants to tell her how much he loves her.
"Mom!"

Killian nearly wets himself; he hadn't heard Ian walk up, but somehow the boy's there with his entire body in between Killian and Emma.

"Mom!" Ian says again, tugging urgently on his mother's t-shirt.

"What?" Emma asks, looking as staggered by Ian's appearance as Killian is.

"Henry said to ask you what the number for 911 is."

Emma blinks. "The number for 911 is 9-1-1," she says.

Ian's brow crinkles, then his entire face contracts into a snarl as he whirs back towards his brother.

"You're a jerk, Henry!" he shouts, as Henry laughs hysterically on the sofa, bent double with both hands pressed over his stomach.

Emma sighs and throws Killian a long-suffering look, and Killian has to scrub his hand over his mouth to hide a grin. Henry and Ian's relationship reminds him very much of his and Liam's, and if Ian's clenched fists are anything to go by, Killian knows what's coming next.

"Easy, lad," Killian says, placing his hand heavily on Ian's shoulder, weighing him down, holding him in place. "Why don't you stay over here and help your mother and I with dinner?"

"Yea, I need you to make the meatballs," Emma says. "Can you do that?"

Ian puffs his chest up and nods.

"Alright, kid. Go wash your hands."

Ian trots off to the bathroom, giving Henry a mean face and sticking out his tongue on his way.

"Mom, did you see that?" Henry asks, waving one arm wildly in Ian's direction.

"Yes, I did," Emma says.

"Are you going to do anything about it?"

"Well, you tricked him on purpose, so no. You deserve it," she says, then adds in a low voice Henry can't possibly hear, "Unless he gives you the finger, I don't wanna hear about it."

Killian steps back quickly as Emma hefts the pot of water out of the sink, and carries it to the stove.

"Henry," she calls, "You need to wash your hands, too. You're helping Ian with the meatballs."

Henry groans. "Why?"

"You know why."

Henry grumbles something under his breath, but he sets Emma and Killian's cell phones down on the coffee table, and goes to join Ian in the bathroom.

"Is there anything I can do, love?" Killian asks.

Emma shrugs. "I got it, but thanks," she says, and smiles. "Honestly, if you could sit with those two and keep an eye on them, that would be awesome."
"My pleasure."

While the boys wash their hands and Killian waits, Emma sets the kitchen in motion: warming up the oven, placing several more pots of various sizes atop the stove and lighting the tiny fires beneath them, and retrieving a clear plastic bag of ground meat from the refrigerator.

"Wow, that's a lot!" Ian says when Emma hands him the bag.

"Yea, well, it's not just the three of us tonight, so we need more than usual."

Ian grins, and takes the bag to the table, where Henry's waiting with a plate and a metal tray.

"I'll be right there, lad," Killian says. He uses the restroom, taking extra care to clean his hand and his hook, and by the time he joins Henry and Ian, both the tray and the plate are half full.

Killian takes a seat, and watches Henry rip a hunk of raw meat from the plastic bag and roll it in between his palms before depositing a perfectly shaped sphere onto the plate at his elbow, where there are already a dozen other perfectly shaped spheres. Killian then turns his attention to Ian, who's apparently taking a more creative route.

Ian points to something on the tray. "Do you like it?" he asks. "It's a horse."

"Erm," Killian says, leaning closer to examine the meat blob the boy's made. "It's very nice. I especially like the, um, the legs."

"That's its tail."

"Right, that's what I meant. I especially like it's tail. Very, uh, horsey."

Drawing is one of Ian's talents; sculpture, however, is clearly not in his repertoire.

"Erm, what's this one?" Killian asks cautiously, indicating another blob.

"That's an angler fish."

"Mmhm. And this one?"

"A skeleton."

"What about this one?"

Ian giggles. "Henry made it. It looks like a ding-dong."

"It's an ice cream cone," Henry hisses, blushing bright red. "It's for Ava."

"It's a ding-dong," Ian says, giggling harder.

Killian snaps his jaw shut and clenches his teeth to keep from laughing, but his cheeks burn from the strain, and he can feel his eyes start to water.

"Stop," Emma says from across the room. "Please stop talking about ding-dongs. And no meatballs that look like ding-dongs, either."

"Here, I'll fix it," Ian says. He pulls several pinches of meat from the bag, rolls hem each in between his fingertips to create tiny cylinders, and adds them to the part of Henry's "ice cream cone" that Killian truly has to admit resembles testicles.
"There! Sprinkles!" Ian announces.

Henry stares, eyes popping and blush darkening further. "That just makes it look worse," he says, horrified.

"What? How?" Ian asks, nose wrinkling in confusion.

"It looks like hair."

"Hair?"

Emma swoops in, like a bolt of lightning from a clear sky, and whisks the tray off the table.

"Aw," Ian whines. "I wasn't finished!"

"Trust me, you're fin—oh my God, it does look like a ding-dong."

"SEE?" Ian shouts triumphantly. "I told you!"

To Emma's relief, Ava shows up not too long after that, and all talk of ding-dongs ceases.

Ian directs Ava to a chair-

"You can sit next to me."

"Perfect," Ava says. "That's exactly where I wanted to sit."

while Henry sets the table for five.

Hook brings Henry's plate of normal meatball-shaped meatballs to the stove, and Emma drops them one-by-one into the pan of sizzling oil.

"Are you certain there's nothing I can do to help?" he asks, and Emma hears the restlessness in his voice.

"You can stir the sauce for me," she says. "Oh, and check on Ian's meatballs in the oven every now and then, make sure they're not burning."

He falls in next to her, takes up the large wooden spoon, and begins slowly stirring the tomato sauce. Emma watches him out of the corner of her eye, noticing his small, contented smile that actually sorta looks a little goofy, and the soft look in his eyes—and yet, he seems melancholy at the same time. She wonders when the last time he did something so domestic was. Never, maybe? She doubts he did much cooking aboard the Jolly Roger—although, she doesn't know much about his life before that, so it's totally possible that he and his brother were in a bachelor pad cooking for themselves or something.

She's happy he's here with them, experiencing a normal family activity—she's happy he's here and not bored by it. Emma wants to tell him that, but she already said those words tonight, so she says it again but silently: she nudges him gently with her arm. He nudges back, and she sidles closer, until her hip brushes his thigh.

When they finally sit down for dinner, Emma sits at the head and makes sure Hook sits to her right, so she can slide one of her legs beneath his, so that his body heats warms her through her jeans. Ian is on Emma's left side, and his feet buffet her other leg in a constant rhythm as he swings them back and forth excitedly.
"Are you really Henry's girlfriend now?" he asks Ava.

"I am," Ava says.

"Do you like him?"

"I do."

"Do you like-like him?"

"I like-like him."

"Are you going to kiss him?"

"Maybe."

Ian gasps, scandalized. "MOM!" he yells. "Henry and Ava are gonna kiss!"

"Henry's 17, so he's allowed," Emma replies patiently.

"Can I kiss girls when I'm 17?"

"Nope," Emma says, shaking her head. "You have to wait until you're 20."

"WHAT?"

Emma shrugs and spread her hands wide, palm-up, in a gesture of helplessness.

"Dad!" Ian says, turning to Killian, but Killian only nods and frowns in mock sympathy.

"Aye, lad. 20."

After that, it's "no talking with your mouth full" time, and Emma has 15 minutes to ask Ava her own questions.

"How's your brother?"

"He's good," Ava answers. "I think he wants to get out of the ice cream and candy business. Now that we're in Storybrooke there're more opportunities."

"What about you? Do you want to leave the shop?"

Through a mouthful of spaghetti, Ian hums a vehement protest.

Ava smiles reassuringly at him. "No, I like it. I'm staying."

"How about your dad?" Emma asks. "How's he?"

"He's okay. He ran a repair shop in the Enchanted Forest—fixing carriages and carts and stuff like that, and here he's back to being a mechanic. I don't know...I can't tell if he's happy or not. I think he's lonely. He's never been very good at getting out and talking to people."

"My grandma's putting together a mixer—an event where people can meet each other and socialize," Henry explains quickly. "She thinks it'll help people get settled here. Maybe you can bring your dad and we can be his wingmen?"

"Wingmen?" Ava asks.
"Yea, like...we hang around with him and help him, you know, get a girlfriend."

"I'm not sure if his daughter is the right person to help him get a girlfriend," Ava says skeptically.

"You don't have to do anything weird. We just have to find someone nice, and introduce her to your dad," Henry says. "Simple as that."

Ava laughs. "Okay, alright, we can try," she says. "When's the mixer?"

"This Saturday. Grandma made some flyers. You can bring one home."

"We'll give you a few before you leave," Emma says. "And I'll ask my mom if she knows any nice, single women—she knows everyone in this town. There's bound to be someone."

Ava smiles an embarrassed smile. "Thank you, Emma."

"No problem."

Emma likes Ava.

She really likes her.

And Emma thinks she's perfect for Henry; Ava's mature, intelligent, polite, and she's patient with Ian. Violet had not been patient with Ian—which was maybe one of the reasons Emma never really liked the girl that much. She was sweet, but a bit stuck-up, and she didn't know how to play along with Ian's questions.

Ava, however, handles Ian like a pro.

They're eating the ice cream Ava brought over for dessert when Ian starts quizzing her again.

"Who's your third favorite Harry Potter character?"

"Hm," Ava says thoughtfully, tapping her spoon lightly on the rim of her bowl as she thinks. "I think Harry Potter is my third favorite Harry Potter character."

"He's not your favorite?" Ian asks, incredulous.

"No, my two favorites are Hermione and Ginny Weasley. Who's your favorite?"

"Harry, duh."

"He's only seen the first two movies," Henry says. "And he hasn't read the books yet."

"Oh," Ava says. "Well, maybe the three of us can watch the third one sometime—if that's alright with your mom," she adds quickly, looking up at Emma.

Emma smiles. "That's fine."

"Can we watch it now?" Ian asks, halfway out of his chair. "Do we have it? Is it on Netflix? Can we rent it?"

"Whoa, whoa," Emma says, pushing him by the shoulder back into his seat. "Slow down, kid. Henry and Ava are going out—"

Ian makes a noise like a dying whale.
"And you, me, and Hook are going to watch Pirates of the Caribbean," Emma finishes, over him.

The dying whale becomes an ecstatic dolphin. "No way! Really?" Ian chirps.

"Really," Emma says seriously. "But we need to clean up and you need to take a bath, first."

Ian shoves his last spoonful of ice cream into his mouth, gurgles, "Bye, Ava," and leaps from his chair only to land on the floor in a heap. There's the heavy smack of knees and elbows hitting wood, followed by an "Oof!", but then he says, "I'm okay!" and pops up before either Emma or Hook can move to help. He sprints into the bathroom, shedding clothes as he goes.

---

Before Henry and Ava leave, Emma pulls Henry aside.

"Okay, I know I already gave you the talk, and I know I can trust you not to be stupid, but just-"

"Mom!"

"Just be careful."

Henry takes a deep breath, and lets it out slowly. "I will," he says with forced calm.

Emma takes his hands and gives them a squeeze. "I'm happy for you, kid. I like her."

He smiles, relieved. "Yea, I like her too."

"Alright." She goes up on her tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his cheek. "Have fun. Don't be out too late."

"Midnight?" he asks hopefully.

She snorts. "It's Tuesday night, and you have to get up in the morning. Let's say 11."

Henry, Ava, Emma, and Hook exchange goodbyes, and then Henry and Ava are out the door—and don't think Emma missed the way Henry had his arm around Ava's waist.

"She's a nice girl," Hook says.

"She is," Emma agrees.

Hook scratches behind his ear, and turns to regard the kitchen table. "What would you like me to help you with, Swan?"

Emma turns to look too. "All I really need to do is wash the dishes. I can do that on my own." She raises an eyebrow up at Hook, and asks, "Do you think you can be the soap police tonight?"

"What's the soap police?"

"The soap police is: make sure Ian uses soap."

"I am using soap!" Ian calls from the bathroom.

"I'm sending your dad in to check, so you'd better be!" Emma calls back, and hears the water slooshing violently in the tub as Ian scrambles to locate the shampoo.

---
Emma’s halfway through the dishes when Hook and Ian emerge from the bathroom. Ian’s in fresh pajamas (the ones with a T-Rex on the shirt and T-Rex patterned pants), and Hook has one sleeve rolled up past his elbow, and a large wet stain the size of a soccer ball on his chest.

"Give me ten more minutes," Emma says, "and then I'll make us some popcorn, okay? Ian, why don't you show your dad how to use his new phone?"

As she finishes the dishes, she listens to Ian explaining the ins and outs of how to make calls, send texts (Emma’s own cell phone vibrates each time on the counter next to her, and she can see from the alerts that pop up and that Ian’s mostly sending her emojis), find all the game apps, and how to use the camera.

"What's this?"

"Smile!" Ian says.

"What are you—ahhh."

Emma hears the camera snap sound, and then a moment of silence before Ian asks, "What d'ya think?"

"It's, erm..."

Emma wonders if Hook’s ever seen a photograph of himself.

"Let's take another one," Ian suggest. "Make a funny face."

Another camera snap sound, Ian giggling, Hook chuckling, and Emma thinks to herself that she could get used to this.

---

Killian can’t recall the last time he felt so at peace.

The last seven years were filled with long, quiet stretches, certainly, but they’d never felt peaceful—on the contrary, the quiet moments only reminded him of how crushingly lonely he was. He’d often sit secluded in his cabin with a bottle of rum, and listen to the sounds of his crew beyond. They were content, he knew; he kept both their bellies and their pockets filled; he slaked their thirst for drink the same as he slaked their thirst for blood. They wanted for nothing, save perhaps for more time ashore to cavort in the taverns and in the brothels.

What Captain Hook wanted was to for one second share the same sky as Emma Swan again; to see her sunshine hair and her deep green eyes and her smile once more, to kiss her, to tell her the words he’d been too much of a coward to utter before.

I love you.

Killian watches her now, pouring popcorn into two bowls, pouring something melted and gooey over one bowl and telling Ian, "Okay, Milk Duds in your popcorn means no donuts tomorrow morning, got it?" and Killian thinks those words as fiercely as he can.

I love you.

I love you both.

It burns in his mind, in his chest, in his belly.
For those two, Emma and the son she named after him, Killian would do anything.

Emma and Ian carry the popcorn over, Emma dims the lights and sets the movie up on the television, and the three of them squeeze together on the couch. Emma and Killian sit side by side, with Ian between them; the boy's a bit squished, sitting with his back against Emma, her arm around his shoulders, and his legs across Killian's lap, but Ian doesn't appear to mind.

Killian rests one arm along the back of the couch, and the other, his hook arm, atop Ian's knees. Physical contact and closeness seem to be something Ian's used to, and something he's comforted by. It's something Killian hasn't experienced in a long time; he's not used to it, but he's becoming used to it.

Twenty minutes into the movie, when the pirates aboard the Black Pearl are revealed to be dead, Ian jolts, and both his hands dart out to grasp Killian's hook. Killian sees Ian press himself into the couch, and Emma's arm tighten around his chest.

"You alright, lad?" Killian whispers.

Ian nods, wide eyes locked on the screen.

Killian shifts a bit closer to him, but that seems to be the scariest moment, and the boy's giggling within minutes at the antics of Captain Jack Sparrow—a character Killian was skeptical of at first, but finds growing on him. Coincidentally, he likes the Swan girl, as well, although he's not especially fond of the boy Will Turner.

The movie ends, and Killian looks down to find Ian fast asleep.

"When did that happen?" Killian asks, a smile pulling at his lips.

"Mm, right about when the skeleton pirates were walking underwater," Emma says quietly. "Should we put him up in bed?"

"Aye, I'll carry him."

Emma eases out from beside Ian, and holds him propped up so Killian can lift the boy into his arms.

"Got him?" she asks.

"Swan, the boy weighs about as much as a cannon ball."

He follows her across the darkened loft, up the stairs, and to the top floor. Emma peels back the bedclothes and Killian lays the boy down. She covers Ian with the blankets, places Roger the crab beneath his arm, and leans down to kiss his forehead.

Ian's eyes open, look at Emma and then Killian, and then flutter shut again. He rolls, pulling Roger tighter to his chest and snuggling his face into the pillow. As he does, something slips from the collar of his pajamas and tumbles to the mattress.

Killian smiles to himself, and reaches for it. It's Liam's ring, still on its silver chain around Ian's neck. He rolls the ring in between his fingers for a moment before tucking it back inside the boy's pajamas.

"He never takes it off," Emma says.

I know.

Ian told him as much, in the bath, when Killian pointed out that he was still wearing it.
"I'm glad," he says. "Liam would be happy."

Emma's hand is on his shoulder, and then her fingers trail down his arm to his hand. She grips it, and leads him away from the bed and down the stairs.

They walk slowly, treading with care so as not to make noise. The only light in the loft is from the small light over the kitchen stove, and it's silent, save for their footsteps and their soft breaths. Killian's suddenly reminded of another moment, seven years ago, when he'd found Emma alone in one of the cabins aboard his ship. The lighting was similar, as was the hush and the anticipation...

Killian's feet find the floor and Emma turns into him, her hands grabbing his shirt collar and guiding his face to hers. In spite of the rush in which she pulls their bodies together, their lips meet gently. Hers are warm against his, holding for a moment before parting. Her tongue flicks out, and he follows it, eager to taste the heat of her mouth.

His entire body is thrumming, and every inch of him that's touching Emma Swan is on fire—he feels her breasts pressed against his chest, her hips and her belly and her thighs; he drops his hand to her rear end and tugs her closer, seeking pressure to sate his rapidly growing arousal.

She grinds into him and gasps against his lips, and when she does something lets loose inside him.

He moves, walking her backwards. They hit the counter and he hoists her onto it. Her legs wrap around his waist like a vise and pull him closer. Her kisses grow more fervent, until his head is swimming and he's lost in a haze where the only thing he's aware of is her lips and her tongue, her fingers dragging along his scalp, and the heat of her core against his belly button.

"Emma..." he murmurs.

I love you.

Gods, I love you.

"Killian," she says, and hearing his name uttered so breathily from the mouth of Emma Swan makes him shiver and floods him with warmth at the same time.

Her fingers leave his hair and travel down, trailing lightly over his chest, and suddenly he can't breathe, he's frozen, whole body waiting in anticipation of her touch.

He break their kiss and looks at her, at her heavy-lidded eyes, so dark green they appear almost black, lips bright red and swollen from his teeth. She looked like this before—exactly like this—in that darkened cabin aboard the Jolly Roger.

Her hands are at his belt, and-

There are voices suddenly, outside the door.

Emma's legs unlock from around him and Killian springs backwards, throwing himself into one of the chairs at the kitchen table just as Emma's parents enter the loft. Their conversation dies as they take in the scene: the low lighting, Emma sitting atop the counter, and Killian hunched over at the table, trying desperately to hide the hardest erection he's ever had in those blasted tight pants.

"Um, hi..." Snow says hesitantly. "Why's it so dark in here?"

"We were watching a movie," Emma answers, and Killian's jealous of how steady her voice is.
"Where's Ian?" David asks.

"We just put him in bed," Emma says.

David crosses his arms over his chest, and scowls. "And what were you planning on doing next?"

"Um..." Emma says, eye skittering from her parents to Killian, searching for help, but Killian doesn't trust himself to speak.

David's eyeing him piercingly, and where Killian felt flushed, pleasantly warm, and tingly moments before, now he feels as if there's ice in his veins. He sees a fork on the table, inches from his hand, and desperately, wildly considers stabbing himself in the thigh with it—*that* would effectively kill his arousal.

"David," Snow says, brightly. "I think it's time you and I go to bed, don't you?"

"What?"

"Yes, it's definitely bedtime. I'm so tired," Snow says, taking his arm and tugging him urgently away from the door.

David follows reluctantly, but continues to glare menacingly at Killian.

"You're free to sleep on the sofa if you'd like, Killian," Snow says.

"No, you're not," David says, sternly.

"Yes, you are. See you in the morning," Snow says, and then she and David disappear behind the long curtains that separate their room from the rest of the loft.

Emma stares after them for several long seconds, and then she turns to Killian with a bemused smile. "It may not feel like it, but my dad's actually warming up to you. I promise."

For the second time in less than two weeks, Killian finds himself wishing that something very large and deadly would fall from the sky and strike him down.
Ok, the next update will probably take 3 weeks (Thanksgiving, the Cygnets chapter I'm telling myself I'm going to write), so apologize in advance!! Also, I've got a cold (AGAIN!!!) and I didn't do a super thorough re-read through, so there are probably quite a few errors, sorry! I'll try to get to them in the next few days :)

Chapter Notes

The Jolly Roger, 7 years ago

Emma needs space, and, between her parents, Henry, Neal, Regina, Gold, and the Lost Boys, there's none to be found on deck, so she goes below.

She finds an empty cabin, one that clearly hasn't been occupied in a long time by anything other than rum barrels, hangs her lantern from the catch in the ceiling, and sits on the bunk. She closes her eyes and drops her face into her hands.

It's over.

The fucking nightmare is over.

Pan's finished, they're leaving Neverland, and Henry...

Emma went into this mess only caring about Henry and getting him back, and now that he's safe she should be relieved—but she's not.

Her stomach twists and contracts painfully, and she feels bile rising in her throat.

Neal's alive.

Her hands clench, fingers tightening, pressing into her scalp and cheeks.

She needed to get away from him, from watching him grin at Henry and ruffle his hair and pretend to be a good guy. Emma doesn't want Henry to hate Neal, but she can't stand passively by and let him be lied to, either.

What do I do?

How do I prepare Henry for the day Neal lets him down?

She almost longs for the time when Mary Margaret was just Mary Margaret—before she was Snow White, before she was Emma's mother. Emma could have asked her for advice, then, and received an answer that wasn't tainted by Mary Margaret's desire to see some sort of fairy tale reunion for Emma and the father of her son.

Emma grips her face harder, painfully.

Her parents are as fooled by Neal as everyone else is—but she can't resent them for that; they've known Neal for five seconds, and all they see is his charm. They don't know what he did, they don't
know what lies behind his Cheshire smile, and as much as Emma wants someone in her corner, she can't bring herself to reveal what happened, partly because it hurts too much, and partly because she's ashamed.

Things are going to get complicated once they're back in Storybrooke.

Which brings Emma to her other problem.

*Hook.*

She kissed him.

She kissed Hook.

She kissed Hook and everyone knows she kissed Hook.

Suddenly Emma's cheeks are hot, making her palms feel ice cold by comparison.

Her problem isn't the kiss, exactly, her problem is-

She hears Hook's voice in her head, whispering, *"It's what the kiss exposed."*

That kiss meant something. Not just to Hook, but to Emma.

She hadn't thought it would, but it did, and now she's stuck knowing that it did—she's stuck knowing that she has a *thing* for Hook.

*Oh my God, his lips...*

Emma remembers the feel of his mouth on hers, the taste of his tongue, his hand in her hair, and the heat spreads from her cheeks to her belly.

She hears a creak, different from the normal creaking of the ship, and she pulls her head out of her hands to find Hook standing in the doorway—she sees him, and that spark inside of her, the spark that kindled to life the moment she kissed him, becomes an inferno.

Maybe Emma didn't come down here to be alone; maybe Emma came down here because she was hoping someone would follow her...

Hook steps fully inside the cabin and closes the door silently behind him. He brought his own lantern, and he sets it down carefully atop one of the rum barrels. His eyes are locked on hers, and Emma sees the same fire blazing in their depths that she feels burning in her chest.

It happens in a flash: Emma stands and turns slowly to face him, and then he's striding across the cabin and taking her into his arms. Their kiss is a hurried clash of lips and tongues and teeth as their hands fumble with each others' clothing—somehow, Hook has the presence of mind not to tear her jeans right from her body, and by the time he has them worked down to her knees and one of her legs free, she has his belt and laces undone and his pants pushed past his hips.

He lifts her and pins her against the wooden beam in the center of the cabin. Her legs open and circle his waist, and as he sinks into her he groans against her neck. The sound sends a thrill straight to her core, and she tightens her legs, pulling him closer, urging him deeper.

There's an urgency to his movements, but there's a precision, too, and with every thrust the pressure builds. He smells like leather and salt and sweat, and Emma loses herself in that, loses herself in the words tumbling from his lips, the kisses he presses to her skin, the slide of his body against hers, and
his heat, both inside and out.

"Emma," he gasps, just as he climaxes. He presses forward, fingers digging into her thigh. Emma clings to him, and the feel of him pulsing inside her is just enough to send her over the edge, and then she's gasping.

He holds her while the flood hits her, while she drowns in it and her back arches and her toes curl, and when she surfaces, he's kissing her and she realizes she's kissing him back; slow, lazy kisses, just a gentle play of lips and teasing tongues.

The air's cooling around them, and Emma's head is clearing. She doesn't know how long they've been gone—probably not for that long, but still, someone may have noticed.

"We have to go," she mutters.

He looks at her, eyes heavy lidded, cheeks flushed, lips parted.

"Emma, that was..."

A one time thing, she wants to say, but she can't, because she knows it would be a lie.

"Hook, we can't get caught."

He huffs a protest but loosens his arms from around her, allowing her to unwrap her legs and put her feet on the floor. Her knees almost buckle, but she takes a deep breath and reaches for her jeans, tangled around her ankle. They dress quickly and silently, and then Emma brushes by him and goes to the door.

"Don't follow me," she says, looking in his direction but keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the collar of his jacket.

"Where are you going?"

There's something in his voice that makes her want to go back to him and tuck herself against his chest, but she can't, because if she does she'll never leave.

"I need to lie down," she says, and flees the cabin on wobbly legs before she changes her mind.

Storybrooke, now

On Wednesday evening Ian made them re-watch Pirates of the Caribbean, since he fell asleep the previous night and missed the ending. Emma made grilled cheese sandwiches and baked some frozen onion rings in the oven, and then she, Hook, the boys, her parents, and Ava squeezed into the living room to eat and watch the flat screen.

On Thursday, they ordered Chinese takeout and watched Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban. Hook complained that he had no clue what was going on, so, on Friday, David made pancakes (per request), and they watched Sorcerer's Stone and Chamber of Secrets back-to-back.

Each night, Hook stayed to tuck Ian into bed, and then Emma walked him out. Downstairs, in the recessed, darkened doorway leading onto the street, they'd kiss, until one of them came to their senses long enough to point out that Emma's absence was likely growing suspicious, and then they'd part.

Neither Snow, David, nor Henry said anything, but Emma knows they're not stupid; they're just
keeping their mouths shut (David likely under pressure from Snow).

Saturday was the mixer. Emma, being more than happy not to mix, chose to volunteer, and was put in charge of the refreshments—Snow fretted, but Emma assured her that she preferred it, and that maybe it was good for the community to see their Sheriff interacting with them on such a mundane level.

Plus, Emma had worked the concession stand at every one of Henry's home track meets, and was practically an expert.

The mixer took place in the city hall auditorium. Emma and Snow spent the morning setting up tables, the afternoon hanging streamers and blowing up balloons, and by 7:00, the room was filled to capacity.

David and Snow filtered through the crowd arm-in-arm, greeting everyone they came across like an old friend.

"There's no hierarchy here," Hook pointed out. "At least, not like there was in the Enchanted Forest. Everyone's on equal footing, peasants and royalty alike."

"Hm," Emma said. "I never thought of it like that."

Hook had volunteered with her, and proved himself particularly talented at serving punch, as the cups fit perfectly into the curve of his hook. The kids in the crowd were extremely fascinated with that little trick, and visited the table as often as they could slip away from their parents—the resultant sugar high from what was essentially fancy Kool-Aid was probably why they were all running around the auditorium like a pack of wolves on cocaine, bouncing off the walls, tables, and adults like steel balls in a pinball machine.

Emma was just grateful that, somehow, Ian wasn't part of it—the Merry Men were running different games around the room, and Ian was stuck to them like glue (mostly asking them why they weren't all magic talking animals). Roland was there too, and, between them, they had the usually dour Merry Men smiling and laughing and letting them have extra turns at ring toss.

Emma caught Hook watching this, a glint of resentment in his eye, and she gently nudged him and said, "Don't worry, you're still his favorite."

His cheeks reddened. "That's not—I wasn't..."

"I used to get kinda jealous of his babysitters and the ladies at his day care," she said, and shrugged. "I was away from him all day and all I wanted to do after work was hug him and kiss him, only I'd get there and find him snuggled up with some other woman. It was always really hard not to rip him out of their arms and say 'He's mine'—but that's him, that's Ian. He's a friendly kid, and people just...like him."

Hook smiled, first across the room at Ian charming the pants off the Merry Men, and then at her. "Alright, Swan, I'll admit it: I am a little jealous."

"You can go over there, you know; you don't have to stay here with me."

"No, no. The boy's with his friend, I don't want to barge in. Besides, Swan, I like being here with you."

Emma liked it, too.
When there was no one at the refreshments table, she'd find Hook's hand at the small of her back, or his fingers tickling her palm or the inside of her wrist. There were multiple times when she considered grabbing him and slinking away to find some dark office elsewhere in the building, but she (just barely) resisted.

The heat between them had only grown scorching since Emma's parents walked in on them with Emma's hands basically down Hook's pants (she doesn't know where exactly she planned on that going, but she thinks she's probably lucky her parents came home when they did, and not five minutes later...), and now it's Sunday and Emma's thinking about Tuesday night again—she thinks about it a lot, and if she's not replaying that in her head, then her mind's wandering back to seven years ago, to her and Hook's first time aboard the Jolly Roger—the time Ian was conceived.

If she hadn't fled from Hook when she did and went to lie down, would she have gotten pregnant? Emma's not an expert on conception, but she's pretty sure gravity's a factor. It's a frightening thought, that life is random chaos, that something as small as choosing to turn right into the crew's cabin to "take a nap" instead of going left to climb the ladder and join the others on the main deck would have so significant an impact on everything.

Emma can't imagine not having Ian—she doesn't want to, and she refuses to. She's not a big believer in destiny, but she chooses to believe Ian was fated to be in her life, and Ian's the reason Emma knows she can't just jump right back into the physical part of things, because she has to make this thing with Hook work—whether it's romantically or just platonically, it doesn't matter, it just has to work.

But if it is going to work romantically, then the best way to figure that out would probably be a date, right?

"Mom."

Emma starts and almost falls off the chair she's standing on. Two hands reach out and steady her at the knees.

"You okay?" Henry asks, staring up at her with wide eyes.

"Yea," she says. "Sorry, you just startled me. I'm okay."

Henry drops his hands, and jerks his chin at the streamer Emma's been trying to detach from the wall for the past five minutes. "You want me to do that?"

"Um..." Emma looks up at the streamer, and then at the two dozen other streamers she hasn't gotten to yet. "Yea, do you mind? I'm apparently not tall enough."

Emma hops off the chair, and, grinning, Henry takes her place. He's got a good three inches on her, and he plucks the streamer down with ease.

"Show off," she mutters. He's been smug about his superior height ever since he hit that growth spurt as a sophomore. Emma's had to endure two full years of reaching for things on high shelves, only to have Henry swoop in, bump her out of the way, and grab it down for her. "Can you get the rest of them, too?"

"Sure," Henry says, but when he steps down from the chair, he hesitates. "Actually, um, can I ask you something, first?"

"Sure."
"When are you and Hook going to go on a date?"

His question hits her like an electric shock.

Emma feels like her eyes are bugging out of her head. She looks quickly around for Ian—he's lying on his stomach in the middle of the auditorium, playing dinosaur pirates and being completely unhelpful, but getting away with it because he's cute—and then she takes Henry by the arm and marches him into the hallway.

"What?" she hisses, when they're alone.

Emma doesn't have a diary, and Henry isn't telepathic, so how the hell is he saying what she's been thinking?

Henry shrugs. "I was just wondering when-"

"Stop talking," Emma says.

Henry's teeth click as he snaps his mouth closed. Emma narrows her eyes and leans closer, searching his expression, which he struggles to keep neutral, but the truth is obvious: no teenage boy just wonders when his mom is going to go on a date, therefore, someone else must be involved.

"Grandma put you up to this," Emma says flatly.

"No-"

"Henry," she says, in her I'm not stupid voice.

He sighs. "Alright, fine. Grandma wanted me to tell you that you and Hook should go on a date."

Emma closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and strangles her annoyance.

She's not going to get mad—she won't let herself. Emma knows Snow means well, and just wants her to be happy, and Emma...well, Emma's used to being the only one looking out for herself, so having someone else there to look out for her is just...it's an adjustment.

But it's a nice adjustment, and it's an adjustment Emma can make—although, she should probably sit her mother down sometime soon and set some basic ground rules that prohibit meddling.

Emma opens her eyes. "Would you be okay with that?"

"With you and Hook going on a date?" Henry asks. "Yea, it's fine, I guess—I mean..." He frowns his thinking frown. "I want you to be happy, mom, and I think Hook makes you happy."

Emma smiles a soft, sad smile, and lifts her hands to Henry's face, cupping his cheeks.

"I'm not not happy," she says. "You and Ian make me happy, too."

"Yea, I know," Henry says. "But it's different. You should have someone, you know? You should have a, uh-"

"A Hook?"

Henry grins. "Yea, you should have a Hook."

Emma takes her hands from Henry's face and folds her arms over her chest. She looks away,
chewing her lip, contemplating.

Yes, she wants this. She agreed to try, and this is trying.

"Oh," Henry says, "Grandma also said that you should go tonight, and that her and grandpa will babysit."

_Oh my God._

"I can't tonight-"

"Why not? Grandma and grandpa will have Ian, I'm going to Ava's-"

"You are?"

"Yes—I mean, can I? Ava's dad wants to have me over for dinner. He said he's cooking."

Emma sighs inwardly.

She hasn't told Henry about Neal yet, and she keeps finding excuses to put it off. The first delay was to deal with the Shadow, the second was because Henry wanted to have Ava over for dinner, and after that Henry was so focused on helping Ava get her dad a date (they got really into it, and even created what looked like a murder board back at the loft with the names of all the single women in town on it) that Emma didn't have the heart to tell him.

She wanted to tell him tonight, but she doesn't want to mess up Meet Mr. Dad Night.

_Another delay, another excuse not to tell him..._

"Yes, you can have dinner at Ava's tonight," Emma says, and smiles even though guilt sits heavy in her gut like a stone.

_Tomorrow, I'll tell him tomorrow._

She loops her arm through Henry's, and leads him back into the auditorium. "So," she says, "I take it Mr. Tillman inviting you over for dinner means that Operation All the Single Dads was a success?"

"They exchanged phone numbers," Henry says smugly. "And Ava said Isabel already called."

Isabel was one of Snow's handmaidens from the Enchanted Forest—almost all the names on Henry and Ava's murder board were provided by Snow, whom Emma is pretty sure was channeling all the energy she can't put into getting Emma and Hook together into getting Michael Tillman a girlfriend.

"Congratulations on the success of your mission," Emma says.

"Thank you, thank you," Henry says magnanimously.

They reenter the auditorium. Ian doesn't look up from the two dinosaurs he's smashing together—he probably didn't even notice they were gone—but Snow spots them from across the room and bustles over.

"Oh boy," Emma mutters. At this point, there's no way to pretend she didn't see Snow making a beeline in her direction. She turns towards Henry, and whispers urgently, "Okay, are you _sure_ you're cool with me and Hook going on a date."

Henry rolls his eyes. "Yes, mom. Very cool."
Emma takes a deep breath; there are already butterflies whirling around her stomach.

"Alright," she says. "Why don't you finish taking those streamers down, and I'll take care of your grandma?"

Henry sees Snow, rushing towards them like a steam engine, beaming a manic smile, and says, "Yep, I'm outta here. Good luck."

He hurries away just as Snow arrives.

"So?" she asks, and the sickly sweetness in her voice makes Emma want to spin on her heel and walk away as fast as possible.

"So, what?" Emma says stubbornly.

"So," Snow says, then drops her voice and leans in, "are you and Hook going on a date?"

Emma doesn't answer, she just sighs. "Does dad know about this?"

"No," Snow says, shaking her head and waving her hands dismissively. "He's still upset about what we walked in on—or, well, what we almost walked in on. But!" she says hastily, as Emma tilts her head back and groans. "As I'm sure you've noticed, he hasn't tried to kill Hook, so that's a good thing, right?"

"Yea, I guess..."

"So," Snow says again. "Yes or no?"

Emma gives in. "I'm gonna ask him—"

Snow squeals so loudly that Henry lets out a startled yelp and Ian drops the dinosaurs he's holding and clamps his hands over his ears.

---

Emma leaves Ian with Henry and Snow, and goes to her car. When she's inside, she pulls out her phone, sends Hook a text (Hey, where are you?), and settles down to wait, as it usually takes him a few minutes to respond.

Unsurprisingly, Hook's a resourceful guy, and he picked it up the whole cell phone thing pretty quickly. Emma received her first text from him Wednesday morning. It read: Good morning, Swan, and attached was a photo of the sunrise, taken from the harbor.

Emma nearly fell out of bed in surprise, but she recovered quickly, and sent him a picture in return—a selfie of her and Ian and Roger the crab still bundled up together in bed.

His response was three smiley face emojis, and Emma's snort of laughter woke up the entire loft.

After that, Emma received texts and photos from him whenever they were apart. They were usually photos of Ian doing whatever it was they were currently doing together (eating ice cream, visiting the tiny aquarium by the docks, chasing seagulls and then getting chased by seagulls, and playing dinosaur pirates), but she got also some of Henry from his and Hook's morning sparring sessions, a handful of scenic shots of the harbor, and some low-angle shots of Hook that Ian must have taken.

Emma sent Hook photos, too—old ones. The farthest back her camera roll was the previous summer, but she knew Hook was desperate to see any of the things he missed, so she started there.
She sent him photos of Ian from the beach and from the Red Sox game she and Henry took him to for his birthday; she sent him photos from Ian's first day of school; she sent him photos from Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas; she sent him photos of the gigantic snowman Ian and Henry built during the blizzard in February that gave them a five-day weekend, of the ice skating lessons he took in March and April, and of a thousand other moments in between that were small and simple but just as significant.

Looking at all those pictures made her realize how much both Ian and Henry have changed over the past year, but her biggest realization is that, although Henry doesn't look much like her, he looks a lot like David—especially when he smiles.

Emma phones buzzes in her hand. It's Hook: *I'm at Granny's.*

*I'm coming to meet you*, she texts back, and adds the little yellow Volkswagen Beetle emoji.

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When Emma gets to Granny's, she finds Hook in the back, throwing darts with Robin and the Merry Men. Emma approaches slowly, uncertain how to politely interrupt.

Robin notices her first, and gives her a warm smile and a nod—Emma was worried he'd be angry at her, but, luckily, he doesn't blame her for what happened (even if she still blames herself a little). The day after he was let out of the hospital, he showed up for duty at the station, towing a long line of Merry Men behind him. Emma thought they were just there to work too, until, one-by-one, they all dropped to one knee right at her feet and offered her a formal apology, while both David and Robin looked on with stern frowns—apparently, some things were said about her behind her back, and David and Robin found out about it.

Emma can't blame the Merry Men, really, but she accepted their apologies (because she didn't know what the hell else to do), and, since then, the Merry Men have been a lot friendlier. The extra help at the station doesn't hurt, either.

Robin calls Hook's name, and as Hook yanks a dart out of the board he turns. He sees her, and whatever he sees in her face has him instantly concerned. Emma stops short, and waits for Hook to close the gap in between them, drawing him a short distance away from the Merry Men, so they have a tiny bubble of privacy.

"Everything alright?" Hook asks, anxiously.

They've been waiting for Neal to show up for days, expecting him around every corner, expecting him to appear every time they have a quiet moment—it seems almost too good to be true that he hasn't popped up yet.

"Yea, yea, no...everything's fine. That's not why I'm here," Emma says, and slips her hands into her back pockets.

Hook tilts his head to the side, the worried crease still in between his brows. "Then why are you here, Swan?"

The butterflies in her stomach feel like their trying to climb up her throat. She swallows hard, and says, "Well, I thought about what you said last week about—well, I thought about what you asked me."

One eyebrow goes up.
"You asked me out on a date," she clarifies.

"Ah." He turns away a bit, looks down, fiddles with the dart in his hand. "Yes, well..." he trails off, and makes a pained expression. His cheeks are pink, and Emma guesses that her rejection hurt him more than she thought it did.

Hook turns the rest of the way away from her, lifts the dart to his shoulder, takes aim, and Emma just goes for it.

"I'm here to ask you out," she blurts in a rush.

Hook stumbles and his throw misses the board and clacks into the wall nearly two feet away from its intended target. The Merry Men scatter, either out of fear of Hook's aim, or to give them some privacy. Robin picks up his cup of coffee and gives her a wink before moving away.

Hook half-turns back towards her but looks first at the wall, quizzically, as if it offended him, and then spins fully to face her.

She starts panicking. "You know, to dinner or something. Tonight," she says, then bites her lip.

"Shouldn't I be the one asking you out?"

Emma snorts. "Shoulda known you'd be old fashioned, given your age. What are you, like 300?"

Hook rolls his eyes—a trick Emma's pretty sure he picked up from her and the boys. "Curses and Neverland may have given me experience, but as you can see, I've retained my youthful glow," he says, then huffs out a breath and grows more serious. "Are you certain about this, Swan?"

"Yea."

 Fuck Neal.

She feels guilty about going on a date before telling Henry, but seriously, fuck Neal.

Hook sweeps out his arm and bows his head. "I humbly accept your offer, Swan—on one condition."

"And what's that?"

He looks up at her, grinning, eyes twinkling. "You let me plan the evening."

"I know how to plan a date!" she scoffs, offended.

"You know how to chase a monster and run search grids. I know how to plan an evening out."

Emma folds her arms. "Well, just so you know, I don't pillage and plunder on the first date."

"That's because you haven't been out with me yet," he says, voice rough and dangerously low. Her cheeks flush.

"See you tonight," he says, and the heat in his voice kindles a fire in her belly. She's turning away when his voice stops her. "Wait, Swan, what are we going to tell the boy?"

Emma likes the way he said we.
"Don't worry," she says, smirking. "I've got a plan."

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It's 7 o'clock, and Emma's almost ready.

"Are you nervous?" Snow asks.

Emma contemplates denying it, but her mom's been brushing and carefully curling her hair for the past half hour, the top of the loft is quiet and pleasantly warm, and Emma's feeling cozy and relaxed, so she says, "A little."

Snow's reflection smiles at her tenderly from the mirror over the vanity. "Do you know where you're going?"

"Nope."

Hook texted her an hour after she left him at Granny's, and told her to be ready by 7.

"Do you think you're going to stay over-"

"Mom."

"I was only trying to say that if you maybe wanted me to pick up Ian in the morning, I could do it."

Ian is sleeping over at Ruby and Belle's with Roland. Emma helped him pack a pair of pajamas, a change of clothes for the next day, Roger, and every single marker he owns into a backpack, then dropped him off at the cute little house Ruby and Belle share in the neighborhood full of other, equally cute little houses just outside of the main town area.

"I'll pick him up," Emma says. "I'm not staying over anywhere. I'll be home."

Snow just smiles like she doesn't quite believe her, and sets the hair brush down. "Okay, all set."

Emma inspects her reflection. She has to admit, for a lady with a pixie cut, her mom's got a talent for hair styling—she did a better job than Emma would have, at least. The loose updo, comprised of soft curls, coupled with the dress Emma bought (a pale, shimmery pink thing) make Emma look very...princess-y.

"You look beautiful, Emma," Snow says. She lays her hand on Emma's shoulder, and Emma takes her fingers and squeezes them gently.

"Thanks, mom. And thank you for the hair."

Snow's smile turns sad. "My mother used to do this for me whenever there was a ball at the castle. When I was pregnant, I dreamed of doing the same for you."

Emma squeezes her mom's fingers tighter.

"C'mon," Snow says quietly. "Let's get downstairs. Hook should be here any second."

Emma stands and follows Snow down the stairs. Henry and David are sitting at the kitchen table, and when they hear Emma's heels clicking on the stairs, they jump up.

"Wow, mom," Henry says.
David blinks and shakes his head, as if to clear it. "What Henry said," he breathes.

"So, I look okay?" she asks.

She doesn't know why she's so nervous, she just is. She's jittery and warm all over, alternating between being excited and needing to throw up.

"Mom, you look..." Henry just gawks at her like he's never seen her before.


Now Emma's warm all over because they're all staring at her and smiling. Maybe Emma overdid it a bit, maybe she should change-

There's a knock on the door.

"Here we go!" Snow sing-songs under her breath, not nearly quietly enough.

"Okay," Emma says, more to herself than her parents. She starts towards the door, but David gets there first. He swings the door open to reveal Hook, standing with one arm behind his back. Hook sees David, and then his eyes find Emma, and Emma sees him stop breathing. His gaze travels slowly over her, moving from her hair to her lips to her collarbones, lingering there for a moment before taking in her dress, her legs bare from the knees down, and her heels.

"You look stunning," he says.

"Thank you," David replies. "I got a new shirt. I'm glad you like it."

Snow tsks, and David moves aside to let Hook inside. He strides past David, throwing him a look Emma can't quite interpret, and walks to Emma.

He's dressed up as well, and wearing new clothes—not the new clothes she and Henry and Ian picked out for him, new new clothes. The pants look the same, as do the boots (God, she'd felt like an asshole when she'd initially picked out a pair with laces only to immediately realize he couldn't possibly tie them one-handed), but the shirt and the vest are new, as is the jacket—short and modern looking, still black leather, and still somehow more pirate than biker.

"You look-

"I know," Hook says, and grins. He got a haircut, too, and a new earring—this one's a stud; a red jewel set in black.

He pulls his arm out from behind his back, and offers her a single red rose.

"Ooh, I'll get a vase," Snow mutters, and hurries away.

Emma takes the rose and lifts it to her nose. "You really went all out," she says.

His grin widens. Out of the corner of her eye, Emma sees David fold his arms over his chest. Snow appears next to her, holding a narrow crystal vase half-filled with water. Emma drops the rose in, and Snow puts the vase in the center of the kitchen table.

"Okay," Emma says. "We should get outta here before David decides to give you his overprotective dad speech."

Hook turns his grin on David. "Spare yourself the trouble, mate," he says. "I can assure you, your
daughter couldn't be in better hands."

David grunts.

"Have fun, you two!" Snow says, ushering them towards the door.

"Hey, have her back at a reasonable hour!" Henry shouts.

---

Emma expects to drive, but Hook tells her they're walking to the restaurant.

"Don't worry, Swan, it's not far," he says, raising an eyebrow at her heels.

The days have been growing warmer as real summer approaches, but the nights are still on the cooler side, and Emma presses close to Hook as they walk. They hold hands, Hook's thumb stroking lazily along her knuckles. He can't take his eyes off of her, and every two seconds Emma catches him eyeing the deep neckline of her dress through lowered lashes.

"Emma, that dress..." he says, in a voice that suggests he's contemplating tearing it right off of her.

"I'm glad you like it. I was a little worried you were going to ask me where the rest of it was."

Hook chuckles. "You'll hear no such complaints from me."

When they reach the restaurant—a fancy-looking one near the docks that Emma's never been to before—they find Robin waiting at the door for him. He's dressed in his street clothes, and has his enormous longbow at his side and a quiver of arrows strapped to his back.

Emma guesses the reason he's there immediately: he's their chaperone.

Hook gets it too, apparently.

"How did you know we were coming here?" he asks in a hard voice.

Robin, however, is undaunted by Hook's scowl, and says genially, "Did I mention that, in addition to being the Captain of the Royal Guard, I'm also King David's spymaster?"

"You're here to spy on us?" Emma asks.

"On the contrary, milady, I'm here to ensure no one else is spying on you," he says. "That, and for protection. Your parents are concerned for your safety, given recent developments."

It had made sense to fill in Robin and the Merry Men on the situation, as it was more dangerous to keep them in the dark, and Emma didn't want anyone else to end up in the hospital—or worse—because of her.

"I can take care of myself," she says. "If you want to protect someone, protect Henry—actually, wait, that's a good idea—"

"Already on it," Robin says with a smile. "Little John's watching Henry tonight—inconspicuously, I assure you—and I also have Will Scarlet stationed outside Ruby and Belle's house."

"Which one's Will Scarlet?"

"Young chap. Short hair, bulgy eyes, sticky-out ears..."
"Got it," Emma says. "He's the one I found passed out drunk in the library the other morning, right?"

Robin grimaces. "Young Will's a work in progress. He only recently returned to the Merry Men, and he's...he's been through some things. I appreciate you not putting him in jail."

"Yea, well, a cell is exactly where he's going if I find him like that again."

Robin nods. "Understood."

Hook clears his throat. "Shall we?" he asks, pointedly.

"By all means," Robin says, sweeping open the door for them and gesturing them through. "Please, pretend as if I'm not even here."

"Just so you know," Emma says in a low voice, "if I find out you reported anything back to my dad that's none of your or his business, I will kill you. Friend or not."

Robin nods again. "Also understood."

The restaurant is even fancier than Emma expected from its outside appearance. It's small, but not crowded, softly lit, and filled with round, white cloth-covered tables each lit by a tiny tabletop lamp.

The hostess leads them to a table near the window. Hook pulls her chair out for her, and waits for her to sit and get settled before slipping off his jacket and sweeping around the table to take his own seat. Two menus and two glasses of water are placed on the table before them, and then they're alone.

Emma takes a long sip of water and looks around the room discreetly. Robin's alone at a table in the corner, as far away from them as he can be and still keep them in sight. His longbow rests against the wall beside him, within easy reach.

"Well, Swan," Hook asks. "What do you think?"

"I like that it's not Granny's," she says honestly, setting her glass down.

She can't remember the last time she ate somewhere that didn't have a kids menu and complementary crayons-

Oh, right. With Walsh.

She feels gross just thinking about him. He tried to contact her a few times, after she arrived in Storybrooke, but she deleted all his voice mails and texts, and never called him back.

Emma shakes the thought away—she's not going to let memories of that asshole ruin the evening.

She looks at Hook. He's watching her intently. His new shorter haircut exposes the strange curve to his ears that makes them look pointed, same as Ian's. There's no cocky smile on his face, no raised eyebrow, and Emma realizes he must be just as nervous as she is, and that calms her a bit.

"I love it," she says. "This place is really nice."

He looks instantly relieved. "Shall we order some drinks?" he asks, and—there it is, there's the smirk and the eyebrow.

Emma smiles. "Sure—just one though."

"What's the problem, love? Are you worried you'll find me even more irresistible after a few
libations?"

His tongue darts out, slides along his lower lip and lodges in the corner of his mouth. Emma wants to lean in and kiss him, trap his tongue with her own.

"No, I just...I wanna stay sober in case, you know, something happens," she says quietly.

Something being Neal.

"Do you think he's still watching?"

"Yea," Emma says.

And if Neal is watching, now would be the best time to be a big ol' dick and crash their date.

Or, even worse, now would be the best time for him to talk to Henry, while she's distracted. Her sudden fear must show on her face, because Hook's slides his hand and hook across the table. His hand reaches further, to take hers, and he laces their fingers together.

"What's wrong, love?"

"Henry," she says, and reaches her other hand out to curl around Hook's hook.

"I'm sure Henry will be fine, love," he says, squeezing her fingers. "I don't believe that, even if Neal does decide to disobey your wishes, he knows better than to scare and confuse Henry. Showing up while Henry's with Ava—well, that would be bad form."

Emma thinks Hook's giving Neal way too much credit, but she also has to admit that Neal showing up while Henry's with Ava is unlikely—at least, it hasn't happened yet, and the only time Henry hasn't been with her or David or Hook, adults that could easily act as deterrents were Neal to show his face, Henry's been with Ava; he hasn't been alone.

"Now, I brought you here to show you a good time, so let's relax and enjoy the evening, eh?"

She nods. "Okay."

They order drinks, and they order dinner, and they talk.

Emma tells him about life in Boston, and all the ins and outs of being a bail bondswoman, and he tells her about life at sea, and what it's like to essentially live as a nomad, roaming from port to port. It's fascinating, and it sounds exciting—but it sounds lonely, too. A Captain can't be friends with his crew, otherwise he wouldn't find himself captain for very long.

Emma wants to ask if he ever had a girlfriend, or even a lover, but she senses that he didn't—she's sad for him, but at the same time, just the thought of him with another woman, even knowing that it's not true, has jealousy rising up inside her like an angry flood.

But then he's talking about Ian, and the jealousy recedes. Their son's a special link between them, something they share together that no one else can touch. They'll always have that, no matter what.

"I was worried he wouldn't be interested in ships or the stars anymore, after he discovered horseback riding," Hook says.

"Well, he did ask me the other day if horses could live on pirate ships."

"And, pray tell, whose pirate ship does he think he's stowing a horse on, precisely?"
"Yours, I guess," Emma says. "He seems to think you're gonna get it back."

Hook drops his eyes to his dinner. "I'm afraid it's likely the Jolly Roger is gone forever," he says, poking his steak with his fork.

"Yea, I'm sorry about that," she says.

He looks at her and shakes his head. "What are you apologizing for, love? Her loss is not your fault."

Emma shrugs. "You had to leave your ship behind so you could get the boys back home—and Henry told me you wanted him to trade the Jolly Roger for a magic bean if you couldn't get the one from Blackbeard. I know how much it meant to you. It must have been hard to let her go."

"It wasn't," he says, and his gaze turns intense. "Not when I knew I was leaving her behind to be with you again. I would have traded her in a heartbeat to get back to you, Emma—only, I knew transport between the realms was impossible, and—"

His eyes flicker away.

"And what?" she presses.

"And I knew you were somewhere out there living a peaceful life with Henry, and I didn't want to ruin that. I thought I would be an intrusion."

"I looked for you, once," she says, and his head snaps up.

He stares at her with wide eyes. "Pardon?"

"Yea," Emma says, setting her fork down and lowering her hands to her lap. "Around when Ian turned one, I tried to find you—I mean, I tried to find the mystery guy I remember having a one-night stand at a Halloween party with." Her fingers twist together painfully at the memory. "I thought...I thought that, no matter what, no matter what went on between me and the guy, that Ian should have his dad in his life—as long as his dad wanted to be there, and I...I'm just sad you weren't there."

Hook's face crumples. "I'm sorry, Emma. If I had known—I never would have left you by yourself—"

"No," Emma says, cutting him off. "I mean, I'm sad for you. I'm sorry you didn't get to be there. I'm sorry you missed everything."

He's staring at her, and tears are gathering in his eyes.

"Pardon me," says a voice, and both Emma and Hook jolt and look up. Their waiter's there, holding an enormous plate in one hand, and two smaller plates in the other. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but the gentleman in the corner sent this over, with his compliments."

The waiter lowers a gigantic piece of thick, gooey chocolate cake onto their table.

"Enjoy," the waiter says, and leaves. Emma and Hook look to Robin, who raises his glass of beer in toast before taking a sip.

Hook chuckles, and subtly wipes his cheeks before taking up his own glass and raising it to Robin in return. Emma follows suit. She sips her wine, and waits for Hook to set his tumbler back down before she reaches out and takes his hand. He lifts his eyes hesitantly to hers.

"I really meant what I said the other day. You're here now, that's what matters. We can't change the past, and being sad about it is pointless. We can only move forward and focus on the future."
"The future," he says, and she can't tell whether he's agreeing or asking a question.

"Yea. The future. Ian's technically not even six yet. You've got a lot of fun years ahead of you to look forward to—before the teenage years, that is."

Hook smiles, and the light returns to his eyes. "Alright, Swan," he says. He slips his hand from hers, grabs his glass, and raises it once more. "To the future."

They clink their glasses together. Emma finishes her wine, and Hook swallows the rest of his rum in one long pull.

"So," she says. "Can I start calling you Killian, now?"

He grins.

---

It's chilly by the time Emma and Killian leave the restaurant, so he slips his coat over her shoulders, his arm around her waist, and they begin walking slowly back towards the center of town.

Robin trails them, but when they reach Granny's and stop, he gives them a wink and a jaunty salute, and turns back down the sidewalk the way they came—Emma's pretty sure he lives in the same little neighborhood as Ruby and Belle.

"Would you care to come upstairs for a nightcap, love?" Killian asks, his fingers tracing patterns along her side—Emma can feel it even through the fabric of her dress, like trails of fire along her skin.

She steps closer, until his body heat saturates her and she can smell the spicy scent of rum on his breath. "Yea, but, I gotta warn you: a drink is not what I have in mind."

The breath whooshes out of him, and his fingers tighten briefly on her hip.

"Emma, are you certain?"

"Take me upstairs, Killian," she answers.

He's barely shut the door to his room when he's taking her in his arms and lifting her onto the low dresser beside the bed.

He presses smoldering kisses along her collarbones and up her neck to her lips. His hand pushes up her skirts, his hips push against her, his fingers find the silk of her underwear, but then he freezes.

"Killian?"

He blinks, languidly, long eyelashes brushing his cheeks, opening to reveal blue eyes gone dark with desire. He kisses her again, but it's slow, unhurried, and Emma understands.

Their few times before had been hard and fast, acting on feral desire, fueled by their fear of getting caught. This time...this time it's different.

Emma gets down from the dresser to stand before him, never breaking their kiss. He unzips her dress and slides it from her shoulders. Emma undoes the buttons of his vest and shirt and slips her hands inside, presses palms and fingers against his chest and just feels him. He's all sinew and lean muscle, surprisingly smooth skin, coarse hair, and dimpled scars. She works on his belt while he shimmies her dress down over her hips and to the floor. He's already hard, pressed against the front of his
boxer briefs, and when Emma runs her fingers over him, he shivers.

Clothes removed, his hook and brace discarded, nothing between them but skin and heat, he walks her backwards to the bed and lays her down. He takes his time, worshipping her body with his fingers and his mouth, touching and kissing all the places he was never able to before.

When his hand finally reaches her core, she's ready for him, and she allows him only a moment before she wraps her legs around his waist and tugs his hips hard against hers, urging him inside her, urging him deep.

He groans, as he did before, and his blunted arm slides around her to pull her close. The charms of his necklace tumble forward to rest in the hollow of her throat, and they're heavy, but she likes it. She likes the feel of his body weight almost fully on hers, of his chest hair against her nipples, of his heat inside her, and the way his girth and length fill her up. He smells like the sea and leather and something that's just Killian, something warm and comforting.

Killian's cheek is next to hers, and she turns her face into it, into his neck, pressing kisses there, whispering his name into his ear, whispering encouragements. He talks too, telling her how good she feels, how much he wants her, all the while his fingers trace a long, slow line through her folds, matching the rhythm of his thrusts.

When Emma reaches her peak and tumbles over its edge, she takes Killian with her. She doesn't bother to stifle her cries, and they mingle in the air with Killian's until they turn to trembling gasps. He holds her until their quivers cease, then lowers himself slowly to the mattress beside her.

His eye are heavy-lidded, his face relaxed. He smiles, and it's that soft, gentle smile Emma's starting to think only she knows about. One of his fingers traces the curve of her cheek.

"I missed you," he says. "For seven years, all I thought about was you. You were the only thing that kept me warm at night—the only thing that kept me from descending back into darkness. You were my lifeline, Swan."

Emma cups his hand with hers, draws his palm to her lips and kisses it.

"I'm here now," she says. She pulls his hand down against her chest, and holds it tight with both of hers.

"Aye, love," he says quietly. "We're here now."

Emma closes her eyes. She should get up. She should clean up, pee, put her clothes back on, and go home, but she doesn't want to—not yet. She wants to enjoy this a little longer. She'll leave in a few more minutes...
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I'm HOPEING to get one more chapter posted before Christmas, but December's going to be crazy busy, so I dunno. Anyway, enjoy!!!

Emma doesn't want to wake up.

The loft is quiet, she's cocooned in the blankets with her favorite little furnace snuggled right next to her, and the weight of the hand resting in the dip of her waist is comforting, as is the thumb stroking the bare skin over her ribs.

Wait, no—what?

Emma's eyes snap open. Six inches from her face is Killian's face, half-buried in a pillow, one long-lashed eye visible, closed peacefully in sleep. She has seconds to take in details—the sweep of black hair across his forehead, the reddish gleam of his beard, the thin, straight scar along his cheek—before she's panicking.

Fuck.

She sits bolt upright. There's daylight pouring in through the windows—not the pale glow of dawn, but real, mid-morning sunshine.

"Emma?"

Killian's awake, looking way more alert than she currently feels.

Fuck, fuck, fuck-

"Emma?" he asks again, sharper, more concerned.

"Shit!" she swears, and leaps from the bed.

She pounces on the pile of discarded clothes in front of the dresser, and rummages around wildly until she finds a phone. The lock screen is a selfie of Killian and Ian pulling goofy faces, and Emma stares at it in confusion for several heartbeats before she realizes it's Killian's phone, not hers. She gives herself a shake, and focuses.

It's after 10 o'clock, and Killian has eleven missed calls as well as text messages from Henry, David, and Snow, which means two things: they definitely realized she's gone, and they're going to come looking for her soon. Emma needs to compose herself before-

There's a knock on the door, followed by Henry's voice.

"Mom?" he calls, hesitantly.

Then there's pounding on the door, and Ian shouts, "MOM!"

Emma freezes. Should she pretend she's not there? Maybe hide in the bathroom while Killian
answers the door? Or she could sneak out, escape through the window or something, and text them
from Granny's, act like she was never even up here, just nonchalantly go about the day as if nothing's
out of the ordinary...

Neither Henry nor Ian would ever fall for it. Unfortunately for Emma, they're too perceptive for that.
"Emma," Killian says gently, just as the boys batter his door again.

Emma sighs. "Be right there!" she calls, before Henry decides to pick the lock, then, to Killian,
"Don't move."

She snatches her panties and Killian's shirt off the floor and puts them on, and while she buttons the
shirt she kicks the rest of their clothes into the corner and out of sight.

"Mooooooooom," Ian whines impatiently.

Killian chuckles; Emma can't bring herself to look at him, but she can feel him looking at her. She
tries not to let the heat of his gaze warm her cheeks—the last thing she needs right now is to look
flushed and flustered.

Walking to the door feels like marching to her own funeral, and the thought of what awaits her on
the other side makes her stomach shrivel, but she's a mom, and she has certain responsibilities, so she
slaps on a smile and opens the door just enough to wedge her shoulders into the gap.

Ian smiles back. "Hi!" he says brightly. He's wearing his Red Sox hat, and he has to tilt his head way
back in order to see her past its brim. "We were looking for you! We called you like a million—hey!
That's not fair! You never let me sleep naked."

Emma's whips around. Killian's lying on his stomach on the bed. The sheets are low, exposing his
entire bare torso and one pale butt cheek. He looks back at her, startled.

"Did you and my dad have a sleepover too?" Ian asks.

Emma turns back, and steps further into the gap between door and frame, blocking Ian's view. She
risks a glance at Henry, but he's carefully avoiding her eye, and his cheeks are bright pink—she's
probably never embarrassed him more than she is right now.

"Um, how about you two go downstairs and get a booth? I'll be right there."

Henry immediately starts pulling Ian towards the stairs, clearly relieved to be offered an excuse to
bail, but he only drags Ian three feet before Ian twists out of his grasp and trots back.

"Wait! Grandma said to give this to you." He slips his backpack off his shoulders and hands it to her.

"Your bookbag?" Emma asks, taking it by one of the straps.

"She said she put some stuff inside for you."

It's likely a change of clothes, and maybe a note saying, 'I told you so'. Emma feels both guilty and
enormously grateful at the same time.

"Alright, kid, thanks. Now, go with Henry."

She waits until Henry and Ian are in the stairwell and out of sight, then closes the door with a snap
and whirls on Killian, still lying on the bed.
"When I said don't move I didn't mean don't cover yourself!" she hisses.

He grins at her. "My apologies, love. I panicked. I thought perhaps if I didn't move they wouldn't notice me."

Emma groans, rolls her eyes, and sits down heavily on the edge of the bed. She unzips the backpack. Inside is exactly what she expected: a change of clothes. She drops the backpack to the floor, puts her elbows on her knees, and puts her face in her hands.

Scenes from the previous night start playing in her head.

God it was amazing: the restaurant, the conversation, the sex...she's sort of surprised by how perfect the whole evening was—she doesn't even mind that Robin was their chaperone.

They didn't use a condom, though—she's on birth control, so it's probably fine, but she should keep an eye on it, and, moving forward, they need to be more careful. She has to check and make sure she can refill her prescription at the pharmacy here, and she should probably introduce Killian to the condom display at the drug store.

Emma groans again, into her hands. She didn't pee or clean herself up last night, either—hello, UTI.

The mattress shakes as Killian scoots over so he's right behind her. His hand ghosts along her spine, and Emma sits up straight, until her back hits Killian's chest and she can feel his warm breath tickling the back of her neck.

"Is everything alright, love?"

He plants a kiss on her shoulder—Emma wishes she didn't have his shirt on, so she could feel his lips on her skin again.

"Everything's fine," she says.

"Do you regret what happened last night?" he asks, and drops another kiss on her shoulder. Despite the kisses, she hears the tension in his voice.

"No," she says firmly. She leans into him, and his lips are on her neck, pressing slow, lazy kisses all the way up to her ear. Emma indulges in it for a few seconds, shivering when he uses his tongue, gasping when his teeth graze her ear, before saying, "We do have a bit of a problem though."

The kisses stop.

"Your father?"

"No—I mean, okay, yes, but there's something else, too."

"What?"

She turns her head so she can see his face. "Ian's going to ask questions, and we haven't talked about what we're going to tell him."

His blue eyes are steady on hers as he says, "It's your decision, Emma. I'll go along with whatever you choose to tell him."

"Even if I don't want to tell him that we're dating yet?"

"Aye, love. You're his mother, Swan; you know best."
She tilts her head back, leaning it against his, then takes his hand from her hip and pulls it around her waist.

"Thank you," she says.

"Thank you for what?"

Emma doesn't reply, she just squeezes his fingers. He squeezes back, and nuzzles his face further into her neck.

She wants to stay up here, she wants to lie back down and let Killian hold her for a few more hours, bask in the afterglow—but that's a luxury she can't afford right now.

"We have to go downstairs," she says quietly, regretfully.

He grunts in response, but makes to move to unwrap himself from around her.

"C'mon, we already scarred Henry enough; if we take any longer up here he's going to think we're having sex again."

"Perhaps, if we're quick-"

Emma snorts and stands, pushing Killian's arm away. "Alright, seriously, we gotta go—and you gotta get rid of that."

The bed sheets are pooled around his thighs, and bobbing up from amongst them is a happy little morning erection. He smirks at her, eyes glinting wickedly, but he gets up from the bed and makes his way into the bathroom without further argument.

He goes slowly, however, and he's very obviously flaunting his nakedness, as if hoping his fuzzy butt cheeks and the glorious patch of black hair between his legs might entice her, make her change her mind—and it almost works, she almost goes over there and wraps her hand around him—but the thought of Henry being assailed by Ian downstairs keeps her putting her clothes on rather than taking them off.

Before they leave Killian catches her by the waist and draws her body against his. Both of her hands rise up to rest against his chest, and her fingers curl into his shirt. He smells strongly of whatever soap he used to wash his hands and face, and Granny's laundry detergent. Emma breaths it in—it's pleasant, and just beneath it is Killian's natural scent. She wants to press her nose into his collar, and—

Fuck.

She's falling for him, isn't she?

"Will you go out with me again?" he asks.

Her answer is a kiss.

Ian tugs on Henry's hand as they're making their way through the switchback hallway that connects the inn and the diner.

"Henry?"

"What?"
"Did mom and my dad do the baby-making thing?"

Henry wishes he could die.

He's not stupid—he knows his mom and Hook are adults dating and that dating results in sex and that obviously they already had sex before because mom had Ian, but, seriously, what the fuck? Just knowing his mom—his mom—is having sex is weird enough; he does not need visual confirmation, too.

And—oh my God—Hook's so hairy. Is he gonna be hairy like that one day, too? Hopefully he has grandpa David's genes, because grandpa David seems like he's pretty hairless—unless that's because he shaves-

Ian tugs on his hand again, and Henry almost starts crying.

"Are we gonna have another brother or sister?" Ian asks, and without waiting for an answer, continues, "I hope we have a sister. Then mom won't be the only girl—oh! I gotta go pee. Wait for me!"

"I'll be in our booth," Henry says. That'll give him an extra minute of silence.

Henry makes sure Ian gets safely into the bathroom, then he goes into the diner. They've eaten at Granny's enough times in the past two weeks that they now have a usual booth. He's about to slide into it when he realizes it's already occupied—and when he sees who's occupying it, the blood turns to ice in his veins.

"Hey, buddy," Neal says, grinning at him. "Long time, no see, huh?"

Killian didn't want to leave his room—and it wasn't only because Emma was there kissing him, it was because he feared leaving his room would break the spell, but he finds that, even after walking down the hallway and down the stairs, he still feels it—the connectedness they forged the previous night, a connection beyond the kisses and touches they've been stealing over the past few weeks.

She holds his hand, and Killian knows it's a sign—a sign that, while she may not love him yet, she's opening herself to possibility of loving him someday. Killian's a patient man, he can wait; he waited seven years to see her again, and he can wait another seven—or longer—to earn her love.

And he will earn it, of that he's certain.

He can smell Granny's bacon and eggs from the lobby of the inn, and his stomach rumbles. The moment they step into the diner, however, his hunger turns to nausea.

Henry found a booth, but it's not Ian sitting across from him—it's Neal.

Killian stares. Neal's appearance is normal, no crocodile skin in sight, but Emma said she saw it, so Killian assumes Neal's using a glamour of some kind. For the first time, Killian doesn't see the man that was once Bae; this time, he sees Neal Cassidy, the man who fooled around with a child and got her pregnant, the man who allowed her to go to prison for him, the man that never came back for her, the man who moved on with no regrets and no apologies.

Anger floods Killian and heats his blood, until it feels as though his veins are on fire. His own heartbeat thunders in his ears, drowning out all other noise.

He could kill Neal—for what he did to Emma, for what he's doing to her now, for speaking to Henry
when Emma asked him not to, for the look of shock on Henry's face—but then Emma's fingers tighten on his like a vise, her nails digging into his knuckles, and his anger recedes, becomes a smoldering ember sitting in his chest, waiting.

"What are you doing here, Neal?" Emma asks coldly. Her voice cuts across the diner, and those nearest them halt their conversations and look around. Killian can see Granny out of the corner of his eye, watching them warily from behind the counter.

Neal grins at Emma. "I came to see my son," he says cheerily. His gaze slithers over Emma, lingers on her hand, joined with Killian's, and then he looks at Killian—the moment his eyes make contact with Killian's, Killian feels a chill crawl up his spine.

Emma pulls her hand from his and goes to stand beside Henry's shoulder. Killian follows, looking cautiously around the diner for Ian as he does, but the boy's nowhere to be seen.

He's likely in the bathroom, Killian thinks, and for a moment he's torn between going to head him off and hide him from Neal, and staying with Emma—he can't leave her to face Neal on her own, he won't, not even for a second.

He prays silently that Ian drank a lot of orange juice that morning.

Henry turns to Emma, looking up at her with an expression that's half hurt, half accusatory. "Mom, you knew he was here?"

Emma nods tightly. "Yea, Henry. I did."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Emma looks past Henry, to Neal.

"Are you going to tell him, or should I?"

"Tell me what?" Henry asks, turning to Neal,

Neal's eyes bore into Emma's for a long moment, and then he rolls his fingers, as if he were passing a coin along the backs of his knuckles, and his skin changes, from flesh to a scaly, greenish-gold.

Killian's nausea returns suddenly, boiling in his stomach.

Henry draws his hands off the top of the table and braces them on the edge, as if trying to push himself away—or keep the table in between himself and Neal.

"Why are you the Dark One?" he asks. His voice doesn't waver, but Killian hears his unease.

Neal shrugs. "I did it to get back to you, Henry. I missed you."

"How?"

"What?"

"How are you the Dark One?"

The barest flicker of discomfort crosses Neal's features. "It's a long story—"

"How?" Henry demands again.
Neal smiles again, but it's stiff, a mask. "We resurrected my dad-

"Who's we?"

Neal pauses, licks his lips, smiles again. "Me and Regina," he says through his teeth.

"Regina," Henry repeats. He looks briefly up at Emma, and then back at Neal. "Where is she? Is she here too?"

"No, she's-

"Hey, who's that guy?"

Killian feels as if his insides turned to liquid and plummeted to the floor. Ian's next to him, in between himself and Emma. He's eyeing Neal with his nose scrunched up and one eyebrow drawn down.

"Why's he look like a crocodile?"

Neal looks at Ian. "Who's this?" he asks.

It's too late to hide him, but Killian takes Ian by the arm anyway and tugs the boy roughly behind him. He can see Ian gaping up at him, startled, then he turns to Emma, and says, "Mom?"

Emma turns and reaches for Ian, but Neal interrupts her.

"Mom?" He spits, and looks again at Ian standing behind Killian with one hand gripping Killian's jacket, at the way Killian's half in front of him protectively, and his face pulls into a snarl, "Emma, is that—did you...did you have a kid with Hook? Christ, Ems, when did you even-"

Neal's eyes snap shut and he grabs the sides of his head. He groans through gritted teeth, and the lights blink on and off several times before blazing intensely, so bright and hot that Killian hears them sizzling.

Granny pulls her crossbow from thin air and lays it threateningly on the counter, pointed at Neal.

"Everybody out!" she says sharply, and the entire diner leaps to their feet to obey, scrambling towards the door, pushing and yelling.

"Where's Regina?" Henry says loudly, over the din.

Neal shakes his head, still clutching his skull as if it might break if he lets go.

Henry leans forward. "Tell me where she is. Tell me what you did-" Henry stops, and his mouth drops open. "You cast the Dark Curse," he says. "You brought back Mr. Gold so you could crush his heart, and that's why you're the Dark One."

Neal doesn't respond, but, slowly, his hands slip away from his face and back onto the table. The lights dim, returning to their normal luminosity.

"What happened to Regina?" Henry asks, quietly.

"She's dead, Henry. I'm sorry."

Henry slams both fists on the table, rattling the silverware and the salt dispenser and the bowl containing the tiny cylinders of coffee creamer that Ian likes to stack, and then he throws himself
from the booth and bolts out the door.

Killian feels Ian move against him, but he grips Ian's shoulder firmly, and says, "Stay here, lad."

"God dammit, Neal!" Emma burst out. "This is why I didn't want you seeing him! You scared him!"

Neal rises from the booth, fists clenched. "He's my son, Emma. I have a right to see him!"

"No, Neal, you don't," Emma says, taking two deliberate strides into Neal's space. "You were part of his life for two weeks. You don't get to make decisions about what's best for him. You might be his father but you're not his parent."

Neal's head jerks back, as if Emma slapped him, but he recovers quickly and turns to Killian. "She giving you the same treatment?" he sneers. "Or is she letting you see your kid because you're fucking her?"

"Neal!" Emma gasps, eyes popping.

"You'll open your legs for anything, wont you? God, Emma, you're such a who-"

The soft, pained sound that escape Emma rekindles Killian's anger. It explodes inside of him, and he moves, intent on grabbing Neal by the throat—but he has to let go of Ian to do it, and, released, Ian darts past him and puts himself in between Emma and Neal before Killian can grab his arm again and haul him back.

"STOP IT!" Ian shouts. His face is crimson, his teeth are bared, and there are tears in his eyes. "Leave my mom alone!"

Neal blinks down at Ian in surprise.

"Ian," Emma says. "Ian, it' alright." She takes Ian by the shoulders and tries to turn him around, but he won't budge, eyes fixed on Neal. "Ian, hey, kid." She gives him a gentle shake. "Ian, look at me."

Ian turns, reluctantly, and his scowl turns into a wobbly frown. Emma kneels and pulls him into her arms, cupping his head against her shoulder.

"Everything's alright," she whispers, stroking his hair. "Okay? Everything's fine."

Neal's still gawking. Killian steps in between him and Emma and Ian and glares. "You need to leave," he says.

Killian doesn't want to resort to violence in front of his son, but if Neal makes a single threatening move towards Ian or Emma, Killian will put his hook through him without hesitation.

Neal glares back—and vanishes.

Killian turns on his heel and drops to one knee beside Emma and Ian.

"Are you two alright?" he asks.

Emma nods. "We're fine. Can you go keep an eye on Henry? Make sure Neal doesn't go after him?"

"Aye, love," Killian says. He leans in, pressing a kiss to Ian's hair, then gives Emma's hand a squeeze, and stands.

He exits the diner at a run, and almost smashes headlong into David and Snow. David skids to a halt
and Killian dodges to the left just before they collide.

"We just saw Henry running the other way," David says. "What happened?"

"Neal!" Killian says.

David looks past Killian, into the diner, says, "Emma," and races inside with Snow on his heels.

Henry sprints towards the docks, trying to outrun his thoughts.

Regina's dead. Neal—Henry bitterly refuses to think of him as his dad right now—is here, he's the Dark One, he cast the Dark Curse, and he's probably also the one that put the wall around town.

He'd happily go back to half an hour ago, when the most horrific thing on his mind was catching his mom and Hook half-naked in Hook's room.

Without him realizing it, his feet take him directly to the warehouse he and Hook spar in. There's no one around, as usual, so he goes inside and sits atop the stack of dock pilings near the water. He drops his head into his hands and drags his fingers back and forth through his hair, trying to calm down.

It's too much. It's too much all at once.

"Henry?"

Hook.

"Over here," Henry says, without looking up.

Hook's boots crunch on the gravel as he approaches, but he's otherwise silent as he takes a seat next to Henry. Henry tenses, expecting him to say something, to ask him a question, but he doesn't, and Henry relaxes again.

He likes Hook—sometimes he doesn't want to like Hook, especially when Hook's butt naked in the same room as Henry's mom, but Henry can't help it. Hook understands him, in a way Emma or even David can't, and Henry thinks, maybe, he understands Hook a little bit, too.

Plus, Henry managed to get his wooden practice sword past Hook's guard the other day and give him a sharp poke in the ribs, and Hook didn't even get angry.

Henry lets out a deep breath and lifts his head so he can look out at the harbor. He's starting to understanding what Hook finds so relaxing about the sea. It's a nice view—deep, calming blue below pale, calming blue, and the rhythmic sound of the waves sloshing around is soothing.

He looks over at Hook; he's doing that introspective, gazing out at the ocean thing too, but Henry knows he's listening.

"I'm not mad at my mom, if that's what you're wondering," he says.

Hook's silence continues.

"It's okay she didn't tell me about Neal," Henry says. "I...I get it. I know everything she does she only does because she loves me and Ian and wants to protect us."

"You're right," Hook says gently. "You and your brother are very lucky."
Henry half-smiles. "We are."

Fuck, they're lucky. The last seven years with Emma were pretty awesome—they didn't have a mansion and the VW bug was ancient and the SUV was bought used and sometimes didn't start in the winter and they often couldn't go to restaurants because they needed to save money, but they were happy.

Half of him wishes he didn't have his old memories back, that he didn't have to know that only the last 7 years with Emma were real, and the 13 years he thought Emma raised him for before that were a lie.

Life with Regina was lonely and miserable. He never felt that way with Emma, he never felt unwanted, even when Ian was born and she had to give him so much attention that Henry actually got jealous sometimes—even then, Henry knew Emma loved him and wanted him.

Henry fists his hands together, so hard he feels like his knuckles will pop.

"Regina never really loved me—at least, I don't know, not until after Emma got to Storybrooke and she thought she was going to lose me. Then she kinda started changing—or trying to. Before that..." He shakes his head. "She did a lot of bad things—to me and Emma and grandma and grandpa—and maybe she deserved what she got, but...I don't want her to be dead."

He looks quickly at Hook, searching his expression for he doesn't even know what, and then he just blurts, "Can I tell you something? About my dad?"

Hook nods. "Of course."

"I sort of didn't want to find him."

"What do you mean?"

"I know what he did to my mom—when she was my age. He's..." Henry grimaces, clamping down on the tears he feels stinging his eyes. "He's a scumbag. He's a shitty, shitty person. He doesn't deserve for my mom to ever even talk to him again."

It's not Hook that responds to Henry, it's Emma.

"Kid..."

Henry turns sharply towards the door, towards Emma. His cheeks heat up. He hadn't meant for her to hear, he doesn't want her to know—he knows she can take care of herself, that she doesn't need anyone to protect her, but he still feels protective of her, because she's always protected him. Even when he was a baby, she protected him by giving him away so he'd have a better life than the one she knew she could provide.

She comes over and sits next to him, on his free side.

She takes his hands and holds them between both of hers. "Henry, you don't..." She pauses, and bites her lip. "You don't have to hate your dad on my account."

"But he left you-

"That was a long time ago, Henry. You don't have to-

"Mom! You went to jail because of him! He got you pregnant when you were seventeen! Seventeen!
Her hands move to his arms, and she pulls him into a hug. He leans into her and squeezes his eyes shut, burying his face in her shoulder.

"Henry, I've let it go," she says, and he opens his mouth to argue but she continues talking over him. "It doesn't matter to me anymore. It doesn't matter because—even after all the pain he caused me, I wouldn't wish it any other way...because I have you."

The fight rushes out of him, and his shoulders sag.

"Yea, he was a bad guy," Emma says. "And what I said in Boston is true. I don't think he deserves to know you, or to be in our lives...but he showed up anyway, and he does love you. He fucked up—God, he fucked up—but he loves you."

"But he hurt you," Henry says, into her t-shirt.

"But he's never hurt you. You don't have to be angry on my behalf, and you don't...you don't have to feel guilty if you love him too, okay?"

He nods, reluctantly.

"I love you Henry, and I just want you to be happy. If having a relationship with your dad is going to make you happy, then that's what I want for you."

He doesn't know if he'll ever love Neal—he doesn't know if he can, but he appreciates what his mom is saying. He hugs her back, hard.

"Thanks," he says.

She laughs. "Thanks? What are you thanking me for?"

"For being my mom."

"You never have to thank me for that, kid."

Henry sits back and swipes at his cheeks. "Where's Ian?" he asks. "Is he okay?"

"Yea, he's fine. Grandpa took him back to the loft. We had to bribe him with pancakes though. If you want any, we'd better hurry—unless you want to be alone?"

Henry sighs. He doesn't want to be alone.

"No, let's go back," he says. "I haven't eaten breakfast yet."

Now that he thinks about it, he's starving. He'd really been looking forward to Granny's bacon and eggs.

"Ah, sorry," Emma says, smiling ruefully at him. "I guess that's my fault." She looks past Henry, to Hook, bites her lip again, and says, hesitantly, "Um, about earlier-"

Henry shudders. "Mom, please stop. I just want to pretend it never happened. You guys can do whoever you want, just please don't make grandpa send me to come get you again."

Emma nods. "I can do that."
Henry turns to Hook. "As for you," he says darkly, and Hook blanches. "You said you could teach me to shave, but now that I've seen how much body hair you have, I'm not sure you're qualified."

Hook blinks, and then one eyebrow draws down. "I don't understand what my body hair has to do with my shaving abilities."

Emma smiles, and reaches down a hand to help lever Hook off the stack of dock pilings.

"Some guys here shave their chests and, um, other things, so that they're smooth," she says.

Hook, wrinkles his nose, disgusted. "What, like a...a fish?" he asks. "If that's what women of this realm are into, why not just date a merman?"

"Wait—there are mermen?" Emma asks, incredulous.

"Swan, how did you think their species reproduced?"

"I don't know," she says, shrugging. "I never really thought about it."

Hook looks to Henry for help.

"Sorry," Henry says. "I never really thought about it either—although, in The Little Mermaid, there is only, like, one dude..."

"Okay," Emma grumbles, shoving Hook towards the door. "Let's stop before this takes a weird turn."

"Actually," says Hook, stopping despite Emma's hand between his shoulder blades. "Henry's observation is more or less accurate: there are fewer mermen than mermaids, and it is fairly common for one merman to impregnate multiple—"

"Seriously, stop! And don't talk to Ian about mermaids. If he asks, they don't exist."

Hook grins, and allows Emma to push him through the door and out of the warehouse.

As soon as the three of them are bodily inside the loft, Ian races over and plows wordlessly into Henry. He wraps his arms around his brother's waist, and resists any attempts at removal, forcing Henry to waddle around the loft with Ian stuck to his front.

Nobody mentions Neal, but the atmosphere is tense all afternoon and into the evening, until Snow unearths a game called 'Monopoly'. Henry sets up the board on the kitchen table while the adults and Ian arrange themselves in chairs around it.

Predictably, Ian sits next to Killian—almost physically on top of him—and whispers loudly, "Watch out, Henry cheats..."

"I told you, I don't cheat," says Henry patiently as he counts the multicolored paper money into stacks. "You just suck."

"I don't suck!" Ian says hotly.

"Alright, well, remember that when you're crying because you're broke and I have all your property."

"Hey!" Emma cuts in sharply. "If you two start fighting this game is going right back in grandma's
closet, got it? I'm not dealing with any Monopoly brawls tonight."

Henry and Ian glower at each other from across the table, but they both keep their mouths shut.

Henry does not, in fact, cheat. He does, however, absolutely annihilate the five of them. Ian is particularly terrible, although Killian believes it's due to a lack of comprehension rather than a lack of skill. When they switch to another game, Candy Land, he fares much better—Killian suspects Henry somehow purposely lost so that Ian could claim the victory.

They order pizza for dinner, after which they play a round of a card game called Uno before they decide to relocate to the living area for a movie. Ian announces that he wants to watch the fourth Harry Potter movie, but Emma and Henry look at each other, shake their heads, and say, "No."

"Too many dark lords resurrected already today..." Killian hears her mutter.

They end up watching Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory ("The original," Henry assures him), which Killian can't decide whether to be amused by or frightened of. Emma makes her special gooey, chocolate-y, caramel-y popcorn, and Killian shares a small bowl with Ian, who wedges himself against Killian's side, beneath his arm. On Ian's other side is Henry, bearing the burden of Ian's legs, and, next to him, Emma.

Killian wishes he were closer to her, but he decides that, since her parents are also in the room, it's probably for the best that there's some separation between them.

Definitely for the best, he amends, when he notices the sidelong glares David's throwing him.

Ian's half-asleep and sprawled across Killian's lap by the time the movie finishes.

"Bedtime?" Emma asks him, and Ian surprises everyone in the room by nodding.

Emma's eyebrows shoot up to her hairline. "Did you get any actual sleep at your sleepover?" she asks Ian, teasingly.

"Did you?" Snow mutters. Killian looks to her quickly, but she's already out of the room, carrying the empty popcorn bowls to the sink. Luckily, David's in the bathroom, and didn't hear.

Killian maneuvers Ian into a better position, and stands. Ian wraps his arms around Killian's neck, his legs around Killian's waist, and nestles his head beneath into Killian's chin. Killian hugs him a little tighter than strictly necessary, and carries him across the loft and up the stairs.

"Crap," Emma mumbles from behind him. "I forgot to get Ian in the bath."

Killian chuckles. "I don't think he minds, Swan."

Ian gives his head a little shake.

"Alright, well, we do need to get him in clean pajamas. Which ones do you want to wear, kid?"

"Stars," Ian says.

"Are they clean?" Emma asks, eyeing the stack of Ian's clothes sitting atop the dresser. "I don't think they're clean, Ian. Pick another pair."

Ian shakes his head again. "No."

"How about the ones with the T-Rexes?" Killian asks, spotting them on top of one of the piles.
"Those are nice."

"Skeletons."

"Pardon?"

"T-Rex skeletons."

"Right. My apologies, lad. T-Rex skeletons. How about those ones?"

"Okay."

Ian allows Emma and Killian to strip him down to his underwear, and stuff him into the clean pajamas. Dressed, he climbs sleepily into the bed and curls around Roger the stuffed crab. He lies still, until Emma pulls the blankets up over his shoulders. He turns onto his back, and looks up at her.

"Is Henry's dad going to come back?" he asks.

Emma sits on the side of his bed. She reaches out and smoothes Ian's hair off his forehead, trailing her fingers over his brow, making his eyelids drift half-closed.

"What's on your mind, babe?" she says softly.

"I don't like him," Ian says in a small voice. "He's a bad guy."

"He can't hurt you," Emma says. "You're safe."

"I don't want him to hurt you," Ian says.

"He won't," Killian says.

Ian's eyes open all the way and fix on Killian's own, piercingly.

"Promise?"

"Aye, lad. I promise."

Ian nods, satisfied, and turns back onto his side, snuggling his face into Roger. Emma drops a kiss on his head, gives the blankets one last tug over his shoulders, and then she and Killian go back downstairs.

Henry's in the living area, flipping through channels on the television, and David and Snow are near the sink, standing close together, talking in low voices.

Killian checks the time. It's only 10, but it feels much, much later.

Killian reaches the bottom of the stairs and turns back.

"I think it's time for me to turn in, Swan," he says.

"I'll walk you out," David says quickly, before Emma can.

"Erm..."

He wanted a moment alone with Emma, to seek peace in the circle of her arms and for her kiss to breathe warmth back into his body—but there's nothing he can do; David's standing with his hands on his hips, waiting, clearly with no intention of backing down.
"Alright," he says, and gives Emma a helpless look, to which she replies with an apologetic look of her own.

Killian follows David outside, to the recessed doorway that leads onto the street, the one in which he and Emma have shared many a secret kiss. David stops there, and Killian stops too.

"Robin said the restaurant you took her to was nice," David says.

"I was under the impression that Robin wasn't supposed to reveal things that were none of his or your business," Killian retorts.

"How someone treats my daughter is my business," David says.

Killian bites back his rising anger, and turns his head sharply away, to stare out at the street. Fog is gathering, hanging in the warm air, creeping in from between the buildings. It reminds him of early mornings at port, when the fog would rise like steam from the still, black water.

He understands David—he thinks he understands better now that he's also a father. The desire to protect our children and ensure their happiness is paramount—it eclipses all else.

David's just a father that doesn't want bad things to happen to his daughter. Again.

"Listen, mate, about this morning-" Killian starts.

"Emma's an adult," David says, cutting him off. "She can make her own choices when it comes to-" He stops abruptly, grimaces. "Just—in light of the current situation, I would appreciate it if, in the future, you two were within reach. Snow and I were worried this morning when we couldn't get a hold of either of you."

"Of course. I apologize. It won't happen again."

David huffs out a breath, shoulders slumping, and looks to the side.

"It's kinda foggy out there," he says. "Will you be alright getting home, or do you want me to give you a ride?"

"I'll be fine, but thank you for the offer," Killian says. "Goodnight."

He senses David suspects the possibility of an ambush, and Killian suspects it as well, but, truthfully, if Killian can't be with Emma, than he'd rather be alone at the moment. He needs to think.

He steps out into the fog and makes his way towards the harbor, feeling very much as though he's being watched.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Alright, I'm actually cutting the last half of 19, because I can't finish all of it tonight, and I don't want to wait for another 2+ weeks to be able to finish it, so here's half of what was supposed to happen in Chapter 19, and I will post the rest as Chapter 20 sometime after Jan. 5. I hope everyone's holidays are wonderful, and that y'all have a Happy New Year!!!

"So, is this fog for real, or what?" Emma asks, although, at this point, the question is merely rhetorical—the fog rolled in Monday night, stuck around all day Tuesday, and is still going strong now, Wednesday morning.

"Aye," Killian replies. "I think it's safe to say that this cursed mist isn't natural."

*Unnatural* is an understatement—it's fucking creepy.

If it wasn't summer, if this wasn't Storybrooke, and if Neal hadn't already broken the laws of nature to fuck with her, then Emma might not be suspicious.

She also might not be suspicious if the fog didn't feel like a million freaky fingers caressing her skin and touching her hair and *breathing* on her—she wants to shower and vomit and curl up into a little ball all at the same time; the only reason she's not in bed right now beneath a pile of warm blankets is because meeting Killian at the docks at the ass crack of dawn is the only way to have some alone time with him.

"More coffee?" Emma asks, hefting the giant Thermos she borrowed from the loft that morning and giving it a little shake to demonstrate that it's still half-full.

"If you don't mind," Killian says.

He lifts his tiny tin cup, and Emma tips more coffee into it. Killian inclines his head in thanks, and takes a sip; Emma copies him, relishing the burn. Black coffee on an empty stomach is really not the greatest, but she doesn't feel much like eating, and if she doesn't get some caffeine she's going to fall asleep on this bench.

She takes another sip, and holds the coffee on her tongue for a moment before swallowing. She's perking up, becoming more aware of reality. The heat is slowly spreading outwards from her stomach, but even as she grows less hyper-conscious of the clammy air, she grows more aware of her own body.

The past 24 hours have felt more like 24 years. She's tired, and the tension that grips her is making her entire skeleton and every muscle it's attached to ache like she got hit by a truck.

She sees Killian watching her out of the corner of her eye, and when she turns to look at him, he asks, "How did you sleep, Swan?"

"Horribly. Again," she says, and gives him a weary, strained smile. "You?"
His grimace is her answer.

"How about the boys?" he asks.

"I think Henry actually slept," she says. "But I think it's more out of sheer exhaustion than anything else."

Emma woke up Tuesday morning to find Henry still awake and in the same place she left him in the night before: on the couch watching TV. Emma tried to convince him to take a nap, but he refused, and insisted on going to the library, where he spent the entire day holed up with Belle, researching. Researching what, you might ask?

Well, Henry's researching how to make someone not the Dark One anymore—without killing them, that is (which was Killian's muttered-under-his-breath suggestion).

As much as Emma wants to talk Henry out of it, she can't. When she told him he could have a relationship with his dad, he understood that she obviously meant in a scenario in which Neal wasn't the Dark One. What Emma wasn't counting on was for Henry to decide it was their duty to help Neal—she was sort of just hoping they could leave Neal to figure that one out on his own, preferably somewhere very, very far away.

But Henry's Henry, and when he looks at her now she sees his 10-year-old self, full of pure hope and belief.

"He's not lost," Henry said, yesterday evening after Ian had gone to bed, and the rest of them were gathered in the kitchen. "He's...he's not himself, but I think he's still in there, somewhere. We just need to figure out how to change him back."

He looked at Emma then, imploringly, yearningly, while around them everyone else exchanged glances, and the only thing Emma could say was, "Okay, kid. We'll try." because while, on the one hand fuck Neal, on the other, Emma could see how much Henry wanted what Ian had, she could see how badly he wanted his dad to just be his dad again.

After everything Henry has been through, he deserves happiness, and Emma will do whatever she needs to do to make sure Henry's happy.

Even if it means helping Neal.

Even if it means there's a gigantic stack of ancient, moldering books on their kitchen table, books that Belle unearthed from God knows where—books that Emma could tell from a brief flip-through definitely belong in the restricted section of the library at Hogwarts.

"And Ian?" Killian asks. "How did he sleep?"

Emma lowers her empty tin cup to her lap, but keeps her hands wrapped tightly around it, sucking up every last drop of residual warmth. "He had nightmares again," she says. Ian woke her up more than once both last night and the night before, crying "You died!" and clinging to her like he was afraid she'd disappear.

"I don't think he remembers them though," Emma says. "So there's that, at least."

Killian makes a face as if he's in pain. "Is there something I can do?"
"Not really. He's..." She pauses, and sighs. "What he saw the other day was scary, and that's on top of all the changes that have happened over the past 3 weeks. There's a lot going on, and even if he doesn't know everything, he can still sense it."

Killian nods, listening intently.

"The only thing we can do is talk to him, explain as much as we can without freaking him out more, and make sure he feels safe."

"Has he asked about what he saw the other day—in the morning, I mean, when he and Henry came to the door..."

"You mean has he asked me why we were having a naked sleepover?" she says dryly—normally, she might blush, but she doesn't have the energy for it right now. "No, he hasn't. I think everything that happened after made him forget—for now, at least. Knowing him he'll bring it up eventually."

*He has a habit of asking inconvenient questions...*

Emma looks down at the tin cup, rotating it idly between her hands, round and round and round—Killian leans forward and tilts his head, so he can see her face. "What's on your mind, love?"

"Ian asked me about Regina."

Killian sits back. "Ah," he says, sympathetically.

"Yea," Emma agrees. She was hoping that one had flown right over Ian's head—frankly, she'd rather answer the naked sleepover question than the Regina question.

Killian takes the Thermos, uncaps it, and carefully pours more coffee into her cup.

"What did you tell him?" he asks gently.

Emma shrugs. "I had to lie a little bit," she says. "I told him when I had Henry I was very young—a teenager, like Henry is now—and I couldn't take care of Henry, so I gave him to Regina and Regina took care of him for me until he was 10."

Even now, guilt sits heavy in her chest. It's not like she hasn't lied to Ian before—lying to your kid is a necessity when your kid is young and not ready for the harsh reality of the way things work sometimes; it's just that Emma doesn't feel like she lied to protect Ian, she feels like she lied to save her own ass.

Telling Ian that she gave Henry up with the expectation of never seeing him again would devastate him *and* his worldview. He might lose his faith in her, and that would devastate *Emma*.

She can't lose that—she could stand to lose a lot of things, but not that.

Killian nudges her with his elbow, and taps her tin cup with his hook. She raises the cup obediently to her lips, and takes a sip.

"He'll be old enough to hear the truth one day," Killian says. "And when he does, he'll understand. He won't blame you."

She looks at him quickly, almost dribbling coffee down her chin, startled by how well he read her thoughts, and he just smiles.
"You love your sons more than anything, Emma. They both know that."

For some reason, exhaustion or anxiety or the draining combination of both, hearing those words from Killian has her ready to cry. Her eyes and throat burn, her chest feels tight, like she can't breathe. She looks away, out at the fog—which is useless because she can't see more than 20 feet in front of her—and takes big, deep breaths, forcing herself to calm down.

She can't lose her cool, not now. She has to stay strong for Henry and Ian; she has to see them all through this.

Killian's arm slips around her shoulders, lightly. Emma reaches up, fingers searching for the metal curve of his hook, and when she finds it she pulls, tugging him closer.

He rests his forehead against the side of her head, so that his lips are against her ear as he whispers, "Tell me what you'd have me do, Emma, and I'll do it."

*Go back in time*, she thinks. *Stop Neal and Regina from doing what they did, and then come find us in Boston.*

But that's impossible. Didn't she literally just tell Killian that they can't change the past, they can only focus on the future? Wishing things were different is pointless. She has to accept reality, and move forward.

She turns her head, until her cheek touches Killian's. "Just help me keep Henry and Ian safe," she says.

He turns his head too, nose brushing hers, breath ghosting along her lips. "I will, Emma. You have my word."

*I know.*

She kisses him, brief and gentle, eyes fluttering shut and then reopening to find Killian's heavy-lidded and an inch from her own.

*Fuck,* she wants more. She wants to undress him and have him right here on this bench, she wants to reclaim the feeling she had in his arms and in his bed Sunday night, she wants the heat of his embrace to engulf her, warm her from the inside and out, burn away her fears.

He pulls away first, and Emma's grateful because she apparently didn't have the willpower to do it.

There are spots of color high on his cheek bones, but his voice is controlled and measured when he says, "Shall we go for a walk?"

Emma nods. Killian knows that about her, knows she needs to move when she's upset. She's like Henry in that way, although she wouldn't mind Ian's strategy, if she was smaller—unfortunately, she's too big to sandwich her entire body into the couch cushions.

Emma stands, collects the two empty tin cups and reattaches them to the Thermos. "Let's start heading towards Granny's," she says. "I want to get some donuts for the boys."

Killian stands, and offers her his arm. Smiling, Emma slips her hand into his elbow, and lets him lead her through the fog back towards town. Emma has to admire his sense of direction—if she was leading them, she's pretty sure she would have walked them right off the edge of the docks and into the water by now.
As they walk, they talk, and although their tone is conversational, they keep their voices low—in addition to being creepy as hell, the fog feels...not empty. So far, luckily, it seems more like an Edgar Allen Poe situation than a Stephen King situation—at least, Emma doesn't think there's anything more sinister lurking in the mist than Neal, eavesdropping or watching or whatever—but leaving the docks feels like leaving a safe little bubble and venturing back out into the danger zone.

She grips Killian's arm harder than necessary, not because she's scared, but because she's on red alert, and every muscle in her body is tensed, ready to spring into action. Likewise, Killian walks with his hand on the pommel of his cutlass.

It's not until they're back on Main Street and close enough to Granny's to see the sign glowing eerily through the mist that Emma relaxes—and the moment she does, her mind snaps back to Killian, to his arm pressed against hers, to the way her hand slipped down of its own accord and wrapped around his hook.

She's falling for him, a thousand times harder and faster than she thought possible, and while she doesn't understand it, she can't deny it.

What she feels when she's with Killian she's never felt before with anyone else.

Part of her is screaming at her to go for it, to give in and take the plunge—but Emma doesn't think that's the rational part of her brain speaking; she thinks that's the part that has daydreams about Killian's chest hair.

The rational part is preaching walls and baby steps.

The only really good thing that ever happened to Emma is Henry and Ian. Everyone else has either left her or just sucked: August abandoned her in an orphanage as an infant; Lily lied to her and then used her, got her kicked out of the first good home she'd been in since she was 3; Neal also abandoned her; Walsh was an asshole; and Graham...

*Poor Graham.*

He was a good man, Emma liked him, and he died.

Killian's a good man, and Emma likes him. How is she not supposed to believe, with all the shit luck she's had her whole life, that something bad won't happen to him, too?

*Especially* with Neal skulking around thinking Killian's a rival or something.

Emma should push him away, probably for his own good, but she can't.

She doesn't want to.

She wants this thing to work out—she wants this good thing to stay a good thing.

And she thinks that means that she has to fight for it.

Which is actually sort of reassuring, because fighting is something Emma knows how to do.

"Want to have breakfast with us?" Emma asks, as she and Killian make their way through Granny's patio to her front door.

"I'd love to," he replies.

The inside of the diner is virtually empty, and Granny herself is behind the counter, looking less than
happy about it.

"Please say you're here to tell me this fog's about to disappear. I want my customers back."

"Sorry," Emma says.

Granny huffs dramatically, and pulls a pad of paper and a pen out of her sweater pocket.

"Alright, what'll it be?"

"Um, a dozen donuts and anything else you want to throw in there and make me pay for."

Granny glares at her over the top of her glasses. "Don't patronize me, girl."

"Sorry," Emma says again. "How about the donuts, and five of those bacon and egg sandwiches, then?"

"Coming right up," Granny says. She moves away from the counter, and Emma and Killian take two seats to wait.

"Who are all the sandwiches for?" Killian asks.

"You, me, my parents. Henry will probably eat one, too."

"Then who are the donuts for?"

"I guess just Ian. He could probably eat, like, six of them."

"Aye, love, probably. But should he?"

Emma grins. Killian's already pretty good at being a dad.

They're on their way out with one big box of donuts and one grease-bottomed bag full of breakfast sandwiches when Belle throws open the front door and runs in.

"There you are!" she says, skidding to a halt right in front of Emma.

"Uh..." Emma says.

Belle straightens, smooths her skirt and tucks her auburn curls behind her ears. "I was hoping I'd find you here. I was just in the library, and—Granny, you can put that away. Everything's fine."

Emma half-turns, just in time to see Granny tucking her crossbow back behind the counter.

She turns back towards Belle. "Um, you know, you could have just called me," she says.

Belle waves her hand dismissively. "I've been reading, and I think I found something—I think I have an idea."

"What is it?" Emma asks, hesitantly.

"I think we can contact Regina's spirit."

"What, like a...a séance?"

"Exactly like a séance. Regina might know something that can help us help Neal, and..." She frowns, brow crinkling. "She might be able to tell us what really happened, back in the Enchanted Forest."
Emma looks at Killian. He meets her gaze steadily, but doesn't say anything.

Struggling to hold in a sigh, Emma looks back at Belle. "Do you think this séance thing could really work?"

"Yes, we just need someone with magic to lead it."

Belle's smile is pleased, triumphant, but Emma gets a sinking feeling that has her wanting to cry, vomit, and curl up into a little ball again.

"Belle, who's going to lead it?" Emma asks.

---

The answer is not what Emma expected.

The answer is a tall, stout old man with a thick white beard, grizzled gray hair that's balding on top, and twinkling brown eyes who shows up at Regina's manor precisely at 8:30, just after sunset.

"Emma, I'd like you to meet the Apprentice," Belle says, ushering the man through the door and into the entrance hall.

"Uh, hi," Emma says. She offers her hand to shake, and the Apprentice takes it; his hand is huge, but his grip is gentle, as is his smile.

"Very nice to meet you, Emma," he says. He sounds like a kindly grandpa, and Emma's trepidation vanishes—her experience with magic users has pretty much only been with villains, so she was expecting someone scary, or at least intimidating.

Henry appears next to her, and offers his hand as well. "The Apprentice," he says. "Is that like 'The Doctor'?"

The old man chuckles. "I am not a Time Lord, no, but I do hope to meet one, one day."

Henry's eyes bulge, and he pauses halfway through shaking the Apprentice's hand.

"Does that mean Time Lords are real?" he asks in a breathy whisper.

The Apprentice winks, and Henry's eyes grow even rounder. He starts making a strange keening sound in his throat, like the whining of an overheated computer.

"Are you Dumbledore?" says a demanding voice from somewhere around Emma's waist. Ian's wedged in between her and Henry, fists on his hips in a style very reminiscent of David, eyeing the Apprentice with clear suspicion.

Emma's about to apologize and tell Ian to apologize, but the Apprentice merely smiles and squats down until he's on eye level with Ian.

"You must be young Killian," he says.

"Yea," Ian answers, then grins his nose-crinkling grin. "No one calls me that though."

"Ah, yes, it's Ian, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh."
Emma freezes. She didn't tell the Apprentice Ian's name. Maybe Belle did? Or maybe this is some sort of magic trick?

The Apprentice extends his open hand, held palm-up, slowly forward, stopping just before he touches Ian's chest. Ian watches it, grin slipping from his face, a frown appearing in its place.

Emma stops breathing. Is she about to have to kick this old guy's ass for doing something weird to her kid? She can feel Killian standing a few feet behind her, inching closer, and she wants to turn and look at him, but she's afraid to take her eyes off of Ian.

The Apprentice curls his fingers into a fist.

"What am I holding in my hand?" he asks, and his words ring strangely in Emma's ears.

"A coin," Ian says, as if it's obvious.

"Very good," the Apprentice says, nodding slowly. "What kind of coin?"

Ian shrugs. "A gold one."

"What's on it?"

"A horse."

"What about the other side?"

Ian makes a face. "A starfish?" he asks.

The Apprentice opens his hand, and sitting in his palm is a thick, misshapen gold coin. On the side facing up is some sort of Celtic knot that actually does look sort of like a six-armed starfish.

"Oh," Ian says, disappointed. "I was wrong."

"To be fair, it does look remarkably like a starfish," the Apprentice says. He takes the coin between thumb and forefinger. "Here, it's for you. Take it."

Ian stares. "What? Really?"

"Yes, really."

Ian takes the coin, holding it delicately with the fingers of both hands. "Thank you," he says.

"You're very welcome." The Apprentice stands, and clasps his hands behind his back before beaming warmly back down at Ian. "Now, why don't you go show that coin to your father. He seems very interested in it."

"He's a pirate," Ian says, cheerfully.

"Ah, well, perhaps that explains it."

Ian spins and races the ten steps up the hallway to Killian. Killian's eyes are locked on the Apprentice, but his expression is otherwise unreadable, and he only tears his gaze away from the man when Ian crashes into his legs.

"Look!" Ian says, holding the coin up proudly.
Killian smiles. "That's some fine treasure you've found, lad," he praises. "I hope you have somewhere safe to put it."

"Should we bury it?" Ian asks solemnly.

Emma turns away from the scene, towards the Apprentice. "Are you sure you want to give him that?" Emma asks quietly. "It looks kinda old and valuable."

"It's quite alright. I don't need it anymore."

He smiles at her, and she can tell the whole benign grandpa vibe isn't fake.

Emma has questions—a lot of questions—but Belle interrupts.

"Should we get started? It's nearly full dark."

Emma looks hard at the Apprentice. She has no idea what the thing with the coin was, but she knows he'll answer her truthfully when she asks—which, apparently, can't be now, because they seem to be on a schedule.

"Sure," Emma says. "Let's do this."

---

They chose Regina's house for the séance because they were told by Belle, who was told by the Apprentice, that the connection the house had to Regina might help them make a connection to her spirit.

In fact, the more connections they had to Regina, the better.

Emma gets why she's there, she gets why Henry, Snow, and David are there, and she even gets why Belle and Ruby are there (Belle came up with the idea and knows the Apprentice, and Ruby's there because Belle's there), but what she doesn't get is why Robin's there.

When she questions it out loud, Snow takes her by the arm and draws her aside. "Robin and Regina had a thing back in the Enchanted Forest," she says.

Emma blinks, and then it hits her. "What?" she hisses.

Snow shrugs. "It was a brief fling—"

"Okay, stop," Emma says, clamping her eyes shut and waving her hands frantically. "I don't need to know. I don't want to know."

"Well, you asked."

"Yea, and I regret it." She shakes her head, fighting down the feeling of revulsion—finding out Regina had a lover feels like what Emma imagines it feels like when you walk in on your parents having sex. "Wait, I don't get it. Robin's so nice," she says. "How did he end up with Regina?"

"I thought you said you didn't want to know," Snow says.

Emma snaps her eyes open, and glares. Snow just smiles sweetly, and pats her arm.

"See you in the library," she says. "Don't take too long."
"I won't," Emma grumbles. They spent half an hour getting the library ready for the séance, which mostly just entailed figuring out how to fit enough chairs around the table and deciding who's sitting where, and now Emma needs to check on Ian one more time so they can get started.

He's in the living room with Roland and their two guard dogs for the evening, Little John and Will Scarlet. Henry scrounged up some more toys, games, and comic books from his room, and got the two other boys set up nicely with (hopefully) enough supplies to keep them occupied for at least an hour.

Emma could have left Ian with Granny—or even left him at Robin's with Roland and the Merry Men—but she wants him close. She isn't taking any risks.

"Hey, kid," Emma says, striding across the living room to where Roland and Ian are kneeling on either side of the coffee table. "You all set in here?"

"Yea!" Ian says brightly. "We're going to play Candy Land. Henry had one here, too!"

"Sounds fun." She stops behind Ian, rests her hand on his head, and runs her fingers through his hair. It's getting long; she's going to have to take him for a haircut soon. "Which color are you going to be?"

"Red," Ian says. "Roland's green."

Emma looks at the two Merry Men expectantly. "What about you guys?"

Little John grins and shows her his tiny, yellow plastic gingerbread man.

She then turns to the young guy, Will Scarlet, who suddenly looks uncomfortable.

"Oh, erm, um..." he stutters. "I'm, uh, not playing."

"C'mon, play with us!" Ian pleads.

"Yea, play with us!" Roland says, smiling his dimpled smile. "Please! It'll be fun, I promise."

"You can be blue," Ian wheedles in a sing-song voice, holding up the blue game piece and waving it back and forth.

Will caves with a heavy sigh. "Alright, mate, you won me over. Blue's my favorite color."

Roland cheers, and Ian vaults over the coffee table to slap the blue gingerbread man into Will's waiting hand.

"We're gonna kick your butt," Ian says with a savage grin.

Will offers Ian a smirk of his own. "Oh, it's a challenge now, is it?" He rises from his chair dramatically. "Prepare to be vanquished, lads."

While Will settles down beside the coffee table and gets the boys riled up with some good old-fashioned trash talk, Emma slips over to stand beside Little John.

"You guys will be okay, right?"

"Of course, Your Highness," he replies, inclining his head.

It's not the first time one of the Merry Men has referred to her as 'Your Highness' (to Killian's
amusement), and she's learned not to flinch or roll her eyes at it. They can call her whatever makes them happy, as long as they don't revert to whatever they were calling her while Robin was in the hospital.

"Alright," Emma says. "Don't hesitate to come get me if something happens. And don't hesitate putting Ian in his place if he gets out of hand."

"Understood."

Emma drops a kiss on Ian's forehead and wishes him and Roland good luck before leaving them and going to join the others.

---

It's nearly 11 when they finally trudge out of the library.

Nothing happened. They held hands around a table with their eyes closed and their "minds open", listening to the Apprentice call Regina's name for two hours—the only interesting moment was when Killian accidentally jarred the entire table with his leg and they had to start over.

The séance was a complete bust.

Robin and Killian peel away from the group to check on the boys in the living room, and the rest of them file into the kitchen. The room seems absurdly bright, white, and empty compared to the closeness and the dim lighting of the library. In the library, Emma was able to convince herself that she was in someone's actual home, but in the kitchen, she's back to feeling like she's in a museum.

"Anybody else need a drink?" Emma asks. "I'm sure there's some wine around here somewhere."

"Oh, there is," Snow says. "I already checked. Ruby, Belle, wine?"

"I'm in if you're in," Ruby says, to Belle.

"I'm in," Bell grumbles.

Emma's expectations weren't high going into the séance, and she's definitely not surprised by the results, but she hates seeing everyone so disheartened—especially Henry. He's the last one into the kitchen, being led and possibly propped up by David's arm around his shoulders.

"It's alright, kid," David's saying. "We'll find another way."

Henry nods, but his eyes are fixed dully on the floor tiles, and Emma's pretty sure he didn't actually even hear what David said.

They settle around the island countertop while Snow pulls bottle after bottle of expensive looking wine out of various cabinets and then follows it up with an army of crystal goblets. Snow pours, and Emma takes the first glass and offers it to Henry.

He blinks at it, and then looks at her in confusion. "Really?" he asks.

Emma shrugs. "If you feel like you want it, yea."

_It's not like I don't know you drank before, Mr. Gets-Drunk-on-Schnapps-at-Junior-Prom._

Henry hesitates only a moment before he takes it, but he doesn't drink it.
Emma receives her own glass from Snow, and takes a careful sip.

It's good.

*Of course* it's good.

Regina had money, so why wouldn't it be good?

Emma takes another, longer sip, not caring about the taste, just wanting the bite of the alcohol.

She doesn't know how she feels about Regina being dead. Well—she does, and the answer's not a lot. So, her problem is really that she doesn't know if she should feel more.

Emma doesn't have any particularly pleasant memories of Regina—or any even remotely approaching pleasant. The only thing she knows is that Regina raised Henry for ten years, and while it wasn't great, she knows from experience that it could have been worse.

Emma guesses that means she's just grateful to Regina for not being *worse*.

*Here's to you,* she thinks, and raises her glass a subtle two inches before downing the rest.

Snow's Johnny-on-the-spot with a refill before Emma's glass makes it back to the counter.

"Thanks," Emma says, and Snow presses her lips together in a brief, sad smile.

Emma wonders how her mom feels. Is she happy that the woman who tormented her and ripped her family apart is finally dead?

*They made amends though,* Emma reminds herself, but judging by Snow's face Emma thinks she feels exactly how Emma feels: sad, but not sad.

They drink in silence for several long minutes. Emma can hear giggles from the living room, and thinks there might be some tickling going on. She wants to go see, but Henry needs her more right now, and she doesn't want to leave his side. He managed a few small sips of wine, but Emma can tell he's not enjoying it. He probably just wants to go home, put his ear buds in, and sit in the dark.

Emma's about to suggest they pack up and leave when Belle breaks the silence.

"I don't understand why it didn't work," she says. "It should have worked!"

Ruby slips her arm around Belle's shoulders and pulls her close.

"It's okay. It's not your fault," Ruby says, soothingly.

Belle's face crumples and she clamps a hand over her mouth. "I'm so sorry, everyone," she says through her fingers. "I just wanted answers about...about Rumple." She turns into Ruby, hiding her face against Ruby's shoulder.

Emma feels a swell of sympathy. Seeing Belle so happy with Ruby made it easy to forget that Belle was ever in love with Mr. Gold. This whole thing has probably dredged up all those feelings Belle thought she buried a long time ago.

"Maybe it didn't work because Regina's not really dead," Henry suggests hopefully.

"Henry..." Emma says.
"Mom, think about it," Henry says sharply, whirling towards her. "Why else wouldn't we be able to contact her?"

Emma opens her mouth to argue, to try to explain, but no words come out—because she has nothing to say.

"Henry." The Apprentice's voice is so calm that everyone turns towards him. "Regina Mills is no longer among the living. Of this, I can assure you. As for why we were unable to make contact, I cannot say." He shakes his head, and says, almost to himself, "I don't understand it either. I felt her spirit. She was so close-

The doorbell rings.

Snow jumps, and Emma feels a little thrill of terror run through her.

Henry sets his wine glass down with a loud clink, and starts towards the hallway, but Emma puts an arm out, and stops him.

"I'll get it," she says. "Stay here."

She stares at him until he nods, and then her eyes slide over and find Snow, who moves to stand next to Henry.

David follows Emma out of the kitchen.

"Do you have your gun?" Emma asks him quietly out of the corner of her mouth.

"No," he whispers back. "Do you?"

"In the car," Emma answers, and silently curses herself for being so thoughtless.

Ahead of them, Ian races out of the living room and into the hallway, closely followed by Killian.

"Ian, why don't you let me-" Killian's saying, but Ian's already bolting down the stairs into the foyer.

Emma starts running, because she has a feeling that she's not going to like whatever's on the other side of that door.

Ian grabs the doorknob, and rips open the door.

"IAN!" Killian shouts.

It's Neal.

Neal's standing on the front porch, shrouded in a thick cloud of fog, glowing a dull yellow in the light from the lamp over the door.

Killian leaps down the entire staircase into the foyer in one go and snatches Ian up, pulling him to the side, out of the way.

Emma reaches the stairs, ready to punch or kick or bite or do whatever the hell she has to do—only, Neal hasn't moved. In fact, Emma's not even sure he's conscious. He's standing stock still with his head bowed, his shoulders slumped, and his arms loose at his sides, almost as if he's sleepwalking.

Emma's feet slow, and she descends into the foyer on her tiptoes, David beside her.
"What the hell?" he mutters.

Emma only shakes her head in response. She has no idea what's going on.

She hears movement behind them, and the sound of bowstrings being drawn, and knows Robin, Will Scarlet, and Little John are behind her, covering her and David.

"Neal?" Emma asks, as she inches closer.

"Be careful, love," Killian says gruffly. "It's probably some trick." He's standing against the wall with his back to Neal, his hook arm around Ian, clutching him tight, and the other holding his cutlass. Emma can see Ian's eyes, wide and terrified.

"Ian," Emma says calmly, "I want you to run into the kitchen and go to grandma, okay?"

"Okay."

"Go, lad," Killian says. "Quick."

Ian's footsteps go up the stairs and down the hallway, and when they stop, Killian turns and joins Emma.

"Neal?" she says again, louder, but there's still no response. She watches him for a full minute before she turns back to look at her dad.

"I don't know-" she starts, and then she sees Henry. "Henry, go back to the kitchen and-"

But she can't finish that sentence either.

Henry's eyes go wide, and David shouts.

"EMMA!" he yells, pointing behind her.

Emma spins back around only to feel Killian's arm slam across her chest, pushing her back, away from the doorway, away from Neal, who's having a seizure on his feet. Emma watches in horror as he convulses, arms flailing, head jerking from side to side, face wracked with spasms and his mouth gaping in a silent scream, and then he collapses forward into the foyer—only the body that hits the decorative rug isn't Neal's body, it's Regina's.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long wait, and I really appreciate your patience. We found out on Christmas Eve that my grandma had stage 4 lung cancer and was in the hospital going downhill fast, so as soon as I got back to Boston from Greece I flew home to Chicago to see her. She passed away last Friday, and I was in Chicago again this week for her services. My grandma helped raise me and she was very dear to my heart. I’m going to miss her a lot.

Now, in terms of the story, something big and dramatic happens, and I don't wanna spoil anything, but just let me say: the story isn't finished. There's plenty to come, and many secrets still left to reveal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The atmosphere in the manor is similar to that of a wake, where the deceased died suddenly in a freak accident and no one can quite believe it's real.

*Emma* can't believe it's real. She can't believe what she just saw—Neal morphing into Regina—is real.

Of all the bizarre things she's seen since she first came to Storybrooke, this is probably the most bizarre.

They moved Regina from the foyer to the long couch in the living room, where Emma felt for a pulse and the Apprentice waved a wand he pulled from his sleeve around to determine that Regina was alive, merely unconscious.

"Will she wake up?" Henry asked.

"Yes," the Apprentice answered. "Soon, I should think."

"What the hell just happened?" David said, and Emma was grateful he said it so she didn't have to.

The Apprentice shook his head slowly. His eyes were fixed worriedly on Regina's body, as if she was a particularly troubling puzzle. "I have many ideas, though I can be certain of none of them."

"Shouldn't we take her to a hospital or something? Call an ambulance, perhaps?" Killian asked. Emma almost smiled—he was becoming quite the 21st century man.

"Doctors can't help her," the Apprentice said, cryptically, and that was that. He swept from the room, and everyone moved away to find a comfortable place to wait, and left Emma and Henry alone with Regina.

Henry's sitting on the coffee table next to the couch, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. He's silent and absolutely still; the lone sign of anxiety are his hands, twisted together in a tight knot.

Emma paces back and forth across the carpet just behind the coffee table, hands balled into fists,
arms folded tightly over her chest. She keeps an eye on Regina, unable to shake the tension that grips her like a vise. She can't be certain that Regina won't turn back into Neal, and she refuses to be caught off guard if that happens.

Her thoughts race, calculating escape routes and how quickly she can get the boys to safety, pinpointing where exactly she's going to punch Neal if he appears again, probing tentatively for her magic, wondering if she can make it work again in case Neal decides to use his own powers against her, wondering who exactly the Apprentice is and if he's a match for the Dark One.

The only clue Emma has that time passes are the hunger pangs gnawing at her stomach that grow slowly more and more fierce, and the ache that develops in her neck and shoulders and travels down to the small of her back.

"Emma."

She rolls her shoulders as she paces, and subtly twists from side to side, trying to stretch and relieve some of the pain throbbing along her spine.

"Emma."

She must be getting old. She used to be able to sit or stand for long periods of time during stakeouts no problem, but now she gets unbearably stiff and sore within an hour. Is it a result of poor diet and insufficient exercise, or a sign of approaching middle age?

"Emma."

Regina's not looking particularly young anymore, either. If Emma's nearly 36, then Regina has to be at least-

"Emma."

She starts. Ruby is less than a foot away, hand on Emma's elbow, poised to start shaking her.

"You okay?" Ruby asks, studying her face warily.

"Yea," Emma says, forcing her eyebrows to un-knit and her brow to un-crinkle. She smoothes her frown into something a little less upside-down U and asks, "What's up?"

Ruby gives her arm a little squeeze before drawing her hand back and stuffing it into the back pocket of her jeans. "We can't get Ian to fall asleep."

Emma rolls her eyes towards the ceiling, and leaves them there. Over their heads is Henry's room. Ruby and Belle took Ian and Roland there to keep them safely out of the way.

"Roland won't sleep either," Ruby adds hastily. "It's just that Ian keeps asking what's going on and when can he come downstairs and we ran out of books to read and I don't think Belle and I can keep him up there much longer."

Her tone takes on a frazzled edge that Emma recognizes all too well.

"I'll take care of it," Emma says, swinging her gaze back down to Ruby. "Thanks for watching him. I know he's a handful."

Ruby smiles. "Only a little."

Emma smiles, too. It's a measure of how much Ian likes Ruby and Belle that he hasn't already
stormed downstairs.

"Mind staying here for a minute?" she asks.

Ruby nods.

"Okay. Be right back."

Emma doesn't address Henry; she knows he's listening.

She turns to look for Killian, expecting to find him close, but he's not there. The living room opens onto the dining room, and Emma can see everyone else—her parents, Robin, Will, and Little John—all hovering just inside, as if the line where the wooden floor of the one room meets the carpet of the other is some sort of barrier.

"Killian just left," Snow says, pointing to her right, out towards the main hallway. "I think he went to the bathroom."

"Thanks," Emma says, and starts in that direction. As she leaves the room, she sees Snow and David enter, filling in, taking up twin positions behind Henry.

Entering the hallway is a relief, and Emma takes a deep breath that feels like her first breath in hours. She heads towards the kitchen, feeling lighter and lighter the further away from the living room she gets, and turns into the back hallway that leads to the bathroom—only to bump into Killian.

She takes a surprised step back, and freezes.

Killian's not alone; he's with the Apprentice, and he has the Apprentice pinned to the wall. His hand is fisted in the Apprentice's collar, and he has his hook resting threateningly against the old man's collarbone, very near his throat.

"Killian, what the hell?" Emma hisses.

But Killian doesn't look at her; instead, his lips pull further into a snarl.

"Tell me what infernal magic you used on my son," he demands, eyes blazing furiously.

"I meant the boy no harm, Killian," the Apprentice says calmly. He doesn't flinch or even blink as Killian's hook slides another inch higher and touches exposed skin. His hands are open, raised, and out to the sides—a gesture of surrender.

Emma half-raises her own hands, ready to intervene.

"I don't believe you," Killian growls, and his hand tightens in the Apprentice's shirt. "Your kind never mean well."

"I understand that magic has only ever been a source of loss and sorrow in your life—"

"You understand nothing!" Killian spits, and Emma darts in, wrapping both of her arms around Killian's and bearing down with all her weight. She feels Killian resisting for a moment, feels the taut muscles of his arm, sees his fist shaking, and then he gives up.

His hand and his hook leave the Apprentice's chest, but the black anger remains on his face. He digs in his coat pocket and produces a gold coin.

"Tell me what this is," he says, holding the coin up between thumb and forefinger.
Emma blinks. "Did you pick Ian's pocket?"

"Aye," Killian answers, unapologetically. He hasn't taken his eyes off the Apprentice, and Emma can feel his arm trembling where her fingers still grip him. "Answer me, old man. What is this?"

"The coin is merely a coin," the Apprentice says. "It's significance lies only in that it used to belong to my master, Merlin."

*Merlin.*

The name whispers through Emma, but it has no impact on Killian.

"How did Ian know it was in your hand?"

"Magic," the Apprentice answers simply.

"You said the coin was merely a coin."

Emma feels herself stop breathing. Killian apparently didn't catch the Apprentice's meaning, but she did, and before she can fully absorb the revelation, before she can tell him to stop because she's not ready to hear the words uttered aloud yet, the Apprentice continues.

"The coin has no magic. Your son has magic."

Killian takes a quick step back, and Emma, still clinging to his arm, stumbles with him.

"Magic," Killian repeats. He's gone pale, and the fire's left his voice and eyes—he looks more scared than anything.

"Yes. Light magic, to be precise," the Apprentice says, eyes flicking to Emma's. "Like his mother."

Emma swallows hard.

*Magic.*

Ian has magic—has had it all along.

She finds herself searching her memory, analyzing every strange thing that ever happened to or around Ian.

When he was a baby, sometimes he'd cry and the lights would flicker or the TV would turn on, but Emma just contributed it to bad wiring in their apartment—and, occasionally, to sleep-deprivation-induced hallucinations.

And then she remembers something long forgotten: *Ian's baby monitor.*

It was given to Emma second-hand from the kindly old lady who lived on the first floor (who ended up being Ian's first babysitter, coincidentally). Emma accepted the ancient baby monitor because, since she couldn't exactly have a baby shower and since she was pretty close to broke, she was in no place to refuse any gifts from anyone—even if it looked like it was last used by a dinosaur.

It was fine, it worked, but it often picked up activity from other baby monitors, especially at night.

When Ian woke up crying, if Emma didn't get out of bed and get to him soon enough, sometimes she'd hear singing over the monitor, as if someone—a man with a deep but pleasant voice—was in his room with him.
The first time it happened Emma nearly had a heart attack. She knew right away it wasn't Henry—nothing could make Henry get out of bed in the middle of the night, and he didn't have that deep of a voice, besides. She leapt from bed, crashed down the hallway, and burst into Ian's room to find it empty save for the baby, awake but no longer crying, apparently soothed by the singing from the monitor. Emma listened for a moment, and decided it must be coming from somewhere nearby—some dad was singing to his baby, in a nursery that had one of those noise machines that sounded like ocean waves.

It happened pretty frequently over the next year and a half. Sometimes she'd wake up to the sound of the man's voice singing over the monitor, and even though she didn't hear Ian crying, she'd still go into his room. She'd feed him if he was hungry, change him if he needed it, and stroke his hair or his chubby baby belly until he fell asleep again.

It was always sort of comforting, knowing that somewhere out in the night there was another parent with another baby, just trying their best—she felt like they were keeping each other company.

When the baby monitor finally crapped out and died, Ian was nearly two, and Emma decided he didn't need one anymore so she didn't replace it. Eventually, over the course of his tornado toddler years, she forgot all about the whole thing—until now.

Emma looks at Killian.

*His voice.*

His voice is the voice she heard singing to Ian over his baby monitor, all those years ago—she's *positive* it is.

Killian turns towards her, and startles when he sees the look on her face. There's no way he can guess what she's thinking, guess why she's staring at him so intensely, but she doesn't have time to explain, she just asks, "Do you sing?"

"Pardon?" he says, so shocked he doesn't even raise his signature eyebrow.

"Do you sing?" she repeats. Suddenly, this is the most important thing on the planet. She needs to know *now*. "Do you—*did* you—used to sing aloud to yourself? On the Jolly Roger. Out at sea."

Were you there with us all along, even though we didn't know it?

"Erm."

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, struggling to wrench his thoughts from one thing and wrap them around another. Emma gives him a minute to collect himself, and when he opens his eyes again, they're confused but focused.

"Yes," he says. His cheeks turn slightly pink as he says it, and he glances self-consciously at the Apprentice. "I used to sing to myself at night when I couldn't sleep, especially during the first few years after we were separated. It helped to ease the loneliness. Why do you ask?"

Emma doesn't know where the words come from, they just come.

"*Oh won't you come with me, where the moon is made of gold.*"

He jolts and his head jerks back, as if Emma slapped him, but she keeps going, because she can't stop herself, because in her head she can hear his voice singing the same words.
"And in the morning sun, we'll be sailing free-"

He grabs her wrist and she stops.

"Emma, where did you—how do you-"

"Mom?"

They both spin around to find Ian standing in the hallway. Luckily, Emma's mom instincts kick in, and instead of staring at him wondering how the hell he got away from Belle and made it all the way down the stairs and to the kitchen without being spotted by anyone in the living room, she asks, "Yea, kid?"

"When can I—hi, Dumbledore—when can I come downstairs?"

"Um, you already are downstairs, bud."

Wordlessly, he steps forward, slips his arms around her, rests his head against her stomach, and mumbles, "I don't wanna go to sleep."

It's a dirty lie. It's nearly one in the morning, a good three hours after his summer bedtime, and Emma can hear how sleepy he is. Emma knows if he would just lay down and close his eyes, he'd pass out immediately—but he's stubborn, like her and like Henry. He wants to know what's going on, he doesn't want to be left out.

"You don't have to sleep," Emma says, running her fingers through his hair from brow to nape. "You do have to stay upstairs though."

"Why?"

"Because it's safer upstairs."

*And there's a bed. And if you would just lay down in it and close your eyes...*

"Who's the lady?" Ian asks.

"Regina."

"Henry's other mom?"

"Yea."

"What happened to her?"

"We don't know yet."

He turns his head so he's looking up at her with his chin nestled in her belly button. "Is she dead?"

"No, she's not dead. She's..."

Emma knows Ian didn't see Neal turn into Regina, but she knows he saw them carrying Regina's unconscious body into the living room.

"She's sleeping," Emma says. "Okay? She's sleeping and we're all just waiting for her to wake up so we can talk to her."
"Oh," Ian says.

He tucks his head against her stomach again, and Emma resumes stroking his hair. She feels him relax and melt into her. Maybe if she just runs her fingers through his hair long enough she can put him to sleep on his feet...

_Magic_, she thinks. _He has magic._

Now that it's sunk in, it's maybe not as big of a shock as she initially thought. If magic is a part of Ian, then it's a part of him—she'll embrace it the same way she embraces every other part of him. What worries her is that she can't control her own magic, and if she can't control her own magic, then how can she help Ian control his?

She doesn't know when he'll start using his powers for real—tomorrow, two years, twenty—but when he does, Emma's not going to let him walk that path alone, and if she wants to be able to help him, then she's going to need to get some help for herself first.

After a full minute, she looks to Killian and the Apprentice, and whispers, "Are his eyes closed?"

"He's awake, Swan," Killian says, with a grimace.

"I don't wanna sleep," Ian grumbles, tightening his arms around her.

Emma throws Killian an imploring look, which he reads.

He squats down next to Ian. "How about you and I go back upstairs and I'll tell you a story?"

Ian shakes his head. "I wanna stay down here."

Now it's Killian's turn to look at Emma imploringly.

She sighs, thinking.

She needs to get back to Henry, and she can't afford to be worrying about Ian right now—she needs to know he's safe and out of the way so she can focus on Henry and on Regina (who might also turn back into Neal).

"I'll make you a deal," she says. "You can stay down here, but only if you stay with your dad—and I mean right next to him. Where he goes, you go."

Ian's silent as he considers her proposal.

"That's a fair deal, lad," Killian chips in, grinning.

"It's that, or I'm going to carry you right back upstairs to Henry's room and duct-tape you into that bed myself."

Ian removes his arms from around her waist and transfers them to circle Killian's neck. Killian takes him, and stands. Ian's getting almost too heavy for Emma to pick up, but Killian makes it look easy. Ian's legs go around his waist, and he lays his head on Killian's shoulder. It does something to Emma every time she sees them like this, every time she sees the trust that already exists between them, as if Ian's known Killian his whole life.

"Why don't we go see if there's any ice cream in the kitchen?" Killian suggests quietly.

"Mmm," Ian agrees.
As Killian walks away, he begins humming, the lullaby that Emma started earlier.

Emma looks at Ian, looks at the blonde head nestled next to the dark one, and smiles.

*Your dad's been with you for longer than you know, kid.*

---

It takes another twenty minutes for Regina to wake up.

Emma rejoins Henry in the living room, and they wait, until Regina's breathing audibly changes. As soon as Emma hears it, she stops her pacing and takes several quick strides until she's standing at Henry's shoulder.

"Are you ready?" she asks softly.

"Yes," he answers, just as quietly. Emma can only see part of his face, but she can see the determined set to his jaw.

They watch Regina for several long seconds, watch her breathing increase, until she's panting through her nose like a long distance runner. Her eyes flick rapidly back and forth beneath her eyelids, and her hands, laying over her stomach, clench and unclench.

"Call her," says the Apprentice, from somewhere behind them.

Henry leans forward, and says, loudly and clearly, "Regina."

Regina gasps, sucking in a deep breath like a corpse restored to life. Her eyes pop open and she sits bolt upright, fingers now scrabbling along the back of the couch on one side, and open air on the other.

Henry snatches her flailing hand, and says, again, "Regina."

Regina whirls towards Henry, her expression changing from terror to pure joy in an instant.

"*Henry!*" she cries, and even as a grin splits her face, tears spill from her eyes and pour down her cheeks.

The moment Regina opens her arms and pulls Henry into a hug, Emma turns and moves away. She knows it probably makes her a terrible person, but knowing what she knows about how Regina treated Henry as a kid, she can't stomach the sight of that woman touching her son.

She thought she made peace with it, but apparently not.

"I thought I'd never see you again!" Regina gushes. "I missed you so much!"

Emma squeezes her eyes shut and walks blindly towards the dining room before she says or does something she regrets.

Those two assholes—Regina and Neal—resurrected a man and then *murdered* him; they resurrected the fucking Dark One and brought all that shit back into the world, and now they think they can just waltz back into Henry's life like nothing's the matter.

Neither of them even *deserve* Henry.

Her anger brings her magic rising to the surface like a flood, and her palms suddenly feel hot and
itchy.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She feels like she could raze the entire house to the ground with a single thought. She's not actually sure she can stop that from happening—until a pair of hands grab her by the arms and jerk her sideways. She stumbles, completely caught off guard. She opens her eyes just as her back is pressed against the wall, and sees Snow staring back at her.

Emma's so shocked she doesn't even struggle, she just stands, stares, and waits.

Everyone in the room is on their feet. Robin and the two Merry Men are clustered together to Emma's left, David is just behind Snow, and Killian's in the back, on the other side of the dining room table. He's holding Ian, who's finally asleep.

"I know what you're thinking, Emma," Snow says, "and you're right. You're absolutely right. But now's not the time. Right now, you need to be there for Henry."

Emma switches her focus, starts listening in on Regina and Henry's conversation. She hears Regina's questions—and Henry's tersely muttered responses.

"Henry needs you, love," Killian says. Emma looks at him then, looks into his eyes, and wonders if it was ever like this for him, wonders if he felt this every time he saw Gold with Belle because Gold didn't deserve it.

"You can do this, Emma," David says.

Emma takes a deep breath, clenches her fists, and peels around the corner back into the living room.

Regina stops talking and lifts her head to watch Emma approach. Henry turns and looks at her, and Emma can see how uncomfortable he is—she realizes that however hard it is for her, it's ten times harder for Henry.

She puts her hand on his back, just above his shoulders blades, and smiles.

Sorry about that, kid.

"He looks good, Emma" Regina says. "He looks happy."

"He is," Emma says, not breaking eye contact with Henry. "The last seven years have been really great."

"He says he's going to college next year?" Regina says, more as a question than a statement.

"Yep." Emma grins proudly, and the corners of Henry's mouth twitch in an almost-smile. "He's thinking English Lit and/or journalism, maybe with a little creative writing thrown in—he knows he wants to write, he's not sure what he wants to write yet."

"Well, that all sounds wonderful," Regina says, and Emma hears the note of sadness in Regina's voice.

She hears it, and she doesn't give a rat's ass.

Because she's a terrible person.

"I think you owe us an explanation," Emma says, and she gives Henry's shoulders a pat before she
turns her gaze to Regina.

Regina nods briskly. "You're right. We don't have much time." She slides her hands from her knees to her lap, and draws her shoulders up. Her face smoothes out, becomes an impassive mask.

"What do you know so far?" she asks.

Emma feels her parents approaching silently from behind, and knows if she reached her hand back, she'd find waiting fingers. Knowing they're there, knowing they have her back, calms her a bit, keeps her voice from trembling.

"We know that you and Neal decided to cast the Dark Curse to get back to Henry." Emma says, in a monotone. "We know that you resurrected Mr. Gold so that Neal could crush his heart to make the Curse work, and we know that Neal is now the Dark One."

Regina nods in confirmation. "All true," she says.

"What we don't know is why Neal just shape-shifted into you."

"Resurrecting the Dark One was a one-for-one trade," Regina says. "I gave my life for Rumple's."

Some emotion flickers across Regina's face, too fast for Emma to catch, and then it's a mask again. "We didn't know it was a trade, of course. We found a book with a key to the Dark One's vault in it. The book claimed that the Dark One could be resurrected easily by reopening the vault, but made no mention of the price."

"Magic always comes with a price, Regina," Snow says. "You should have known."

"Yes, well," Regina says, and sighs. "The plan was for me to open the vault, and for Neal to...well, for Neal to take Rumple's heart before Rumple could resist." She glances at Henry briefly, then looks back to Emma, Snow, and David. "As soon as Rumple appeared and started strengthening, I began to weaken. I didn't understand what was happening until it was too late—Neal had already crushed his father's heart and turned into the Dark One. He panicked when he saw what was happening and realized I was dying, and his solution was this—"

She gestures at herself, and then lays her hands back down on her lap.

"He...absorbed you?" Emma asks, trying to decide whether she's disgusted or not.

"In a manner of speaking, yes. By incorporating my body into his, he's able to temporarily sustain me."

"So, you're..." Henry says, hesitantly.

"I'm not alive Henry, no. Not really. Technically, I'm dead—or, I will be, very shortly." She smiles, falteringly. Her eyebrows draw down and her eyes narrow, as if she's fighting back more tears. "Unwillingly or not, I traded my life for the Dark One's, and although Neal managed to slow the process, he can't halt it entirely. My death is inevitable."

Emma feels a chill creep up her spine.

However angry she is at Regina, she doesn't actually want her to die, and she especially doesn't want Henry to lose someone he cares about.

"What can we do?" Emma hears herself asking.
"Nothing," Regina says. "Save to speed up the process."

"What?" Henry says, before Emma can. "Why would we-

Regina takes Henry's hands between both of hers, and Emma sees her squeeze them tight.

"Because trying to keep me alive is hurting your father, Henry. Two souls can't reside in one body. The longer he tries to hold on to me, the more damage he does to himself. You need to let me go."

"But I don't want to," Henry says. His voice is strong and steady, but his hands are balled into fists between Regina's, and they're shaking so hard they're sending vibrations up his arms to his shoulders. Emma puts her hand back where it was, and as she rubs small, gentle circles there, Henry slowly goes still.

"There's nothing you can do for me," Regina says. "I'm lost already. I'm just happy I was able to see you and say goodbye."

She lifts one hand to cup Henry's cheek. "You've grown so much, Henry. I'm so proud."

Henry nods, but doesn't speak—Emma doesn't think he can speak, at the moment.

"Can I talk to your mother alone for a minute?" Regina asks.

Henry nods again. He stands up, turns, and brushes by Emma. She sees the tears shining in his eyes, and gives his arm a squeeze as he passes. She watches him over her shoulder, watches him walk into the dining room and go stand by Killian, who says something to him in a low voice that Emma can't hear, and puts his arm bracingly around Henry's shoulders, then Emma takes Henry's place on the coffee table.

She faces Regina, and waits for Regina's eyes to leave Henry, Killian, and Ian. There's a question in Regina's raised eyebrow, but Emma ignores it—her family and her love life are none of Regina's business.

Regina eventually takes the hint. She lowers her eyebrow, scans Emma up and down silently, searching for God only knows what, and then she says, "You have to do something about Neal."

Emma almost snorts. "Like what?"

"I don't know, but you have to stop him soon, before it's too late."

There's something ominous in Regina's tone that sets Emma back on edge.

"What do you mean?"

Regina shakes her head. "Neal is not his father. Rumple was able to work with the Darkness, but Neal's fighting it, and it's a fight he can't win. It won't be long before Neal loses control and the Darkness takes over. You need to find his dagger."

"Where is it?"

"Don't you think if I knew I'd have told you already?" Regina sneers.

Emma sighs inwardly.

There she is.
"We had a cell made for Gold at our castle," Snow says quietly. "We could make another for Neal."

Emma makes a face.

"It might be our only option, Emma. At least until we can figure out how to change him back."

"Can we even change him back?" Emma asks. "I thought the only way to make someone not the Dark One anymore was to kill them?"

"There is another way," says the Apprentice.

Emma, Snow, David, and Regina turn to find him standing casually in the corner of the room with his hands folded neatly in front of him. He smiles benignly as they all regard him with frowns and raised eyebrows.

"What is it?" David asks.

"There's a magical object that, in the right hands, has the power to remove the Darkness from its host without harming them."

"Do you have this object?" Emma asks slowly, and although she already guesses the answer, she can't help the small, tiny spark of hope that ignites inside her.

*If there's a way to save Henry from losing two people...*

Emma would give *anything* for that.

"Alas, it is no longer in my possession," the Apprentice says, smiling ruefully.

Emma feels hope deflate like a tire with a slow leak, until the Apprentice says the most wonderful word Emma's ever heard: "However-" he starts.

"However what?" she cuts in, impatiently.

"*However,*" he repeats. "I do know where it is, although getting to it will be difficult."

"Okay," Regina says, "Can you stop with the cryptic grandpa bullshit and just tell us where it is and how to get there?"

In spite of Regina's glare, the Apprentice's cheerfulness only increases.

"It was in my home in the Enchanted Forest-"

"The Sorcerer's Mansion?"

"You know of my master?"

"Yea, yea, no time to explain," Regina drawls. "Just tell us where the mansion is."

"The mansion is here in Storybrooke," the Apprentice says.

"Then what-"

"The object of which I speak is very powerful, and it seems that it was able to resist the Dark Curse. It lies in exactly the same place it always has."

"So you're saying it's just hanging out on a rock somewhere back in the Enchanted Forest, where
"To be more precise, it's in an underground vault in the Enchanted Forest, above which there used to be a mansion."

"Great," Emma groans. She buries her face in her hands. Her brain hurts. How the hell are they going to get to the Enchanted Forest? And how the hell are they going to find an underground vault?

"If this thing exists," David asks, "Why has no one ever used it before?"

"Because only someone with the most powerful light magic ever born into this world could ever accomplish such a task, and that person hasn't existed until recently."

Silence follows his remark, but Emma's skin starts prickling.

"Are you all staring at me?" she asks, keeping her face in her hands.

"Yes," Regina answers.

"Awesome. Is there a prophecy that says I have to go get it, too, or can I just have like a mermaid or something go get it for me and then just use it when she brings it back?"

She really wasn't expecting an answer, but she gets one anyway.

"A mermaid is actually an excellent idea, love," Killian says. "They can travel between realms."

"Where are we going to find a mermaid?" David says.

"I don't know," Snow replies. "I don't think any made it to Storybrooke."

"We'll find another way," Henry says. Emma drops her hands and twists around to find Henry back in the room.

"The lad's right," Killian adds. He's standing beside Henry, rocking from side to side, holding Ian slumped against his chest. "If we can't find a mermaid or a magic bean or a bloody Wishing Star, then we'll just have to find another way."

They all exchange glances, and then nods.

"He's right," David says. "We'll find a way."

They all look at Henry, looking for his reaction—this is about him, after all. It isn't for Neal or even to prevent unleashing Darkness upon Storybrooke, it's for Henry.

He smiles—it's a grim smile, but it's satisfied.

Regina lets out a soft sigh. It's a sorrowful sound, and Emma's breath catches.

"Okay, Emma, it's time," Regina says.

"Me?" Emma says, startled.

"Yes. You. You have to separate me from Neal."

"How?"

"I can guide you."
It takes another twenty minutes to evacuate the manor.

Belle and Ruby and Will Scarlet take Roland back to Robin's house, and Emma sends Killian away with Ian.

"But Emma-

"Please, Killian. You said you'd help me keep Henry and Ian safe. This is what I need you to do. I need you to keep Ian safe tonight, no matter what."

"But you and Henry-

"My parents are here. We'll be fine."

He goes, reluctantly and with more than a few anguished looks cast in her direction, but he goes.

They clear the coffee table out of the way, and then Emma and Regina stand in the center of the room, facing each other with Regina's back to the couch. Henry stands nearby, watching.

Robin comes close, reaches out a hand and brushes his fingers down Regina's arm. "Good to see you again," he murmurs.

Regina lifts her hand at the last moment, so her own fingers sweep along his palm. "You too," she whispers back. Her gaze linger on him as he walks away, into the hallway to take up his bow and ready himself.

Regina gives herself a little shake, and then lifts her eyes to meet Emma's.

"I'm sorry this happened to you," Emma says.

Regina smiles sadly and shakes her head. "You don't have to be sorry. This is no one's fault but mine. Thank you for taking care of Henry."

"You don't have to thank me. He's my kid."

Emma feels an understanding pass between them. *Friendship* was never in the cards for them; a truce is about all they could ever have hoped for, and a truce is what they have now.

"Alright, Ms. Swan. Let's do this."

Regina takes Emma's wrists, and lifts them to the lapels of her pantsuit jacket. "Hold on tight, and when I say pull, *pull*," she says, and Emma grips the fabric until her knuckles ache.

Regina closes her eyes. Emma doesn't know why, but she does too.

"Okay, Emma, now! *Pull*!"

Emma pulls. She expects to fall backwards and drag Regina with her, but she meets resistance, like she's trying to pull down a brick wall.

"*PULL!*" Regina shouts.

Emma grits her teeth, and her magic surges to life, bubbling up pleasantly beneath her skin. She pulls again, and this time, she feels something come loose.
She isn't prepared for how quickly it happens, and she plummets to the carpet and lands hard on her ass. Something large thumps heavily to the carpet beside her. When she opens her eyes and blinks around, she sees Neal standing where Regina was, moments before, and lying next to Emma is...

Henry drops to his knees, face crumpling as he takes Regina's shoulders and rolls her onto her back. "No," he whimpers.

Regina's eyes are closed peacefully, as if she's asleep, but her skin now looks gray and lifeless when only a minute ago it was rosy and healthy.

"She's gone, Henry," Emma says. "I'm so sorry. She's gone."

Tears gather in her eyes at the sight of the pain on Henry's face. She doesn't know whether she should reach for him or give him space, but then he looks at her, helplessly, and says "Mom," and starts crying, and she leaps to take him into her arms.

He sobs into her shoulder, and his fingertips dig into her back, but she holds him tight, presses her cheek against his hair and waits.

"Emma," Neal says, in a hoarse, disbelieving voice. "What happened? What did you do?"

"I did what Regina asked me to do, Neal," Emma says coldly. She lifts her head to glare a challenge at him.

His eyes skitter away from hers. He looks wildly back and forth between her, Henry, and Regina, and then, face twisting in torment, he disappears.

---

Once Henry's tears are spent, he becomes like stone. He helps David lift Regina's body and move her once more to the couch, then leans down and arranges her arms across her stomach so that she looks comfortable. Snow and David volunteer to keep a vigil over Regina's body during the night.

"We'll make arrangements for her burial tomorrow," Snow says gently, more to Henry than to Emma.

Henry nods, numbly, and after hugs from his grandparents, he follows Emma, Robin, and the Apprentice from the house.

---

Killian's waiting up for them at the loft. It's dark inside, save for the light over the sink, and he's sitting alone at the kitchen table. He stands as Emma and Henry enter, but keeps his distance.

Henry goes upstairs without speaking, and Emma doesn't try to stop him. He'll come to her when he's ready. She watches him walk upstairs with his shoulders hunched, and waits until she hears him crash down on the bed before she turns to Killian.

It only takes one look from her for him to cross the kitchen and gather her up in his arms. His heat and his scent engulf her, and she leans into him, burying her face in his shirt. His hand skims her back, tracing patterns along her shoulders.

"Let's go to bed," she says. She just wants to sleep and wake up tomorrow and have all of this feel like a bad dream.
He freezes.

"To sleep, I mean," she clarifies. "My parents are staying at Regina's with her...with her."

She can't bring herself to say Regina's body.

"Let's get the pullout setup and go to sleep."

"Erm," he says.

Emma lifts her head. She looks at him, sees him looking into the living room, and follows his gaze. The pullout is already setup, and there's someone small and blonde wrapped up in the blankets atop it.

"Why's Ian down here?" Emma asks.

"I put him to bed upstairs, but he had a nightmare. I didn't want to leave him alone, but it's also not appropriate for me to stay in your bed. I brought him down here so I could keep an eye on him."

Emma pulls away from Killian, and goes into the living room area to sit on the side of the pullout bed. She reaches over and runs her fingers through Ian's hair. It's sweaty and tangled, and there are still tear stains on his cheeks.

"Did he say what he dreamt about?"

Killian huffs out a breath. "He said it was the Shadow again. And then he said I died."

Emma feels tears sting her eyes.

Poor little dude.

"It's probably just a stress dream," she forces herself to say. "He'll be alright. I'll sleep down here with him."

"Shouldn't you go upstairs with Henry?"

"No, he wants his headphones and space. I'll sleep down here tonight. We'll all fit."

Killian hesitates a moment. "We, Swan?"

"Yea. Me, you, and Ian."

"I...I can't, love. It's not...I can't."


She sees his brow furrow and his jaw clench.

"You can sleep in the bed, and I'll sleep on the couch. I just...I don't want to be alone."

His expression softens. "You're not sleeping on the couch, Swan. I'll sleep on the couch, and you take the bed with the lad."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course," he says, and grins. "What sort of gentleman would I be if I allowed a lady—the woman
of my affections, no less—to sleep on the couch whilst I lounged upon the bed?"

She chuckles, a moment of joy bursting through her gloom.

"Thanks," she says.

His fingers brush her cheeks, wiping away her tears, and then he tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ears.

"Don't thank me, Emma. Whatever you ask of me, I'll do it. Your happiness is all I desire, I promise."

She captures his hand with hers, and holds it against her cheek. His palm is just as warm as the rest of him, but pleasantly calloused, which she sort of likes. After a minute, she sighs.

"Alright. Which blanket do you want?"

"I don't require a blanket, Swan. I'll be fine with my jacket."

"You sure?"

"Quite."

Emma slips off her shoes and crawls into bed beside Ian. Killian pulls the armchair next to the bed, and settles into it with one leg draped along the edge of the mattress.

"Goodnight, Killian," she says.

"Goodnight, Emma."

Chapter End Notes

The lullaby that Killian sings/Emma heard him singing over Ian's baby monitor is this one: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uen59x1NBRs
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

FINALLY. Sorry, I really crawled through this one. No idea why. Anyway, thank you for your patience and OH MY GOD YOUR LOVELY FEEDBACK ON THE LAST CHAPTER!!! It really helped lift my spirits! :D

It's Friday, the day of Regina's funeral that isn't really a funeral—they're not burying her, they're not having a service, they're just going to say goodbye to her coffin in her vault—and Henry feels like garbage.

The problem is, he doesn't feel like garbage because he's sad, he's feels like garbage because he's not sad enough, and not feeling sad enough about the death of the woman who was technically his mom for 10 years makes him a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad person, right?

Regina raised him. Her idea of love may have been warped and borderline abusive, but she clothed him, fed him, made sure he did his homework and got good grades, taught him manners and how to be responsible. He wouldn't be who he is now if it wasn't for her.

Henry wants to be able to let go of Regina, but he can't.

An hour before they're meant to leave for the cemetery, Henry finds himself upstairs, sitting on the floor next to his bed, flipping through the story book, searching—searching for good memories, searching for bad memories, looking for a reason to feel more one way or another.

Everyone's been giving him his space (except for Ian, who spent the previous day trying to convince him that the melted mini Reese's he's been keeping in his shoe "for emergencies" would make him feel better if he would just eat it already), but he knows they're watching him, throwing each other sorrowful glances behind his back, whispering frantically when they think he can't hear, and it's just...it's too much.

He feels like his insides have all knotted up from all the squirming his stomach's been doing for the last 36 hours.

At home, he has a stress ball he squeezes whenever he gets stuck on a paper or stumped by his math homework, but it's not here, so he picks up the seashell Ian brought him from the beach—the one that was supposed to be an apology for teasing him about Violet—and turns it idly between his fingers.

*Smooth side, rough side. Smooth side, rough side.*

It's almost as good as the clicky pen he used to abuse before his mom got him the stress ball.

He flips through the less familiar parts first, at the back of the book near the missing section. There are new pages there, ones he didn't see when he looked through the book three weeks ago.

Henry reads about Regina removing her heart and burying it, because she can't stand the pain of being separated from Henry. Snow convinces her not to, convinces her she can still find happiness, that she should *try* to find happiness, for Henry's sake, and then, later, Robin Hood convinces her not
to put herself under a Sleeping Curse.

*Regina and Robin Hood.*

Regina had a chance to be with Robin, to move on and be happy...but then Belle arrived at Snow's castle, and told them all what Neal was up to. Regina left. She removed her heart again, and buried it, so she'd have the strength to do whatever was necessary to get back to Henry.

Henry tilts his head back to rest against the mattress.

He feels so *guilty.* Regina could have had a new life, and been happy, but she couldn't let go of her old life—of Henry.

All this, because of him, and the worst part is that, while it's nice and all, knowing that she loved him so much she couldn't move on...that love—that *real* love—came too late.

He needed that love when he was 4 and had nightmares and needed someone to hug him and tell him his dreams couldn't hurt him; he needed her love when he was 5 and peed his pants in front of his entire Kindergarten class because he was too afraid to interrupt the teacher to ask to use the bathroom; he needed her love when he was 6, 7, 8, and 9, and had no friends except his books, and he needed her love when he was 10 and so lonely and depressed that the school recommended he see a psychiatrist.

But not now. He doesn't need her love now.

He closes his eyes, not sure if he feels better or worse.

Downstairs, he hears the shower shut off in the bathroom, signaling his alone time is almost up. As soon as Emma finishes getting ready, they're going to the cemetery.

His stomach squirms again, this time with nerves.

The only funeral he's ever been to was Archie's. He didn't even go to Graham's-

*Graham.*

Henry hasn't thought about Graham in a long time.

Emma was the first person who ever truly loved Henry, but before her there was Graham and Mary Margaret and Archie, who may not have *loved* Henry, but they cared about him—and Regina manipulated and hurt them, tried to destroy their lives.

*Did* destroy their lives—well, one of them.

Graham.

Regina killed Graham.

*Holy shit.*

Henry's eyes fly open and his head jerks back up. He opens the book once more, this time with shaking hands.

The official coroner's report stated that Graham died of a heart attack, but Henry never believed it. He knew what really happened, but he never had any proof.
Until now.

*There it is.*

Next to a page with a small illustration of Emma kissing Graham—fuck, how did he miss *that* when he was a kid?—is a picture of Regina in her vault, crushing Graham's heart.

Henry stares blankly.

He knew it all along but he's still shocked.

Tears sting his eyes, blurring his vision until all he sees is the red, glowing blob of Graham's heart in Regina's hand.

His guilt sours, turns into fury.

It hurts all over again, like it happened yesterday. It hurts more than watching Regina's body fall lifeless to the white carpet in her white living room.

He slams the book shut and throws it. It doesn't go far, as it's heavy and awkward and Henry was never exactly a baseball player, and it lands with a loud thump only a few short feet away. It's not satisfying enough, so he pushes himself to his feet, picks the book up, and throws it again, this time all the way across the room.

*Fuck you,* he thinks savagely.

He's not sure if he's cursing the book or Regina or both, but he doesn't care.

The stairs creak suddenly, loudly, as someone starts making their way up them. Judging by the heavy trudge, it's David—the man may be a skilled swordsman, but he's not a graceful walker.

David reaches the top, and rests his elbows on the banister to either side.

"Hey there," he says, casually. "What're you up to?"

Henry glares at his grandpa's mild smile, determined to say something cutting and sarcastic, but then his anger breaks.

He can't be mad at David, not when he's just so...kind and well-meaning.

Henry drops onto Emma's bed and starts scrubbing at his cheeks. "Nothing," he sighs. "I was just thinking."

"Mind if I think with you?"

Without waiting for a response, David walks over and sits on the bed beside him. He's silent for a split second before he asks, "So...what're we thinking about?"

Kind and well-meaning, but impatient.

*A family trait.*

"I don't wanna talk about it," Henry says, then, to soften his words, he adds, "Sorry, grandpa. I'm not trying to be a jerk or a moody teenager or whatever, I just...don't."

It didn't matter anymore, anyway. Regina's dead.
David smiles again, and puts one big, warm hand on Henry's shoulder. "That's alright," he says. "I understand. I just want you to know that there's always someone you can talk to, no matter what."

"I know, grandpa. Thanks."

David gives his shoulder a brief squeeze, then he rises from the bed, and makes his way back to the stairs. He stops just before he's about to descend, and turns back.

"If you want to stay up here, that's fine, but you should eat something. Your grandma made some PopTarts from scratch. She says they're better than the store-bought ones."

"Because they are!" calls Snow's voice from the kitchen.

Henry didn't notice before, but the loft smells pleasantly like pastry and brown sugar.

His mouth starts watering immediately, and even though he knows the PopTarts are a dirty trick to try and cheer him up, his willpower crumbles.

"I'm coming," he says, and springs up from the bed to follow David downstairs.

They put Regina in her vault—or inter her or whatever—in the special room where she kept Daniel's coffin. They use the same coffin, made of clear glass, and the Apprentice enchants Regina's body so that it won't decompose—which is creepy, and unnecessary, but Emma keeps her mouth shut, because it's not about her and what she thinks, it's about Henry.

Henry doesn't object, so Emma doesn't either.

Nobody really says anything, not even Snow, who can usually muster up some sort of speech, hope or otherwise, in any situation, and they all spend a few minutes of standing around awkwardly, waiting for some cue that it's appropriate to leave.

"Can I have a minute?" Henry asks, quietly and without looking at them.

"Yea, kid. Of course," Emma says. She reaches out and gives his wrist a squeeze as she passes by, then leads her silent parents through the corridors, up into the mausoleum, and back out into the graveyard.

They file down the stone steps and onto the wet grass. Despite the sun and the clear blue sky, fog still clings to the air in tendrils. It's densest lower to the ground, but it's thinner than it was yesterday. Emma wonders what the purpose of the fog was—if there was even any purpose at all. Regina said Neal was struggling with the Darkness, and losing. Maybe the fog was an accident. If his emotions affect his magic like Emma's emotions affect her magic, then-

"Emma, you okay?"

Emma starts, and turns to face David and Snow. They're both watching her worriedly, probably because she's been staring at a tree like she intends to set it on fire for at least a full minute.

"Yea," she says, unclenching her fingers from her biceps and dropping her arms to her sides. "Yea, I'm fine."

She's not fine she's tired. She needs sleep, and she needs Ian to sleep and stop having nightmares that she dies, and for Henry to talk to someone—or her or David or Killian or anyone—before whatever he's bottling up inside explodes.
Her parents are still staring, so she adds, "I'm just worried about Henry."

"I know, honey," Snow says. She steps forward and pulls Emma into a hug that Emma returns automatically. "We are too."

As much as Emma likes the warm feel of her mother's arms around her shoulders and the way she smells like those brown sugar PopTarts she baked, Emma feels guilty receiving sympathy—she's not the person who died, nor is she the one upset about the person who died. She counts to thirty in her head, then politely disengages herself.

"How are you?" she asks, in an attempt to deflect. "I mean, I know Regina was...you know..."

Emma waves her hand in a feeble gesture, unsure how to say: the person who ruined your life but who you still somehow felt sorry for and wanted to help.

"I just wish things could have worked out differently for her," Snow says softly. "Regina had a chance at happiness, she just..." she trails off, and shrugs. "Henry left a hole in her heart, and she decided that nothing could ever fill it."

David slips his arm around Snow's shoulders. "It's not your fault, Snow. You helped her as much as you could, but in the end she made her own choices. She chose to join Neal instead of staying with Robin."

Snow leans into David's chest and nods sadly. "I know. David. I know," she says, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. "I still can't help feeling like I should have done more."

David wraps his other arm around Snow, and she turns into him. Emma tries to give them some privacy and looks away, towards the mausoleum.

She can't feel sorry for Regina. She feels sorry for Henry, because this is hurting him, but she doesn't pity Regina. Regina should have loved Henry when she had the chance instead of when it was already too late, and then she should have let him go, let him be happy.

Casting the Dark Curse was stupid and selfish.

Emma turns back to her parents.

"Are you guys still having that meeting tonight?"

Snow eases herself out of David's arms, but keeps one of her hands joined. "Yes. The town deserves to know why they're here and what's going on."

"It's our duty to lead the town and keep everyone safe," David says.

Emma nods.

"Are you sure you don't want to be there?" Snow asks.

"I'm sure," Emma mutters.

The last thing Emma wants is to have the eyes of the entire town on her when they're informed that Neal, aka Baelfire, son of Rumplestiltskin, aka Emma's ex-lover and the father of one of her sons, is the idiot who got them all transported here.

Henry emerges suddenly from the mausoleum, silent as a ghost.
"I'm ready," he says gruffly. "Let's go."

Together, Emma and David close the gigantic double doors with a thud that feels decisive, the final period at the end of Regina's story.

Emma thinks about Regina's body, in that big empty chamber, where maybe only Henry will ever visit her.

Okay, maybe I do feel a little sad.

They walk back together through the graveyard to their cars. Emma puts her hand lightly on Henry's back, between his shoulders, and when he doesn't flinch away or shrug her off, she slips her arm all the way around his shoulders, and feels him lean into her.

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She drives the bug back into town, and parks in front of Granny's. Henry's so lost in thought that he doesn't even noticed they've stopped until Emma speaks.

"Can I make a suggestion?"

He tears his gaze from the windshield and blinks at her dazedly. "Sorry, what?"

"I said, can I make a suggestion."

His face clears, the grief—and anger?—smoothing away as he pulls himself out of his own miserable thoughts and focuses on Emma.

"Um, yea," he says.

"Go see Ava. You haven't talked to her all week. Go see her, and tell her what's been going on."

Henry starts shaking his head immediately. "No, mom. I don't think-"

"What?" Emma counters, raising an eyebrow. "You don't think Ava can handle it? She met your brother and she didn't run away. Trust me, she can handle anything."

"No, it's not that, it's just..."

He sighs, exasperated, and turns away. He slumps in his seat and fixes his eyes on the windshield once more.

"Look," Emma says gently, "by tonight, everyone in Storybrooke is going to know everything. It would be better if Ava heard it from you first."

Henry makes a face, but doesn't speak.

"I'm not saying you have to read her your diary, I'm just saying talk to her. She'll listen, and you'll feel better after you talk to her, I promise. She likes you, Henry. And I know you like her-"

"Me liking her is exactly the problem!" Henry bursts out, hands curling into fists. "Everyone around us—everyone we love—gets hurt! Graham-"

He cuts himself off, and seems to bite back whatever else he was about to say.

Emma waits, lets him gather himself, lets his breathing slow and the angry red color fade from his
cheeks, and then she says, "Ava's not going to get hurt."

Neal may be a giant asshole, but he would never purposely hurt someone Henry's close to. At least, not as long as he's in control. If there comes a time when he's no longer in control, then it'll be time to start worrying.

Emma pushes that thought away. She digs some money out of her jacket, and offers it to Henry.

"Go see a movie. Take Ava out to dinner. Do something—something normal."

Henry looks at the crumpled wad of cash she's holding, then looks at her, startled.

"What?" Emma asks.

"I really need to get a job. I can't keep letting my mom pay for my dates."

Emma snorts. "Does that mean you're going?"

He takes the money from her and tucks it away carefully in his jeans pocket.

"Yea, I'll go," he says quietly. "Thanks."

Emma smiles. "Just text me and let me know your plans, okay?"

"Okay."

He opens the car door and starts to slide out, but Emma stops him with a hand on his arm, and he turns back.

"Hey..." she says. "I know you want to protect Ava, but keeping her in the dark isn't necessarily keeping her safe, okay? If there is danger, it's better if she knows about it."

Henry looks at her, and then down. He chews his lip for a moment, and then raises his eyes to hers once more. "You're right."

Emma gives his arm a gentle squeeze. "Plus, Ava grew up in the Enchanted Forest. She can probably kick more ass than either of us."

"I'm pretty sure she can, too," Henry chuckles, with a note of adoration in his voice. "Granny said she's pretty ace with a crossbow."

Emma grins. "Well, if Granny said that..."

Henry grins back, blushing slightly. "Bye, mom."

"Bye, kid."

He gets out of the car, and Emma watches him walk down the street towards Ava's ice cream shop, then she takes a deep breath, and faces Granny's.

*Alright, now I've got to deal with the other one.*

---

Killian's never felt so powerless in his life—not when he was a slave aboard Captain Silver's ship, nor when Liam died, and not even when he watched the crocodile crush Milah's heart.

Ian's crying, and no matter what Killian says or does, he won't stop.
"Hush, lad, hush," Killian whispers as he paces his room, but the boy sobbing in his arms continues to sob.

He's likely worn holes in the carpet by now, so long has he been treading the same track back and forth from his bed to the wall, over and over for what feels like hours—alright, it hasn't been hours, it's been less than one, but with every passing second Killian's heart grows heavier.

He's not certain what triggered the tears; they were downstairs in the diner, drawing, when all of a sudden the orange marker Ian was holding slipped from his fingers to the floor, and he started bawling.

Granted, the morning had been a less than joyful one to begin with. After four nights in a row of very little sleep, disturbed constantly by nightmares, Ian was clearly exhausted beyond his limits. He was pale, listless, and frustrated by nearly everything—each drawing he attempted went wrong somehow and was destroyed, first by scribbling, then by crumpling.

Ian's tears shouldn't have shocked him—they did, however, and so did the flickering of all the lights in the diner that accompanied the crying.

Killian's only hope now is that Ian will eventually cry himself out—perhaps then he'll get the sleep he desperately needs.

As Killian reaches the wall and begins to turn back towards the bed, his door opens, and in walks Emma.

She stops, one hand still on the doorknob, and Killian stops too. He's simultaneously so relieved to see her and so embarrassed that this is what she's seeing that he nearly starts crying himself.

"Granny said you guys were up here," Emma says, pushing the door closed and making her way calmly over. Her expression is concerned, but not overly surprised. "What happened?"

"I don't know-"

Ian picks his head off Killian's shoulder and twists towards the sound of his mother's voice. "Mom!" he wails.

Ian opens his arms and Emma takes him, muttering, "Okay, okay. It's okay. Everything's alright."

Instead of feeling lighter, Killian feels heavier. His heart feels like lead, ready to drop right out of his chest.

He failed.

He couldn't do it—he couldn't console his own son.

Killian shrinks away as Emma begins pacing the same track Killian walked. She has her face tucked against Ian's, speaking in a low voice over his sobs. Killian watches her, watches the warmth pour out of her and over Ian, watches Ian calm in her embrace.

"Wanna tell me what's wrong?" Emma asks gently, when Ian's gone quiet.

Ian doesn't answer right away. He shivers, and hiccups, then, voice muffled by Emma's shirt, he whimpers, "I don't want you to die."

Emma freezes.
"Ian, I'm not-"

"I don't want you to die like Henry's other mom!" Ian cries, and erupts in fresh tears.

Pain sears through Killian at Ian's words, as if he's been physically stabbed. In his mind he sees images that have absolutely no business resurfacing, images of two little boys kneeling by the bedside of their mother, begging her not to go, not to die.

"Momma!"

"Momma, please!"

Emma's eyes flutter shut. "I'm not going anywhere, kid," she whispers. She turns her head to kiss Ian's cheek. "Got it? I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here. I'm always gonna be right here."

"Liam, Killian, my loves, I'll always be with you, no matter what."

Ian nods, but great, shuddering sobs continue to wrack his whole body.

Emma resumes pacing, and Killian resumes watching, chest constricting in agony. He clenches his fist, focusing on his straining knuckles and the bite of his nails into his palms, forcing the memory of seeing his mother die back down into whatever dark hole it crawled out of.

There's only one little boy Killian needs to worry about now, and he doesn't have dark hair and sad eyes; he's blonde, with eyes that are usually bright and glinting with mirth or mischief or both-

And that little boy's currently drowning in his own tears—has been for a while, despite Killian's best attempts.

Bloody hell he's so useless—he's always been useless. The only thing he's ever been good at is letting people down—he let Liam down almost constantly, he let Milah down when he failed to save her, he let Emma down when he left her to raise their son on her own, and he's letting her down now because he can't even do something as basic as comfort their boy and make him feel safe-

Emma pauses and hefts Ian, trying to readjust her grip, and Killian realizes the boy's weight has become too much for her to continue carrying comfortably.

He finds his voice, croaks, "Emma, the bed."

She turns and stares, clearly confused.

"You should sit," he explains. "The lad's heavy."

She hesitates, as though contemplating denying it, then bobs her head and starts towards the bed. As she passes by him, she grabs his wrist and drags him with her. She sits, and Killian's forced to sit beside her before he can protest.

He waits for her to settle, to get Ian seated in her lap, then carefully slides closer, drawn to the both of them in spite of himself.

They're his world—Emma and Ian have become his entire world.

All Killian wants is to be worthy of them, to be able to make them happy and keep them safe.

His arm goes around Ian's back, and he hugs him, clings to Ian the way Ian clings to Emma. He doesn't want to lose this—he can't lose this; he's lost much in his life, turned his anguish into rage,
spent centuries sustained only by bloodthirst and vengeance...but if he lost *this*, it would destroy him.

Slowly, Ian's huffs and hiccups fade until he's quiet. Killian leans down and rests his head lightly against Ian's. After a moment, he feels Emma's lips against his hair and her soft breaths gusting warmly across his scalp.

He doesn't deserve this, he truly doesn't, but he's going to hold tightly to it as hard as he can for as long as he can.

Killian listens to Ian's breathing even out and grow deeper, until it's clear the boy's asleep. He thinks Emma might be asleep too until she whispers, "Can you help me with the covers?"

"Aye, love."

They both stand, and Killian peels back the blankets so Emma can lay Ian down. Emma slips off his sneakers and his socks, then shimmies his jeans down his legs until he's clad in just a t-shirt and striped underpants.

"He's been sweating a lot in his sleep lately," she says, in answer to Killian's raised eyebrow.

Killian nods, then asks, "Should I close the curtains?"

Emma settles the blankets back over Ian, then squints out the window at the bright, early morning sun shining over the rooftops of Storybrooke.

"I don't know," she sighs. "He needs sleep, but I don't want him to nap for so long that he's up all night again."

"We can wake him up in a few hours, Swan."

"Yea..."

She stands over the bed with her hands on her hips, looking down at Ian. Although the boy's eyelids are puffy and his cheeks are stained a splotchy red, he looks peaceful for the first time in hours.

Emma tilts her head back and closes her eyes, and when she opens them, she's changed, as if whatever energy that's kept her going these past few days has finally and suddenly run out.

"I'm taking a nap too," she says, tiredly.

She steps out of her boots and rounds the bed to the other side. She lays down next to Ian, over the covers, and curls around him.

The room is quiet, and it should be a pleasant silence but it's not. He suddenly feels out of place, as if this is a scene in which he doesn't belong.

Killian clears his throat lightly. "You two may stay up here as long as you wish, Swan. I'll be-"

"Where are you going?" Emma asks, cutting him off sharply.

"Downstairs. I left one of Granny's booths a mess. I thought I'd-"

"Shut up."

He blinks, eyebrows lifting, but then she's off the bed and in his arms, crushing his mouth in a kiss. It's brief, but it effectively eliminates all thought from his brain, until the only thing he's aware of are
her soft lips and a pleasant humming sound that might be coming from his own throat.

She pulls away, and while he's still recovering, she places both hands on his chest, and glares at him firmly.

"I know what you're thinking," she says, "and you need to stop thinking it."

The warm feeling that was rising inside him halts.

"And what, pray tell, am I thinking, love?" he asks, a bit touchily.

"You're thinking you're a shit human being because your kid was crying and you couldn't make him stop, and you were thinking of going down to Granny's to have a shot of rum to make you feel better."

Her gaze is hard yet serene, and although Killian wants to be irritated by her accurate assessment and her rather offhand delivery of it, he can't help noticing the beautiful hue of her eyes, the way the light makes them appear as green as emeralds.

"There's nothing wrong with you because you couldn't make him stop crying," she continues. "Do you know how many times that happened to me when he was younger? Or how many times I gave him to Henry because I was about to start crying myself, and Ian would just stop and start smiling like he hadn't just been wailing in my ear for an hour?"

Killian swallows, suddenly feeling rather foolish but determined to argue nonetheless.

"But-"

"Parenting's hard, Killian. There are days you feel awesome and like you know everything there is to know about being a parent, and then there are days when you feel like everything you do is wrong."

Her eyes pierce him, drive a spike through his center that opens him like the hull of a ship exposed to crashing waves, and he can't help baring himself to her.

"What if everything I do is wrong, Swan?" he breathes. "What if I'm not good enough? For Ian? For..." He licks his lips. "For you?"

His words quiver in the air between them. Emma's lips part, then her brow furrows and she frowns at him. Killian feels exposed, vulnerable. She understands him, understands that there are things in his past that haunt him, things he's done that he regrets, but she doesn't know the depth of his sins.

Trying to change, trying to be a better man...it doesn't erase what he's done.

"I wish you could see what I see," she says softly.

His throat is tight and he doesn't think he can speak, but he manages, "What do you see, love?" so quietly he's not even sure she heard him.

Her hand slides up his chest, curls around his head. Her fingers thread through his hair and she kisses him. He's lost once more in the warmth of her mouth, her soft lips, teasing wet tongue, her body tight against his.

They fit together, he realizes.

His breath rushes out of him and he presses forward.
"Easy, tiger," she mumbles. "We have an audience."

He growls, deep in his throat, even though he knows she's right. He's at half-mast already, and he takes a step back, away from Emma, before his lust has a chance to sink its claws even deeper into his brain.

Emma's gaze drops to his belt, and a small, satisfied smirk appears on her face. He feels his cheeks flush in a way that has nothing to do with the heat of their kiss; these blasted modern pants he's wearing are tight and revealing at the best of times, and uncomfortably so when he's hard.

"Perhaps I should ask Granny to rent the adjoining room," he says, in an attempt to draw Emma's attention away from the front of his jeans while he, with very little grace, adjusts himself. "Then perhaps we'd have more privacy."

Emma shrugs. "Or I could just get my own place," she says. She seems surprised by her own words, and quickly turns away. "Um, let's get back to that nap."

"Let's?"

"Yea, aren't you coming?" She smiles at him over her shoulder, the tiredness back in her eyes, and climbs onto the bed.

Killian heaves and exaggerated sigh. "When I imagined you in my bed again, Swan, this isn't quite what I had in mind," he says.

She snorts. "Yea, well..."

He removes his vest and takes off his boots before sitting next to her on the bed. While they negotiate positions—Emma curling around Ian with her back to Killian, and Killian trying to get close but not close enough to cause certain physical reactions—their jostling of the mattress disturbs Ian. He shifts, and they freeze, but he merely mutters, "Spider-Man," and is quiet again.

"Who?" Killian whispers, carefully settling his body next to Emma's. As much as he'd prefer to fit himself to her and feel her rear end nestled against his hips, he remains on his back.

"Spider-Man," Emma chuckles. "I think I know what movie we're watching next. That's his favorite super hero. Well, current favorite. He used to be all about Batman."

"Who's Batman?"

"Mm. I guess we'll have to watch that movie, too."

Without looking, she reaches over, finds his hand, grabs it, and moves it so that it's resting on her hip. She gives his hand a few chaste pats, and then her fingers disappear from his again.

"Talk to me," she says, sleepily.

He moves his fingers slowly, lazily, stroking her thigh through her jeans. "What would you like me
"Anything. Tell me about your brother. He raised you, right?"

"Aye, he did."

"What was he like?"

Killian closes his eyes. "He was a good man. He tried his best to raise me, even though all I caused him was trouble. I think he would have liked you—and the boys. It's a shame they'll never meet."

He tries to imagine what that might have been like, Liam and Henry and Ian, together. He pictures Liam teaching Henry to fence. He pictures Liam teaching Ian to tie knots and ruffling his hair when he succeeds, the same way he ruffled Killian's hair when he was a boy.

"He's just like you were when you were that age, Killian."

Killian smiles to himself.

He could have asked Liam advice on how to be a good father. Perhaps Liam would even be proud of him...

"What happened to your parents?"

Emma's question startles him out of his thoughts.

He's completely caught off guard, and she senses it. She rolls over to look at him, hand once more covering his, squeezing his fingers. "Hey, sorry, I shouldn't have asked like that. If you don't want to tell me-"

"It's alright, Swan," he says, turning his hand beneath hers so their fingers entwine. "My mother died when I was very young. And my father abandoned my brother and I."

"Abandoned?"

"Aye. He left my brother and I in the middle of the night, while we slept. He was on the run from the law, so he traded his two sons for a dingy in order to escape. My brother and I belonged to Captain Silver from the time I was eight until I was eighteen and old enough to join the Navy. We were his slaves, and he was not kind to us."

This is only the second time in centuries that he's told that to anyone—Milah was the first, then Henry and Ian, and now Emma.

"Holy shit, Killian. I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "It doesn't matter anymore, Swan. That was a long time ago."

"Still, that was...you were a kid, and that sort of thing sticks with you."

He wishes that weren't true, but it is.

His father's abandonment is a wound that has never quite healed. It's been bleeding venom into his soul for ages.

He looks at Emma, into her eyes. She knows his pain because she has the same wound—the truth of her "abandonment" doesn't matter; she grew up an orphan, feeling unloved and unwanted...at least
Killian had Liam.

Killian rolls onto his side. He slides his arm around her belly, and tucks his face against the back of her neck, into her hair. She smells amazing, and her scent surrounds him, wraps him up and calms him, calms the anguish stirring in his chest.

He's here, now, with Emma and their son. He's not alone—they're not alone-

He remembers something.

"Emma, about my mother," he says. "I...I don't remember her much—just her hair. It was red, and it curled, like Liam's." He pauses, gathers himself. "And I remember that she sang to us."

He hums the song he used to sing to himself when he was alone on the Jolly Roger, the song his mother used to sing to him.

"That song is the only thing I have left of her," Killian says. "I've never heard it anywhere else. Emma...how do you know it?"

Emma's silent for a long moment, and then she says, "Do you know what a baby monitor is?"

"No."

"Do you know what a walkie-talkie is?"

"Aye, Ian and Henry described the device to me once. They're similar to talking phones, correct?"

"Um, yea—and it's just called a phone, by the way. But, uh...a baby monitor is sort of the same thing. You put one in the baby's room at night or when they're napping or whatever, and you keep the other one with you so you can hear when they wake up."

He nods into her hair, bidding her to continue.

"When Ian was a baby, sometimes I'd hear a man singing on his baby monitor at night. At first—oh man, at first I freaked out because I thought someone was in his room, but then I realized the monitor was just picking up a signal from another baby monitor—it happens sometimes."

She turns her head and he lifts his, so he can see her eyes.

"The guy I heard always sang the same exact song—the one you just hummed."

Killian's breath catches, anticipating what she's about to tell him but fearing he's mistaken, fearing it's too good to be real.

"It was you, Killian. You're the man I heard. You were singing to Ian."

"Are you certain?" he can't help asking. "Are you certain it was me?"

"I know your voice. You were there," she whispers.

"I was there," he repeats, the realization hitting him hard and settling deep.

_He was there._

---
Killian opens his eyes. He hadn't intended to fall asleep, but apparently he did anyway.

Judging by the position of the sun and the quality of the light, he slept for nearly two hours.

Killian shifts and tries to stretch, but finds his movements hampered by a very small body wedged in between himself and Emma. Somehow, Ian's there—and he's awake.

"Hi," Ian says, grinning.

"Hi," Killian says back. He keeps his voice low, because, judging by the sound of her breathing, Emma's still deep asleep.

"Did you know my mom's hair is magic?"

He must still be dreaming, he could not have heard that question correctly.

"Pardon?" he asks.

"Yea. It smells really good, and whenever I'm sad I just put my face in it and then I'm not sad anymore. Like magic."

"Oh," Killian says, fighting back a laugh—he can hardly pretend he doesn't know precisely what the boy means, having just undergone the same experience himself nearly two hours ago.

"I'm hungry."

"That's not surprising. I don't think you've eaten all day."

Ian shakes his head and frowns pitifully.

"Alight, lad," Killian says, levering himself into a sitting position. "Let's go downstairs—wait, you need clothes. I'm fairly certain pants and shoes are a dining requirement."

They leave Emma to sleep a bit more and go downstairs to the diner. Ian holds to Killian's hook with one hand, and rubs at his still-puffy eyes with the other.

"Did you have any good dreams?" Killian asks lightly.

Ian screws up his face, thinking. "Oh, yea!" he says brightly. "I had a dream that your ship came back!"

"Oh?" Killian inquires. "And was it crewed by ponies—pony pirates?"

Ian giggles. "No!" he says, as if what Killian suggested was absurd.

"Who do you think would win in a fight: pony pirates, or dinosaur pirates?"

Ian giggles harder, hand going to his mouth to cover his laughs.

"What if that pink pony of yours Lollipop was the captain?"

Ian's laughing so hard his legs cease working. He stops, bent double, entire body shaking with laughter, clinging to Killian's hook as if it's the only thing keeping him on his feet.

Killian grins—and then a figure steps into the hallway leading into the diner ahead of them.

"I thought I heard you two," Granny says sternly. "Follow me."
Killian's smile fades and his amusement fizzes and dies. Aside from causing a scene earlier, he left the restaurant in a hurry, and left a huge mess in the booth behind him. He expects to find it there waiting for him, but instead he sees the ruined papers are gone, the markers are all packed up, and Ian's toys are lined up neatly beside them on the counter.

Granny leads them over to two stools and points to them before disappearing into the back. Killian lifts Ian onto one stool and takes the other. Granny's back in an instant, and she's carrying two pints of ice cream. She sets them on the counter, one in front of Ian, one in front of Killian, and then offers them each a spoon.

"Thank you!" Ian gasps, and takes the spoon.

Killian eyes his pint suspiciously. "Is it poisoned?" he asks.

Granny makes a face at him like she wants to slap him upside the head.

"No," she says. "I sent one of my girls over to Ava's. Thought you two could use some cheering up. Rum raisin for you, right?"

"Aye," he answers cautiously, still not ensured that this isn't some sort of trap.

"Oh, get over yourself," Granny says, rolling her eyes. "I've got rocky road in the back for Emma, whenever she gets down here."

Killian nods, then politely takes the spoon and cracks open the pint. "She's still asleep," he says. He keeps his gaze pointed downwards, at his ice cream, but watches Granny's reaction out of the corner of his eye.

She looks satisfied, for some reason Killian can't even begin to fathom. She throws Ian a warm smile before she bustles back into the kitchen.

Killian watches her, and then turns his attention to Ian.

"How's your ice cream?" he asks.

"Mmmm," Ian hums around his spoon.

"Don't eat it all, alright lad? You still need to eat some actual food."

Ian hums another response, somewhere in between acceptance and disappointment, and very pointedly slows his consumption of his strawberry-flavored treat.

Killian eats slowly as well. He's not hungry, but he doesn't wish to offend Granny. Killian appreciates her gesture, more for Ian's sake than for his own, and he wants to show her his gratitude.

It takes longer than Killian expects for Emma to join them. By the time she enters the diner, Ian and Killian have split a hot dog and a side of steamed vegetables (Granny informed Ian that if he didn't eat his share she'd send the ice cream right back to Ava), drawn a few pictures and played several games of tic-tac-toe, and been joined by Robin, Roland, and at least half the Merry Men.

Emma weaves her way through the knot of figures around the dart board, stops at the booth Ian and Roland are sharing with Robin and Will, drops a kiss on Ian's hair, then walks over and sits on the stool next to Killian.

"Hey," she says.
"Good evening, Swan."

"Why are you all the way over here? Why aren't you with Robin and them?"

"I'm used to solitude," he says, shrugging. "I'm more than happy to watch the boy playing with his friend."

Emma smiles at him, and then smiles over at Ian and Roland, giggling together in their booth.

"How did you sleep?" Killian asks.

Emma opens her eyes wide, blinks several times, and sighs. "Okay, I guess. I just have that weird post-nap feel, you know?"

"Well, perhaps some ice cream will help?" Killian suggests. "Granny bought some special from Ava just for you."

"For me?"

"Well, for you, Ian, and I," he amends.

"Ah," she says, and grins. "I take it Ian already ate all of his."

"Half. Granny and I convinced him to eat some real food after that."

"Thank you," Emma says.

He winks, and slides his glass of rum towards her. "Drink?"

"Yes, please." She picks up the glass and is raising it to her lips when she spots the drawings on the counter.

"What the hell is that?"

Killian follows her gaze to the picture of a creature that is half horse, half fish.

"Ah, that would be Lollipop, the mer-pony," Killian says.

Emma stares at the drawing with raised eyebrows. "Did she really need a bra?"

Killian grins. The pink mer-pony is, in fact, wearing a neon green seashell bra.

"Not my idea, Swan. I tried telling him that's not where a mare's mammary glands were, but the boy wouldn't listen."

"Oh my God, did you actually use the words 'mammary glands'?"

"Of course I did. Why?"

Emma squeezes her eyes shut, but she's smiling, and there's laughter in her voice when she says, "He's five, Killian. He doesn't know what mammary glands are. You shoulda just said 'boobs'—well, no, actually, please do not say the word 'boobs' to our kid until he's like...30."

"Shall I say breasts, then?"

"No."
"Bosom?"

"No?"

"Teats?"

"Ew. And no."

"Tits?"

"Definitely not."

He smirks at her in silence, and she raises an eyebrow at him.

"Seriously, that's all you got? I expected more from you, Captain."

He scoffs in indignation, and is about to spout off a list of at least 50 more terms for 'boobs' that he knows when Granny appears and he's forced to slam his jaw shut.

"Good morning, dear," she greets Emma cheerfully. "What'll it be?"

"I would love that ice cream you're holding hostage from me right now," Emma says.

"Sure thing. You want your own drink, or are you going to share?"

"I'm good for now, thanks," Emma says, and pointedly takes a long sip from Killian's glass.

Granny brings the pint of rocky road for Emma, and then, twenty minutes later, a grilled cheese and onion rings. They chat while she eats, until, eventually, Killian falls silent, thoughts drifting far away.

Ian's happy and smiling, a complete change from how he was earlier, almost as if it never happened. In his head, Killian begins reliving that moment.

"Hey," Emma says. "What's wrong? What are you thinking?"

Killian tears his gaze from Ian and looks back at Emma.

He contemplates lying for a moment, before realizing it's no use.

"I was thinking about Ian's magic," he admits. "When he was crying earlier he made all the lights in the diner flicker. And what you told me earlier, about the baby monitor...the only way that's possible is with magic."

"You're not happy about it—that he has magic," Emma says.

Her voice is guarded, and the moment suddenly feels brittle, as if one wrong word from Killian could break it—break them.

"Magic always comes with a price, Emma," he says. "I've seen that price paid, I've seen the suffering it's caused. I don't want that for him."

She swallows and looks away, towards Ian. "I know," she says. "Regina, Gold, Cora...Peter Pan even. And now Neal...it just seems like magic ruins people's lives." Her forehead crinkles as she watches Ian and Roland playing across the room. "But the Apprentice is alright. And Merlin was a good guy."
She looks back at Killian. "Ian will be okay, too."

"I hope so, Swan."

"He will be," she says firmly. "I'm not going to let something bad happen to him because of magic. I'm going to..." She pauses and presses her lips together, then takes a deep breath, and continues, "I'm going to ask the Apprentice to teach me how to control my magic."

Killian blinks. "When did you decide that?"

She bites her lip, guiltily. "A little bit when the Apprentice told us Ian had magic...and a little bit right now. The Apprentice said Ian had light magic, and that's what I have. If I can control my magic, then I can help make sure Ian can control his, too."

Killian ducks his head. He's been thinking about this all wrong—how could he have been so stupid? He associates magic with Rumplestiltskin and Cora, but he should have reasoned that the boy's magic came from Emma, and Emma's magic is good magic—light magic.

"You're right, Swan," he says, lifting his head to meet Emma's eyes. "Ian will be fine."

She smiles at him, a bit surprised, but pleasantly so.

"And I agree that taking lessons from the Apprentice would be of great benefit, both to you and to Ian. I look forward to seeing the fruits of that particular labor."

He lifts his glass of rum in a toast, forgetting that Emma has no glass of her own—but she merely pick up her pint of ice cream, and taps it to Killian's glass.

"I didn't know you were a fan of my magic," she says.

"You're magic is a part of you, Swan," he says. Just as I suppose it's a part of Ian. "And I'm a fan of every part of you."

His words bring a blush to her cheeks, which she tries to hide by busying herself with her pint of rocky road.

Killian downs the last of his rum, and sets the glass back on the counter. He slides silently from his seat to stand in the gap between his stool and hers. He's very much in her personal space, his chest and stomach nearly brushing her arm and shoulder, but she pretends to ignore him.

"How about we ask your parents to babysit tonight, so you and I can have a little sleepover, Swan," he says.

The stools are high, and he only has to lean down slightly to press his nose behind her ear and kiss her neck. Her shuddering, nearly inaudible intake of breath sends a thrill straight to his loins.

"What do you say?" he growls, teeth and tongue grazing her skin. "I'll make certain you're home before daybreak this time."

"Fuck," she mutters. "God dammit."

"Is that a yes?" he asks, pulling back, knowing kissing her any longer would be pushing his luck.

"I can't. Not tonight. I have to make sure Ian sleeps."

"As you wish," he says quietly, and sits back down.
She spins on her stool to face him, knees banging against his. "I'm sorry—look, you know I want to, right? I just...Ian doesn't know about us yet and I really just need him to get a full night of sleep and...I need you to have patience, okay?"

He slides his hand across the counter, palm up, and she places her hand lightly atop it. He curls his fingers around hers, and lifts her knuckles to his lips for a kiss.

"I know, Swan, I know. You can't blame a man for trying."

She smiles, and the blush returns to her cheek. "How about we do a movie at the loft? We can rent Spider-Man."

"Sounds lovely, Swan," Killian says, and he means it. As much as he'd enjoy taking Emma upstairs to his room and having his way with her, he also both greatly enjoys and values the nights they spend watching movies with Ian and Henry.

*Speaking of...*

"Will Henry be joining us?" Killian asks. "I haven't seen the lad since yesterday. How is he?"

"He's okay," Emma replies, sobering a little. "I sent him to go see Ava."

"Ah, yes," Killian says, sagely. "A woman's arms can ease any man's-"

With speed that should no longer astound Killian, she elbows him sharply in the ribs, driving the air from his lungs.

"I did *not* just send my teenage son to go get sympathy laid, Killian," she hisses.

"Whatever you say, Swan," he wheezes, hand pressed to his side, certain that she broke something.

She glowers at him balefully for a moment, hands folded over her chest, and then her eyes fly shut, and she says, "Shit. I might have just sent my teenage son to get sympathy laid."

Killian chuckles, even though it hurts. "It's fine, Emma. I was much younger than Henry when I lost my virginity-"

"That is *not* helpful. This isn't the Enchanted Forest. People don't get married when they're 12 here—oh my God please don't tell me you lost your virginity when you were 12."

"Of course not. I was a child; I hardly even had any hair down there," he says, gesturing vaguely downwards.

"Hair down where?" Ian asks, suddenly standing right next to them.

Killian nearly jumps right out of his own skin. "Erm," he flounders, mouth opening and closing like a fish gasping for air, even as the expression on Ian's face grows more and more curious. Finally, Killian grabs onto the first lifeline he comes across. "How would you like to watch Spider-Man tonight?" he asks.

---

David and Snow opted to spend the night out, so Killian, Emma, and Ian have the loft to themselves.

When the movie finishes, Ian imparts upon Killian every ounce of knowledge he has about Spider-Man and his deeds that he's gleaned from various comics, TV shows, and movies, then, full of
popcorn and hot chocolate, clutching Roger the stuffed orange crab, he passes out sprawled across both Killian and Emma's lap.

"Will you stay tonight?" Emma asks, idly stroking her fingers through Ian's hair.

"If you want me to, I will."

"Please," she says, fixing him with her eyes that are now a deep forest green in the low light.

Killian picks up Ian and holds him while Emma sets up the pull-out bed. He lays Ian down gently on the mattress, waits for Emma to get settled next to him, then he sits on Ian's other side, over the covers.

"Seriously?" Emma asks.

"Seriously," Killian says. "We're in your parents house, Emma, and I won't disrespect that."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't argue any further.

He gets in as comfortable a position as possible without actually fully laying down, leans his head back, and closes his eyes.

Fingers graze his knuckles, and slide into his grip. "Goodnight, Killian," she says.

"Goodnight, Emma."

---

It's only an hour later when Emma's parents return home. Killian wakes slightly, but feigns sleep. He hears them stop, hears whispers, then he hears the door close quietly and footsteps retreat to the bedroom at the back of the loft.

He smiles, and goes back to sleep.
Five days later

Emma sets her mug of lukewarm coffee atop the stack of totally bogus incident reports she's supposed to be logging and filing, and sinks lower in her chair.

Okay, the reports aren't *bogus*; it's just that a cell phone stolen out of an unlocked car and some angsty preteen graffiti at the playground seem like extremely small potatoes compared to Neal and Regina casting the Dark Curse, Neal wanting to get back with her and Henry, Regina dying, and —Oh, yea!—Neal being the fucking Dark One.

Emma tilts her head back as far as the chair will let her, and stares at the ceiling tiles. There are some pretty interesting water stains up there that Emma's become well-acquainted with, along with a few pencils that she's pretty sure were launched by Henry and Ian in some sort of competition—she's been finding the ones that *didn't* stick all over the place, including the seat of just about every chair she's sat down in for the past five days.

She closes her eyes.

Five days.

It's been five days since they put Regina's body in her vault, which means it's Wednesday, which means that her and the boys have officially been in Storybrooke for nearly a month—a month that feels much, much longer.

She's beginning to lose the sense that she ever left this place to begin with, as if those seven years in Boston happened in some other lifetime—or in a really pleasant dream she once had.

Her old life is fading no matter how desperately she tries to cling to it.

Another, non-grumbling voice rises up in her mind, and whispers, *It's not all bad.*

*Fine,* she agrees grudgingly, *not everything totally sucks.*

Killian doesn't suck, for example.

Her parents don't suck, either.

Really, only Neal sucks.

Did Emma mention he set his stupid farm on fire?

Well, he did.

On Saturday they woke up to find Storybrooke blanketed in smoke. Emma thought something in town burned down, until the Merry Men—more accurately, the handful of them more comfortable living in tents in the woods than in a house with four walls—arrived to inform her otherwise.

Emma, David, and Killian drove out Neal's farm to find it destroyed; nothing remained except two huge piles of ash and charred wood where the barn and the little house used to be. On the ground
beside the storm cellar was a cardboard box filled with dream catchers—the cellar itself was caved in, and although Emma tried, there was no safe way to enter.

That black urn thing that was in the locked cage was either gone or unreachable—probably gone.

The memories in the dreamcatchers contained information that merely confirmed everything they already knew. Having those memories from the beginning would have made putting the pieces together a simple task, having them now is pointless—granted, her parents, Belle and Ruby, Robin, and the handful of others who were missing memories were grateful to have what was stolen from them returned, so Emma guesses there's that at least.

Neal's gone too, which seems good except that "gone" just means "not at the farm", and if he's not at the farm then Emma has no clue where he is, and that's very, very bad. She honestly wouldn't be surprised if he showed up at the loft one day and announced that he was their new next door neighbor.

If that happens, Emma's definitely moving out-

*Fuck*, there's that thought again.

*Moving out.*

To where?

Getting her own place feels...permanent. Too permanent. She's not ready for permanent, unless it's permanently back in her apartment in Boston, preferably with Killian living somewhere in the vicinity.

Permanently in Storybrooke is not something she's prepared to contemplate yet.

Yet?

Emma groans and throws herself to her feet. She snatches up her coffee mug, ignores the liquid that sloshes over wrist, and stalks out of the office and into the break room.

Yet.

She wants to punch that treacherous, mocking little voice in the face, but her equally treacherous imagination is reminding her of movie nights at the loft, breakfasts at Granny's, ice cream at Ava's shop, and conjuring images of Ian in a Storybrooke Elementary uniform, Killian walking him to school, helping him with his homework...

The coffee in the pot is colder than the coffee in her mug, so she dumps both and sets the ancient coffee maker up to brew another batch. As it gurgles to life, Emma opens the fridge and roots around for some creamer or some milk that isn't expired.

As Sheriff, she's salaried, and while the money's only a little better than what she was pulling as a bail bondsperson, it's a more stable income—plus, cost of living in Storybrooke is way cheaper than in Boston. She could afford an apartment with three actual bedrooms, and Ian wouldn't have to sleep in what's essentially a closet.

Emma finds a carton of half-and-half that smells okay and empties it into her mug before tossing it into the trash.

Staying in Storybrooke would mean being away from Henry—he'd have to live in the dorms at
UMass, which would mean more money, but Emma could take out a parent loan. She knows he'd still visit often, if not for her and Ian then for Ava, and maybe the distance would end up being good for him, anyway; he's had more responsibilities than most other kids his age these past few years, and maybe some distance from all that, from having to be Emma's helping hand all the time, would be for the best.

Still, her stomach sinks at the thought of Henry leaving.

Watching him graduate high school in May was bittersweet, but a month ago she at least had the benefit of knowing that, since he was living at home and commuting to UMass, she'd still see him every day—she only had to half let him go.

*I missed so much already, I don't want to miss any more.*

"Shut up," she growls, annoyed with herself. She shouldn't be focusing on how Henry going to college affects her, she should be-

From behind her, a voice that makes her skin crawl says, "I didn't say anything," and chuckles.

Emma barely keeps her hand from jumping to the gun at her hip—she only stops herself by grabbing the edge of the counter, instead. Slowly, she releases her grip on the linoleum, and turns to face Neal.

He's wearing his normal person disguise, and a lopsided smile.

"What are you doing here?" she asks.

Hands in his pockets, he shrugs. "I thought we could talk about me spending some time with Henry."

His casual tone, all innocence, has her gritting her teeth.

"D'you really think he wants to see you right now? After what happened?" she says.

"Look, I know he's upset about Regina, but..." Neal shrugs again, a loose roll of his shoulders. "He'll get over it."

Emma crosses her arms over her chest to keep her hands from curling into fists.

"It's not just about Regina, Neal. It's about you. You're the-"

"Yea, yea. I'm the fucking Dark One, I know," he says, cutting her off. Suddenly, his gaze turns hard and there's an alien gleam in his eyes that makes Emma's heart start racing. She digs her fingers into her biceps. Every muscle tenses, her breath freezes in her lungs, blood pounds in her veins, and just when she feels as if she might explode if she doesn't move, scream at the top of her lungs and run away as fast as she can, reality fractures.

Emma's staring at two versions of Neal, one superimposed over the other, somehow existing in the exact same space and yet not—one version of Neal is talking, gesturing, in the middle of some speech about how he's Henry's father and how he deserves to see him, while the other version is standing stock-still, hands still in his pockets, and his golden, slit-pupiled eyes boring into Emma like a fucking drill.

She loses awareness of her surroundings—the sights, sounds, and smells of the break room fall away and disappear. The first Neal—the one Emma knows is Neal—begins to fade; Emma can still hear and see him but it's as if he's behind thick, murky glass.
The other Neal that's not Neal smirks, slowly.

Emma feels pressure bearing down on top of her, like a giant, invisible hand trying to press her into the floor. Something wet and warm gushes from her nose. Emma hurriedly swipes her fingers across her face, and they come away smeared with blood.

Suddenly dizzy, she shakes her head—and breaks the spell.

She's back in the break room, and there's only one Neal again—the real Neal—and he's still ranting, apparently completely oblivious to whatever the hell just happened.

Emma's magic pulses through her like a literal breath of fresh air, clearing her head and sharpening her senses. It's different this time; cold where before it was hot, patient rather than hungry, quietly awaiting her command as opposed to clamoring for release.

She lifts her eyes from her bloody fingers and looks at Neal. Either his disguise is slipping or Emma's just able to see through it, because this time greenish scales are perfectly visible beneath his skin, as if his flesh is translucent.

Revulsion rises like bile in her throat.

"You're sick, Neal," she whispers.

He stutters to a halt and gapes at her in shock. "What?"

"That thing inside you—the Darkness—it's taking over."

His lips pull into a sneer. "What do you mean taking over? There's nothing taking over. I'm still me, Emma—I'm still Neal."

He stares at her pleadingly, and then he sees her hand.

"What happened?"

"Just a nosebleed," she says dismissively. She turns back to the counter to wash up in the sink. She wets a paper towel and wipes her nose but there's no more blood. As she's drying her hands she notices the coffee's done brewing, so she tops off her mug and takes a few small sips before facing Neal once more.

"What I said before still stands, Neal," she says calmly. Her magic is fading away, slipping slowly through her grasp, but she lets it go. "As long as you're the Dark One, you can't see Henry. When that changes, we can talk."

Neal stares angrily at her for a moment, and Emma can see him flipping through his mental handbook of manipulation, searching for the best argument to get what he wants.

"Why not let Henry decide?" Neal says finally. "Just—look, Em, I know he'll change his mind about me when he gets to know me again, so why not give him the chance to decide whether he wants to do that or not? He's old enough to make a decision like that, right? What is he, like sixteen now?"

"Eighteen," Emma says. "He's almost eighteen."

"Fuck," Neal curses softly, and staggers backwards a step as if physically slapped.

"What?" Emma asks.
"Eighteen," Neal says. "I just...Wow. I didn't realize it'd been that long. I sort of lost track of time in the Enchanted Forest. Eighteen." He's silent for another long moment, staring off to the side, then he snaps back into himself and looks at Emma. "He must have graduated high school by now, right? Is he going to college?"

"I don't want to have this conversation right now. I'm done talking," she says, and takes a long sip of her coffee to emphasize her point.

"So what? Now I can't even know things about my own son?"

Neal glares.

Emma glares back over the rim of her mug and keeps drinking.

When she was seventeen, all it took was five minutes of the cold shoulder from Neal for Emma to surrender.

But not anymore.

Emma knows better, now.

Neal breaks first, before she finishes her coffee.

"C'mon, Emma," he says. "I don't want to be your enemy. I gave you everyone's memories back, didn't I?"

"You burned down a fucking farm, Neal," she replies flatly.

He rolls his eyes and waves one hand flippantly through the air.

Emma sets her mug on the counter, leans against it, and folds her arms over her chest.

"Where are you living now?"

"Don't worry about it," he says.

Emma raises an eyebrow. "You don't want to be my enemy and yet you want to keep secrets?" she says. "What about that black urn thing that was in the storm cellar with the dreamcatchers?"

His expression pinches in discomfort, so Emma presses him.

"What is it? What's so special about it that it had to be kept in a cage?"

He keeps his eyes averted.

"Is it dangerous?"

"It's none of your business, okay?" he spits. "It's somewhere secure, and that's all you need to know. Got it?"

"So it is dangerous."

"I said it's none of your business."

The sound of the station door closing and voices in the office interrupt.

"Emma?" Killian calls.
Emma doesn't answer. She looks at Neal, and says, "Don't show up like this again, Neal."

"Like what? It's a public building, Emma. It's not like I showed up in the bathroom while you were taking a shower."

_Oh, I fucking dare you._

"You know what I mean," she says.

"Emma?" Killian calls again.

"Mom!" yells Ian.

Neal smirks suddenly. "I still can't believe you had a kid with the pirate," he says, shaking his head.

Emma remains silent. She's not going to engage in this argument; she has nothing to feel defensive about or ashamed of, and she won't let Neal convince her otherwise.

"Emma?" David this time, followed by more choruses of "Mom!" from both Henry and Ian.

"Do you really think Hook's a good role model for Henry?" Neal asks. "Or that...the other one?"

"Yea, I do," she says.

"Mom?" Emma can tell Ian's starting to get worried now.

"Emma?" Killian, wandering closer to the break room.

Neal opens his mouth again, but Emma says, "I'm not seventeen anymore, Neal. You can't hurt me."

His eyes go wide and his face goes slack with surprise.

"MOM!"

"In here," Emma says reflexively, answering the panic in Ian's voice.

Face purple with rage, Neal disappears just before Ian flies into the break room with Killian on his heels.

"Hey," Ian says, grinning.

"Hey," Emma says, forcing herself to smile in response. Killian takes one look at her tremulous expression and immediately begins scanning the room suspiciously, as if searching for assassins with daggers hidden behind the couch or crouching atop the refrigerator.

"Emma?" David calls.

"She's in here, mate" Killian says, eyes on Emma.

"Let's, um, go back out there," Emma says, and ushers Ian out of the break room. As she passes Killian, she mumbles, _Later_, and throws him a significant glance. He nods and follows her back into the office, glancing back once over his shoulder as he does.

Emma finds Henry collapsed in her chair, long legs sprawled in front of him and arms hanging down loosely over the armrests. She snorts when she sees him.

"Rough morning?" she asks.
"It was fine," Henry says, then he grimaces and rubs his belly. "I had to let Ian stomp on my toes and elbow me in the stomach a bunch of times, but other than that it was good."

Emma raises her eyebrows at Killian and David, who both have the grace to look at their feet apologetically.

Killian clears his throat, drawing Emma's attention away from David in a bold gesture of self-sacrifice. "Ian was getting rather good at dislodging Henry when Henry tried to grab him from behind, so I insisted he keep practicing until he could do it perfectly."

"Mmhm," Emma says. "And I hope you're going to let Henry practice the same move on you next."

"Of course," he says meekly, and David bobs his head and grunts wordlessly in agreement.

On Saturday, after they returned from searching the ruins of Neal's farm, Killian asked if he could teach Ian some basic self-defense—what to do if someone tries to grab you from behind, where to strike an attacker, etc.—and Emma hesitated only a split second before she agreed.

"As long as he knows it's only for self-defense," she said.

"Aye, Swan. I'll make sure the lad understands."

"And no swords—I'm not ready for that yet."

"As you wish."

Since then, Snow's furniture has had to endure three nights of Ian pretending he's an MMA fighter.

"I promise you, Swan, I didn't teach him any of that," Killian said, as they watched Ian karate-chop the couch cushions one-by-one.

Snow tried to pretend that she didn't mind, but her pain was evident.

Which is probably another reason why Emma is contemplating finding her own place; if she had a house with a basement, Killian, Henry, and Ian could throw each other around without disturbing anyone or anything else...

Emma's imagination kicks into full gear again. She pictures the play-fighting games Henry and Ian used to play that mostly just involved Henry flinging a giggling Ian through the air onto the couch or one of the beds, only this time it's Killian tossing Ian, throwing him over his shoulder, holding him upside down and tickling him-

\textit{Goddammit}.

Apparently her fantasies have upgraded her from her own apartment to her own house—a house with a basement and a backyard and a dog-

\textit{Stop it!}

But Henry and Ian love dogs-

"Emma?"

Emma startles. "Hm?" she asks, blinking around at Killian and David and Ian, all staring at her expectantly. Killian looks suspicious again, and Emma knows he can't possibly be aware of what she was thinking, but she blushes a bit anyway.
"I said," David enunciates pointedly, "I'm going to go pick up Robin, and do you mind if I take Ian with me?"

"I want to say 'hi' to Roland!" Ian chirps.

"Oh, uh, yea," Emma says.

Henry picks his head up. "Can you give me a ride to work?"

"You sure you're alright to go to work?" David asks.

"It's just the library, grandpa," Henry says. "What sort of employee would I be if I called in on my third day of work just because I was a little tired?"

He peels himself out of Emma's chair and rises slowly to his feet, wincing at what are apparently some very sore muscles, then begins the series of arm and legs stretches that he usually does after he goes running.

"Besides, Belle's not even going to be there today, so I have to open."

"Oh," Emma says, "Is she okay?"

"Hm? Oh. Uh..." Frozen in a quadriceps stretch, Henry's eyes dart to David, then he shrugs and frowns at the floor. "Just sick or something, I guess."

Emma doesn't buy it, so she looks at her dad, who also shrugs.

"Um, we should go," David says briskly.

"Yep," Henry agrees, straightening.

David puts an arm around Ian's shoulders and starts steering him towards the door. Henry makes to follow, but Emma stops him.

"Be careful, alright?" she says.

Henry makes a face. "At the library?"

"Yea, just...you know," she says, awkwardly. Regardless, Henry seems to understand.

"I will, mom," he says, and then does something Emma doesn't think he's ever done: he leans down and kisses her briefly on the cheek. "Ok. Love you. Bye."

He joins David, and they walk from the office with Ian trotting between them.

Emma watches them go, chewing her lip.

Henry's not physical affectionate—he's just not. He tolerates Ian climbing all over him because he has no choice, and he lets Emma hug him or kiss his forehead sometimes because he knows Emma needs it, but he doesn't often, if ever, initiate that sort of thing.

Over the past few years, in Boston, Emma contributed it to him being a teenager and not wanting to be hugged or kissed by his mom—which is totally fine and totally normal and she totally gets it. Now, she sort of know that it's half because he didn't actually grow up with a lot of physical affection, not during the years it mattered, at least—and Emma gets that, too, because she used to be the same way.
But he just kissed her cheek, unsolicited.

Which Emma can only assume means he's worried about her, same as Ian.

"Everything alright, love?"

"Yea, fine," Emma says.

*Fine except that I think both my sons are afraid I'm going to die.*

A hand squeezes her heart, and it makes her throat feel tight. It takes her a minute to realize that there's a hand squeezing her hand, as well.

She turns to Killian, and he smiles softly when their eyes meet. He doesn't say anything, he just looks at her calmly and strokes his thumb back and forth over her knuckles.

She lets out a deep breath; the tightness in her chest loosens as she does, but a new feeling takes its place, blooms like a flower inside of her—it's a...a feeling.

The feeling Emma has for Killian.

The feeling that probably has a name but Emma's too afraid to look it up in the dictionary of Emma's ten possible emotions.

It's a feeling she gets when she hears his voice, whether it's a whisper in her ear or a joke shared with Ian or his booming laugh; it's a feeling she gets when she feels him near her, when he touches her; it's a feeling she gets when she sees him with the boys, when she sees the way he looks at them or at the sea or at her, when she sees his dumb smirk or his dumb eyebrow—just, whenever she sees him, really.

It's a feeling that fills her up from head to toe, that's both grounding and overwhelming at the same time, makes her feel safe and yet vulnerable...

Lust is a part of it but not all of it, lust is merely a byproduct.

It's difficult to keep it under lock and key all the time, to pretend in front of her parents and in front of Henry and Ian that the heat between her and Killian doesn't scorch her skin whenever they're in the same room.

They've found moments alone, as they did before—not many, but enough.

Killian's thumb stills. "Care to tell me what happened earlier?"

"Yea," she says. The memory rushes back and she swears. "Shit."

Killian raises his eyebrows.

"Neal was here," Emma sighs. "He was in the break room, right before you and Ian walked in."

Killian's entire body goes rigid. Jaw clenched, he wrenches his hand from her grasp and storms across the office into the break room.

"He's not here anymore," Emma says, needlessly.

He stalks back, head on swivel, eyes raking every inch of the office. When he reaches her, he takes her hand again, urgently, as if he's as afraid as Henry and Ian that something might happen to her.
"Tell me everything Neal said," he says in a strained voice.

Emma does—or tries to. Her memory is a bit fuzzy, especially around the part where she saw two Neals.

Killian listens, and when she's finished he puts his fingers underneath her chin and gently lifts it so he can inspect her nose. Emma tilts her head back for him and tries to flare her nostrils. It feels sorta crusty up there, like there's dried blood.

"Has that ever happened before?" he asks.

"No—I mean, normal ones in the winter when the air's really dry," Emma says. "But nothing weird."

Killian drops his hand from her chin and lifts it to his own, running his fingers back and forth over his lips.

"You should tell the Apprentice what happened," he says.

"I will. I'm meeting him tomorrow for our first lesson. I'll tell him then."

Killian nods. "Are you going to tell Henry?"

"I don't know," Emma sighs. "If Neal was just Neal this would be an entirely different situation. He may be an asshole but, you know, he's not evil. What I saw today though..." She remembers those piercing, golden eyes and shudders. "Whatever I saw today wasn't Neal, and it was definitely evil."

"The Darkness," Killian says quietly. "Neal might have no clue that he's not in control of it. Emma, we need to find that dagger."

"I know."

Emma wasn't exactly thrilled about the idea of using the Dark One's dagger to control Neal, but if Neal loses the battle he may not even be aware he's fighting then the dagger might be the only thing standing between them and annihilation.

"Do you think there's any chance Neal might just hand the dagger over if we ask nicely? Maybe if we tell him we don't all wanna die when the Darkness takes over his body?"

Killian raises an eyebrow. "Do you think it's wise to alert the Darkness to our plans? It seems that, for now, it's content to wait, but if it discovers that we have a plan to remove it, then it might change its plans."

Emma scrubs her hands over her face tiredly.

Henry took a job at the library partially to earn some money, and partially to do research; he, Belle, and the Apprentice have been spending hours poring over all sorts of ancient, moldy books together. So far, unfortunately, they haven't found a way to cross realms that doesn't involve magic beans or human sacrifice.

"Do you think the Darkness already knows our plan?" Emma asks. "Regina seemed aware of everything that Neal was aware of—wouldn't it work both ways? Shouldn't Neal know everything we discussed with Regina?"

"I don't think so," Killian says slowly, fingers straying from his lips to his beard. "You said when you separated Neal and Regina, Neal was surprised to see what had happened, so apparently
whatever that connection between them was, it didn't flow both ways."

"Shit, yea, you're right. Hopefully that means we still have time."

"Aye, love, although I wouldn't bet on having much of it."

Emma wonders for how much longer she'll be able to get rid of Neal just by telling him to go, or just because they're about to be interrupted. Will constantly rejecting him just make him angrier? If he's angry, does that make him more in control, or less? If she makes him angry enough will the Darkness sweep in and take control?

Maybe that's why the Darkness is content to wait, because it knows it's only a matter of time before Emma pushes Neal to his breaking point.

_Fuck, _she's walking a very thin line.

The only thing she does know is that she does _not _want to meet the Dark One again, especially if the real Neal is gone and there's nothing left but the Darkness.

"Have your parents made any progress towards building that cage they suggested?"

Emma makes a face—she can't help it: the thought of putting a human being in a cage feels...gross.

Even if it was the Dark One, it would still have Neal's face.

"The dwarves said it's going to take a lot of fairy dust and some help from the Apprentice, but they think they can do it again. They're pretty pissed at Neal for casting the Dark Curse—the whole town is, actually."

"I had the impression that people were rather fond is this realm and its various amenities," Killian says with a grin—he's become a pretty big fan of movies and text messaging.

"They do like it here," Emma says. "I think it's just the whole not having a choice in the matter part that bothers them."

"Ah, aye."

His hand is still in hers, but as their conversation fades his fingers trail up her arm, jump to her hip, slide over to the small of her back and tug her body against his. She finds her hands on his chest, sliding up his shirt until her thumbs touch bare skin near his throat. They don't have time for sex, but maybe they can make out a little before-

The little bell over the front door tingles, announcing David's return, and Emma and Killian leap apart. Killian stumbles backwards until he's standing a good six feet away, thumb hooked in his belt, scratching his ear with his hook.

Ian precedes the group, skipping into the office and beaming. David, Robin, and Snow follow; David looks suspiciously between Emma and Killian, and Emma manages not to blush or look guilty.

Ian bounces up to Emma and grabs her hand. "Are you ready?" he asks brightly.

"Ready?" Emma asks.

"Yes," Snow says, beaming just as intensely as Ian. "Your father and I have a surprise for you."
"A surprise?" Emma looks to Killian, who shakes his head and shrugs, just as stumped as she is.

"Yea!" Ian says. "We're going-

"Ian," David cuts in sternly, and levels Ian with a very serious frown.

Ian claps both his hands over his mouth. "Sorry," he mumbles through his fingers.

David smiles, softening his reprimand. "It's alright, just remember it's a secret until we get there."

Ian nods dutifully.

Emma looks back and forth between her parents, Ian, and Robin, who also apparently knows what the "surprise" is.

"Alright, what's going on?"

"We have to go," Snow says.

"Go?"

"Yes—don't worry about the station, that's why Robin's here."

Snow scurries forward, takes both of Emma's hands and starts walking backwards, leading Emma out of the office.

"Where are we going?" Emma asks.

Snow smiles warmly. "You'll see when we get there."

---

Three days ago, Emma caught Snow reading to Ian from Henry's storybook. Emma was upset—until Snow filled her in: apparently, Henry left the book out and unattended, and, naturally, Ian found it.

Snow discovered Ian just in time to redirect Ian's attention away from anything inappropriate (i.e. 97% of the book), and instead read him the story of how she and David met, and (leaving out the part about Regina) how Emma came to grow up in the Land Without Magic instead of in the Enchanted Forest—which supposedly has something to do with why Ian knows where they're going and Emma doesn't.

They pile into Snow's car, Emma's parents in front and Emma, Killian, and Ian in the back, and while they drive, Snow explains.

"It took a while to get everything ready-

"What's everything?" Emma interjects, but Snow ignores her.

"It's been a crazy few weeks trying to get everyone sorted—luckily when the Curse transported us all here it transported us directly to our homes, so we all woke up in our own beds otherwise that would have a nightmare-

"Mom."

"On top of finding everyone a job—I mean, most of us were here before, with the first Curse, so we knew how things worked and we were able to fall pretty effortlessly back into our old lives with our
old jobs, but there were still a lot of people who had no idea where they fit or what they should do—"
"Mom."

"Ooh, we're here!"

Emma can't see exactly where _here_ is because the car doors fly open and the turmoil of everyone getting out blocks her view. Ian leaps from the backseat directly onto David's back—Emma guesses it's happened before, because David isn't caught off guard by the surprise attack and instead immediately bounds away with giant, leaping steps and Ian clinging to his neck, giggling.

Killian waits for her on the grass beside the curb. Emma steps out beside him, closes the car door, and lifts her eyes to the enormous house they've arrived at. It's set far back from the street, surrounded by an expansive yard on all four sides and encased by a white plastic picket fence. The grass is littered with toys and bikes, and the walkway that David and Ian are racing up is filled with chalk drawings.

"What is this place?" Emma asks, stepping from the grass onto the sidewalk. As she moves towards the walkway, the sign hanging over the massive front porch becomes visible.

*Mishaven House.*

It takes Emma a minute—and then it clicks.

"It's a group home," she says.

Her stomach does an uneasy flip. She hasn't seen a group home since she ran away from that last one as a teenager.

"Mom, why are we here?"

Snow takes both of Emma's hands again, and it's only then that Emma realizes she's trembling.

"Hey," Snow says soothingly. "It's okay."

Emma just looks at her, shifting her weight back and forth, fighting down the urge to flee.

"When we were all separated seven years ago, your father and I..." Snow bites her lip, and tears appear in her eyes. "We missed you, Emma. We missed you so much. We just—it wasn't supposed to end that way. You were supposed to break the Curse and then we were supposed to finally be together. We weren't supposed to lose you again...but we did anyway."

Emma watches her, waiting.
"Today is a very special day," Snow says. "Today they're having their first adoption."

Emma glances at the group on the porch, and then back at Snow. "Are you...?"

"Oh, goodness no," Snow says, shaking her head. "Not us. Someone else."

As if summoned, another car pulls up right behind Snow's, and out climb Belle and Ruby. The excitement rolling off the pair is palpable, and Snow lets out a squeal of delight and runs to give both of them hugs.

Alone for a moment, Emma tries to process.

*It's...it's not a bad thing.*

*It's actually a really good thing, I just...*

"You just what?" she whispers to herself.

*I just wish I'd never seen the inside of a group home? I wish one of the families I lived with had stuck? I wish I had been as lucky as the kid in there who's about to be adopted?*

Killian steps up beside her.

"You alright, love?"

His voice vibrates through her pleasantly, comfortingly. He doesn't touch her, but he's close enough for Emma to feel the warmth of his body, like a physical touch in and of itself.

She looks up at him, into his eyes which appear a deep, navy blue in the shade of the tree they're standing beneath, and says, "Yea, I'm fine. Are you okay?"

Finding out that Killian's dad abandoned him and his brother as children—*Christ*, the whole thing was worse than she thought. The next morning she hugged her parents for two minutes straight without explanation, so grateful was she for them and their love.

Killian's answer is a soft smile and fingers on her waist—but then Snow returns, and the fingers disappears.

Ruby and Belle pass by with smiles and small waves; Emma catches her mom's hand and draws her back.

"Mom, listen..."

Snow turns.

"Thank you," Emma says. "For all of this. It...it really makes me happy."

"You know your father and I wish we could have been there for you. It's—it hurts us every day, knowing that you were alone."

"It's okay, mom."

Snow shrugs. "It's not okay—at least it doesn't feel okay. We know we did what was necessary, but our choices hurt you, and that's—we'll never really be okay with that."

Snow reaches up and wipes a tear from Emma's cheek.
"Let's go inside, huh?"

Emma nods. Snow slips an arm around her waist and they walk up to the house side-by-side, with Killian a step behind.

---

Misthaven House is run by a man named Nemo and the Fairies—or nuns or whatever they are in this realm.

Nemo introduces himself to Emma with a smile and a handshake; he has a deep, quiet voice, and though he has a strict demeanor, Emma sees the jovial twinkle in his eyes. He and Killian seem to know each other already. They grin, shake hands and clap each other on the shoulder, but something passes between them that Emma has trouble deciphering, and Killian won't meet her eye afterwards.

David and Snow show her around and introduce her to some of the kids—all of whom seem to know them.

"We visit," Snow says. "In the Enchanted Forest we'd go a few times a week a read to them or play games. We try to do the same here in Storybrooke; we usually manage to visit twice during the week, and sometimes on weekends."

"I didn't even notice," Emma says, dazedly, trying to remember a time when both or either of her parents were suspiciously absent from the loft.

"We didn't want you to notice," David replies with a wink.

Emma files that information away for later, under "P" for "Your parents are craftier than you think".

The house is huge and old, but it's clean and very well-kept, and every little face Emma sees is genuinely happy. Upstairs, David is pulled into a room by a little boy demanding to be read to, and Snow leads Emma into the nursery.

There's one baby asleep in a crib, and another being fed by a nun in a rocking chair beside a window. The nun smiles in recognition at Snow before turning her attention back to the infant in her arms.

After a few minutes of watching Snow coo over both babies, they leave and return to the hallway.

"Maybe you and dad should adopt," Emma says, only half-jokingly.

"No," Snow says. "I mean—maybe one day, but right now...it's just not the right time."

"But you've thought about it?"

"A little."

"A little?"

Snow sighs. "A little as in your father wants to buy a farm and fill it with children."

"I thought child labor was illegal?" Emma says, and receives a chiding slap on the arm.

They find the room David's in, and stand in the doorway. He's sitting on the edge of one of the beds with the little boy in his lap, and another sitting next to him in the circle of his arm. He's so absorbed in the story he's reading that he doesn't notice Emma and Snow watching him.
Her parents probably should adopt some kids—a whole herd, if that's what they want. Emma turns the idea over in her head, and finds that she doesn't actually mind it.

"A farm, huh?" she asks quietly.

"Yes. Your father was a shepherd, you know."

They stand silently for another full minute before Snow turns to Emma and whispers, "You know, we'd also be perfectly content to fill a farm with grandchildren."

"Mom," Emma growls warningly.

"Or, David and I could move out, you could have the loft, and you could fill that with grandchildren-"

"Mom!" Emma splutters, cheeks burning hot. "Killian and I are not—we're not—it's none of your-"

Words fail her, and she spins on her heel and stomps back downstairs. When she reaches the first floor landing, there's a resounding crash from the ceiling directly over her head.

A nun sweeps out of the living room with a baby on her hip, heaves a long-suffering sigh, and says, "I'd better to check on that." As she walks past Emma she deposits the baby in Emma's arms.

"Um..." Emma says, eyeing the chunky, brown-eyed, brown-haired cutie she's suddenly holding. Fist in his mouth, the baby gurgles at her. Emma heaves her own sigh and moves him to her hip, where he latches onto her shirt with his free hand. Emma stares at him a moment—she hasn't held a baby since Ian was a baby—then tears her eyes away to scan the hallway and the side rooms.

"Ian?" she calls, hoping he's down here with Killian and not upstairs causing whatever that crash was.

"Yea?"

A blonde head pokes itself out of a doorway to her right. He sees the baby in her arms, and frowns. "What's that?" he asks.

"It's called a baby," she says simply.

Ian approaches with a scowl on his face, and, apparently intent on defending his territory, wraps his arms around Emma's waist and regards the baby through narrowed eyes.

"You were this little once," Emma tells him.

He huffs disbelievingly.

The baby imitates Ian, blowing air noisily from his nose and mouth, spattering Emma's cheek with flecks of drool.

Ian giggles, and huffs again, making the baby repeat his trick. Emma tries not to flinch as her face is assaulted by baby goo a second time.

Oh my God, I'm gonna need a bath after this.

"Swan?"
Killian appears in the same doorway Ian just vacated. Emma looks over. Killian sees her, sees the baby riding one of her hips and Ian glued to the other with his arms around her waist, and then there's something in his eyes Emma didn't expect—longing.

_Fuck._

It hits her like a hammer blow to the center of her chest.

She looks away.

_Bad idea._

Coming down the hallway is a little girl with black curls and aqua eyes. She's two-years-old, maybe a little older, and all Emma can think is how Killian has black hair and similar blue eyes and that _their_ little girl could have his black hair and blue eyes, too. To top things off the girl attaches herself to Ian like she knows him and the longing on Killian's face doubles and just—_could it get any worse?_ 

It could, apparently.

Snow and David descend the stairs and there's Emma with three kids stuck to her front like burrs and Killian in the corner, eyes filled with yearning; Snow smirks like the Cheshire fucking cat and Emma wants to swear but she can't because she's surrounded by impressionable young ears, so she just stands there with her face on fire, trying not to look at anyone.

Luckily, David's completely oblivious—he notices the baby in Emma's arms, but not for the same reason Snow does.

"Gideon!" David croons. The baby—Gideon—grins and reaches for him, and David lifts him off of Emma's hip.

Emma clears her throat. "You know him?" she asks, watching David bounce the kid up and down in his arms like an expert.

"Belle and Ruby are adopting him, too."

"Oh."

"Not today," Snow says. "Nemo wants them to get settled with Rowan first before they take on a baby."

Rowan turns out to be the tawny-haired girl Emma saw on the front porch with David and Ian. Paperwork finalized, Ruby and Belle leave Nemo's office at the end of the hallway hand-in-hand with their new daughter. Nemo trails them, smiling like a proud father.

It's then that it hits Emma that this is a good place—Nemo's not happy Rowan's leaving because he's rid of another child, he's happy Rowan's leaving because she's getting a home and loving parents.

Ruby and Belle lead Rowan over. The girl's grinning from ear-to-ear, gray eyes shining bright with pure joy.

"Hi, Rowan," Ian says in a soft voice.

"Hi, Ian."

"Rowan," Ruby says, giving the girl's hand a squeeze. "This is our friend Emma. She's Ian's mom."
"Hi," Rowan says shyly. She looks at Emma, and then back down at Ian. The two of them grin at each other and blush.

Belle smiles fondly at the scene for a moment before she says to Ruby, "Don't forget Hook—erm, Killian."

Given their history, Emma thinks it's a miracle Belle includes Killian at all.

Ruby gestures towards Killian, who's standing with his hook arm hidden behind his back.

"That's our friend Killian. He's Ian's dad."

Killian waves, inclines his head, and offers a polite, "Hello."

"Hi," Rowan says, even more shyly than before. She looks between Killian, Emma, and Ian, and then back up at Belle.

Belle reaches down and tucks a stray, wavy piece of orange-gold hair behind Rowan's ear. "Are you ready to go home?"

Rowan nods. She turns to Nemo, standing a few feet behind her, Belle, and Ruby, and says, "Goodbye, Nemo."

Nemo opens his arms, and Rowan pulls her hands from Ruby and Belle's and races back to hug him.

"Goodbye, little love," Nemo says kindly. "Make sure you're a good girl for your mothers. Remember that they love you and always have your best interest in mind."

"I will," Rowan says. She gives Nemo a final squeeze, and then returns to Ruby and Belle.

More farewells are exchanged; Ruby and Belle each kiss and tickle Gideon before one of the nuns takes him from David, David and Snow wave to a small knot of children that have gathered at the top of the stairs, and Nemo and Killian have a quiet conversation that involves numerous glances at Ian.

Her parents are out the door, and Emma tries to follow with Ian, only Ian's stuck; the little girl with her arms around him won't let go.

"Ok, bye," Ian says, trying to step backwards without knocking the girl down.

The girl just stares at him, and tightens her arms.

"Come here, sweetie," Nemo says, squatting down next to Ian. "Ian has to go."

"Her name's Melody," Ian says.

Nemo pauses in the act of gently prying the girl off Ian, and says, "Melody?"

Ian nods.

Brow furrowing, Nemo cocks his head. "How do you know that? This girl hasn't said a word since she arrived here."

Ian shrugs. "She told me."

"Did she tell you anything else?"
"No, just her name."

Nemo sighs and stands, bringing Melody up with him and hoisting her onto his hip. He looks at the girl with a sad, worried frown. "She wasn't with us in the Enchanted Forest. She was here when we woke up in Storybrooke. I fear that the Curse separated her from her parents, and that they're out there somewhere looking for her but unable to find her."

"If she has parents in the Enchanted Forest, we'll find them," Emma says.

Nemo raises his eyebrows at her. "How? I thought travel back to our realm was impossible?"

"We're searching for a way," Killian says, stepping up beside Emma. She sees him put a hand on Ian's shoulder, and Ian lean back into his legs.

"Well, I hope you succeed," Nemo says. "And if you do, let me know. I too was separated by the Curse from someone I care for."

He gives Killian a significant look, and again something passes between them that Emma can't decipher.

"What was all that about?" Emma asks, when they're outside.

Killian stops. Emma stops too, and turns to face him. Killian looks for a long moment at Ian, standing between them, and then he says, "If I tell you that I can't tell you today, but that I promise to tell you one day, will you trust me?"

His expression is completely open, and there's a desperate plea in his eyes.

"Yes," Emma says.

His shoulders sag as he breathes a sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Emma." He takes her hand, lifts it to his lips, and kisses her knuckles. Ian giggles.

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When they return to the station, Robin offers to host a sleepover for Roland and Ian. Emma agrees, but she takes Robin aside and cautions him about Ian's nightmares.

"If he wakes up and he needs me just call and I'll be right there."

"Of course," Robin says. He hesitates, visibly debating his next words, before he adds, "You know, Emma, you don't have to worry. Roland used to have nightmares when he was Ian's age, as well. I'm more than familiar with that sort of thing, and capable of-"

Emma lays a hand on Robin's forearm. "It's not that," she says. She leans to the side so she can see past Robin. Ian's sitting on her desk, with Killian and David standing in front of him, and all three of them are laughing.

Ian's been sleeping better since the incident on Friday, when Emma found him hysterical in Killian's room. He had dreams about the Shadow every night since then, but only two nightmares, both about Killian dying.

Emma turns back to Robin. "He's been having dreams about me and Killian dying," she says. "With everything that's been going on, he's...you might not be able to calm him down."
Robin nods. "I understand. I'll do everything I can to make sure the lad feels safe tonight. Perhaps Will could sleep in the living room with them. I don't think he'd mind."

"Will lives with you?"

"Aye. As I've said, he's a work in progress."

"Alright. How about I pick Ian and Roland up in the morning and take them out for breakfast?"

"Sounds marvelous," Robin says, grinning. "Then Will and I could catch up on the sleep I'm certain we won't be getting tonight."

---

After dinner, Emma and Killian find themselves alone; Henry's out with Ava, Snow and David are enjoying having the loft to themselves for an evening, Emma has paperwork to finish, and Killian—well, Killian says he would rather read in the office with her than in his room by himself, so while Emma logs files into the computer, Killian reads *Treasure Island*.

"Can I ask you something?" Emma asks, into the comfortable silence they've enjoyed for over an hour.

"Aye," Killian says, without looking up from the book in his lap—Henry compiled a list of books Killian should read, and he's been devouring them avidly for five days.

"Do you think Henry and Ava are having sex?"

"Right this minute?"

Emma flings a pencil at him. It hits him square in the chest and makes him jump.

"I meant in general," Emma says.

He looks at her, and says evenly, "They are."

"What? Did he tell you?"

"No, Swan, but he didn't have to: it's quite obvious." He looks down at his book, and Emma thinks she might have offended him with the pencil.

She chews her lower lip and stares at him until he looks back up at her.

"What is it, Swan?"

She shrugs. "I don't know, he's my kid—I mean, I know he's not a kid, but I can't help feeling like he's too young."

"Are you afraid of the possible consequences of his relations with Ava and his ability to take responsibility for them?"

"No!" Emma says quickly. "I trust him to be smart—I trust Ava, too. Actually, I trust Ava more. It's just..."

She groans and lets her face fall into her hands.

"Oh my God, I hope they're being careful," she says.
"Fear not, Swan, I've already discussed the issue with Henry."

Emma jerks upright, horrified. "What did you say?"

She can picture it perfectly: Killian's smirk, regaling Henry with stories of his own conquests, playful nudging him with his elbow, giving him pointers...

"That's between the lad and I," Killian says.

Emma glowers at him, but Killian meets her gaze placidly, and her anger breaks.

He's right. Killian's right.

Henry deserves some privacy, and Emma trusts Killian not to be an idiot and say something inappropriate—in fact, if Emma's honest with herself, she thinks Killian probably did a better job than she could have, given the situation.

"Your father was there as well, if that makes you feel better."

"Yes," Emma says. "No offense but yes."

Killian chuckles, and surprises Emma by closing his book and placing it neatly atop her desk. He plants his elbow beside the book, drops his chin into his hand, and regards her with smoldering eyes.

Emma leans back in her chair and folds her hands over her stomach. "What are you thinking?" she asks.

"I'm thinking that we're alone, and that there are parts of you that I haven't tasted in days," he purrs.

"Oh?" She raises an eyebrow and smirks coolly at him, even while heat pools low in her belly and floods between her legs.

Before Emma can blink Killian's off his chair and on his knees. He skims his hand and hook up her thighs to the waistband of her leggings.

"May I?" he breathes.

Emma nods, unable to form words. Warm fingers and cold metal prick the skin of her stomach, then slide down her legs, taking her pants and underwear with them. Killian leans back just enough to free one of her legs from her pants, then he spreads her thighs and presses between them.

The scrape of his beard against her bare skin sends a thrill straight to her core, and the moment his mouth touches her center and his tongue wets her folds she thinks she'll melt right into the upholstery.

"Oh. Oh, God," she moans.

He hums against her sensitive flesh. "That's a sweet sentiment, love, but you can call me Killian."

It's the corniest joke ever, but that feeling—that feeling feeling Emma has—grows.

---

They fuck on her desk for old time's sake, and then, when they're recovered, they have another go in the break room. It's hard and fast and various parts of Emma are definitely going to be bruised in the morning, but it leaves her deliciously satiated.
She needed that—they both needed that.

They order Chinese takeout to the station, and hang around talking for another few hours, not even once mentioning Neal, because for once he's the last thing on their minds. They're walking back to the loft around midnight when Emma gets the phone call she sort of expected.

"We have to go pick up Ian," she says.

When they arrive at Robin's house, everyone's awake. Roland's in the living room, peeping over the back of the couch with wide, dark eyes; Robin and Will are in the kitchen with what looks like a night light on. Will's holding Ian, and Ian's not crying, but he looks miserable. Robin's standing beside them, rubbing circles on Ian's back.

Killian takes Ian from Will, and Ian wraps his arms and legs around him and buries his face against Killian's neck.

"It's alright, lad," Killian says. "Everything's alright."

They take Ian home to the loft and do what they've been doing to the past five nights: snuggle him between them on the pull-out couch, and fall asleep holding hands.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I know absolutely nothing about group homes/adoption, so hopefully nothing I wrote is wildly inaccurate.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Three updates in two weeks is probably never, ever, ever going to happen again, so sorry for that in advance. I had a week off of work and I was able to use that time to my advantage, but reality begins again tomorrow, so updates will go back to probably every two weeks-ish. As always, thank you very much for reading and for all your lovely comments! <3

It's Saturday morning in Storybrooke, and the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, and while Killian, the boys, and an entourage of others are spending the morning at the stables, Emma Swan is sitting in the dirt, sweating her boobs off in a clearing in the middle of the woods, while the Apprentice supervises her from the shade.

The thing that surprised her most about learning to use her magic is how much energy it takes.

"Light magic is different than all other types of magic," the Apprentice explained. "Light magic exists within you; it's as much a part of your body as your skeleton or your muscles or your circulatory system. This makes it more malleable, but also more taxing to use."

When Emma admitted she didn't really understand, the Apprentice smiled patiently, and explained.

"Most magic users in the world don't possess their own magic; they merely possess an aptitude which allows them to manipulate the magic that exists in the world around them," he said. "Light magic is the rare exception. Because it exists inside of you, it's not as rigid or subject to the same restrictions as other magic."

"Oh," Emma said, feeling suddenly overwhelmed. She thought magic was just magic, she had no clue what was inside of her was so...unique.

"Once you understand the shape of your magic, you can make it do whatever you desire; you can manipulate the world around you with a thought. For now, you must train your body and mind to withstand the force of drawing upon that magic."

Which is why Emma supposes she spent the entirety of her first lesson calling up her magic and grasping various quantities of it: a thread, a rope, two handfuls, an armful—it's probably a dumb way to think of it, but in her mind that's what she sees. Delving into her magic is like plunging both hands into a pool of water; the trick is extracting only the amount she desires, and no more.

Sometimes her magic is stubborn and doesn't budge, and it's like trying to lift a fifty-ton weight from the bottom of that pool; sometimes her magic jumps too eagerly into her arms, splashing her and everything else—twice Emma accidentally set fire to innocent, bystand ing objects, which is why they're now in a wide, dirt circle in the woods instead of in the Apprentice's ruined living room.

When she tried to use her magic to blast a hole through the wall surrounding Storybrooke, Emma basically just opened the flood gates and let everything she had pour out.

That was easy, compared to this. This is much, much harder.
Yesterday, Emma practiced using a thin thread of her magic to lift an object and make it hover in midair; today she's practicing using the same amount of magic to make an object (today, her car keys) disappear and reappear in another place.

So far, it's not going so well.

No matter how hard she stares, or how hard she pokes her keys with that thread of her magic, the keys won't budge.

Exhausted and annoyed—mostly annoyed—Emma groans and collapses backwards onto the ground, mindless of the dirt that sticks to her hair and sweaty arms.

"Can't I just do the thing I was doing yesterday?" she complains loudly to the trees overhead. "I was getting pretty good at it."

To demonstrate, she curls her magic around her keys, lifts them into the air, and shakes them so they jingle obnoxiously. The Apprentice, seated on a tree stump on the edge of the clearing, chuckles but doesn't raise his eyes from the small block of wood he's whittling with his pocket knife.

"Try more magic," he suggests.

Emma drops the keys back to the dirt, and sits up. The keys are lying in a circle the Apprentice drew on the ground with powdered chalk, and the circle Emma's trying to move them to is right beside it. She thickens the thread of magic to a rope the width of her wrist, and touches the keys again. They disappear—but they don't reappear.

Oh, fuck.

Before she can panic and wonder what the hell she's going to do with no car keys, the Apprentice speaks.

"Too much," he remarks, holding up his pocket knife, around which are looped her keys.

Emma practices for another half hour before she can move her car keys from one circle to the other without difficulty, and after that the Apprentice makes her do it over and over again using less and less magic until the rope she uses is thinned back down to a thread. The Apprentice then proceeds to draw ten more chalk circles around the clearing, and when Emma can make the keys appear in each of those in turn, he finally calls an end to their lesson.

They trudge back through the woods together, the Apprentice with light steps, and Emma with dragging ones. She's drenched in sweat, from the top of her head down to places she really wishes it weren't possible to sweat from. It's not from the heat—the weather isn't even that hot, especially compared to Boston—it's from exertion.

To keep her mind off of the list of people she'd kill for a bottle of water right then, she talks.

"Do you have light magic?" she asks—they hadn't discussed it before, and Emma's curious.

"No," the Apprentice answers. "I was not born so lucky."

"Then how do you know so much about it?"

"My master Merlin taught me much in the short time we were together. I believe he foresaw that we would meet, and trained me specifically for the task of training you."
"What do you mean 'foresaw'?

"Every light magic user's power manifests differently, and some often develop special abilities. Merlin had the gift of foresight and prophecy."

Emma nods, then asks, hesitantly, "Do I have any special abilities?"

"No," he says, not unkindly. "But your magic is the strongest I've ever felt."

She keeps her eyes on the narrow path they're following through the trees, hiding her blush. It's so strange to be complimented on her magic—something that's apparently very special and important but something she's rarely ever used, something that doesn't feel very much a part of her, in spite of what the Apprentice said.

"What about Ian's magic?" she asks.

"Your son's magic reminds me a bit of Merlin's, actually," the Apprentice says with a smile. "They both share the same particular talent."

"Prophecy?"

"Yes, prophecy."

Emma mulls that over.

She guesses it makes sense: the weird way he knows things sometimes, his dreams...

*His dreams.*

Emma stops walking, and, after taking several steps, the Apprentice halts and turns politely back towards her.

"His dreams..." Emma says, and trails off.

The Apprentice inclines his head. "Glimpsing the future in dreams is very often how it begins."

Fear grips her, sliding its cold fingers around her stomach.

"Does that mean all his dreams are, you know, prophetic or whatever?"

"No," he says. "In time, he will be able to tell which are truthful and which are merely dreams. However, if you asked him now, he might be able to describe differences in how certain dreams feel—that might help you determine which are prophecies and which are not."

Emma narrows her eyes. "Are you sure you don't have the gift of prophecy?"

"I'm certain. I am simply...observant."

Emma doubts that, especially given the way the guy's eyes are twinkling in amusement, but she doesn't argue. Let him have his secrets; she can read him well enough to know that he's not an enemy, he's the real deal.

*Dumbledore,* she thinks. Thanks to Ian, she can't help equating the Apprentice with Dumbledore—and, occasionally, Gandalf.

She continues walking, but she falls silent for a while, thinking.
She's going to have to ask Ian about his dreams. He's been dreaming about the Shadow again, and that she and Killian die. She truthfully thinks they're just stress dreams, just his little kid brain trying to work through what's going on around him—but she can't be certain.

Most often, Ian dreams that Killian dies, and if there's a possibility that Killian's in danger, Emma needs to know.

After a while, Emma can smell the stables they're heading towards. She was never really horse-crazy, but she'll admit that there's something pleasantly interesting about the tangy smell of horses, and something sort of relaxing about the dim, hushed aisles of stalls, where the only sounds are the soft snorts of the horses and the rustle of hay.

The trail rises before them suddenly and sharply, but it's a short incline, and when they reach the top they're standing at the edge of a gravel parking lot. To their right is a small, shaded pavilion with picnic tables, where Emma can see the others sitting down, laughing, and eating lunch; to their left is the stable and the outside arena for riding.

"This is where we must part ways," the Apprentice says, indicating his shabby little car parked a few feet away.

"Wait—can I ask you something?"

"Mmm," the Apprentice hums agreeably.

Emma thinks she's probably been asking him too many questions, but she can't help it—he's the first person who actually seems to have solid answers to certain things.

"When will Ian start being able to use his magic?"

They haven't told Ian yet that he even has magic. Emma doesn't see the need to, not until he realizes on his own that he has it. For now, she definitely does not want him trying to use it—she can only imagine what a catastrophe that would be.

"The ability to manifest one's magic usually arises around puberty," the Apprentice says. "For some, it's a bit earlier, and for others, a bit later."

For Storybrooke's sake, Emma hopes that in Ian's case it's later. Much, much later.

"It all depends on the person—and the situation, I suppose. There's a possibility Ian's magic could activate in self-defense, as yours has recently."

Emma nods. Apparently, her nosebleed the other day was a result of her magic straining to release her from whatever spell the Dark One was working—which isn't exactly encouraging.

"Can I ask you something else?" she says.

"Of course."

"Is there anything you can do to help Ian sleep?"

He considers it for a moment, standing with his hands clasped behind his back and a thoughtful look on his face, then he says, "There are both potions and spells that can cause a dreamless sleep, but, alas, they are not safe to use on a boy so young."

Emma nods, disappointed. "Alright, thank you anyway. See you tomorrow?"
He sketches a small, half-bow. "See you tomorrow, Ms. Swan."

Emma watches him get into his car and drive away before she begins the hike across the parking lot towards the picnic tables.

Robin sees her approaching and waves—either in greeting or in case he thought she might have trouble locating them in the otherwise empty pavilion. They're a pretty big group, consisting of the boys, Killian, her dad, Ava, Robin and Roland, Will, Ruby and Belle, and Rowan. Somehow they've managed to all fit at one table—when she gets closer, she realizes it's because Killian and Ian aren't there.

"Still riding," David says, when he sees her consternated frown.

Emma looks off to the left. She can just make out Killian and Ian at the far end of the arena.

She rests her fists on her hips. "How'd he manage that one?" she says, meaning Ian.

"He said he wasn't hungry."

"Killian knows he's lying, right?"

"I think so," David says, smiling. "How about you? Are you hungry?"

"Starving," Emma says, and immediately receives a sandwich in a plastic baggie and a bag of chips.

"Water?" Will asks, pulling a bottle from the cooler beneath the picnic table.

"Thanks." She takes it, opens it, and slugs down half of it in one go. Refreshed, she turns to Henry. "How'd you do, kid?"

Henry blushes. "Uh..."

"He didn't fall off," Ava says, in a voice of grand triumph.

"Luckily," Henry says, grimacing. "I'm pretty bad."

"You're not bad," Ava says.

"You're just inexperienced," David adds. "The more you ride the better you'll get."

Henry shrugs. Emma makes a mental note to remind him later that the first time he tried pole vaulting, he fell flat on his face and busted his nose—flash forward to two years later, and he's breaking the school record.

"At least you didn't get bit," Robin says, voice edged with laughter.

"Who got bit?" Emma asks, before raising the water bottle to her lips for another sip.

Robin, David, Will, and Ruby exchange looks and snickers before David jerks his head towards the arena.

Emma almost chokes on her water. "You mean Killian, right? Is he okay?"

"He'll be fine," Robin says with a grin.

"He's gonna have one nasty bruise though," Will says, also grinning. "And he might want to avoid
chairs for a couple of days."

Will, David, and Robin erupt in full-out laughter, while Henry, Ruby, and Ava try to hide smiles behind their hands, and Belle glares a think of the children glare.

idiots, Emma thinks, rolling her eyes.

"I'll be right back," she says, setting her water bottle and bag of chips on the picnic table.

"Why don't you bring him some ice?" Will suggests.

"Shut up, Scarlet," Ruby scolds.

As Emma walks back across the parking lot towards the arena, she opens the sandwich baggie, slides out the turkey sandwich, and takes a bite. Snow, as usual, is tied up at the Mayor's Office all day, but to compensate for not being able to join them at the stables she packed them all a magnificent lunch. Emma takes two more huge bites, barely chewing before she swallows, then tucks the sandwich back into the bag.

Killian spots her, and Emma reaches the fence just as he limps up to the railing, towing a pony with Ian on its back.

"Lookin' good there, cowboy," Emma says, and Ian draws himself up in the saddle proudly. Emma was surprised that morning when she saw that the pony, Lollipop, actually is pink—or, pinkish, at least. David called her a strawberry roan, and in addition to her pink coat she has an enormous, shaggy head of honey-colored hair, and a massive sweet tooth.

"Greetings, Swan," Killian says. His smile turns into a wince as he tries to find a comfortable way to stand—apparently whatever horse or pony bit him got him good.

"Did you learn more magic?" Ian asks eagerly. Yesterday, Emma amused him and Henry by lifting various things around the loft into the air and making them do acrobatics.

"I sure did," she says. "Check this out."

She raises her hand, and at the same time stretches out a thread of her magic to touch Killian's hook. It disappears from the end of his arm, and reappears in her hand.

Ian's eyes open wide with delight. "Cool!" he gushes.

Killian, on the other hand, is not impressed.

"That's hardly amusing," he says, sourly. "It's bad form to tamper with a man's hook."

He snatches it from her and jams it back onto his brace.

"Alright, seriously? What is up with you?" Emma asks.

Ian looks at her, and says solemnly, "He got bit on the butt."

"It wasn't-" Killian visibly swallows his anger, and continues more calmly. "It was not my rear end the pony assaulted. It was just very close."

Emma heaves a sigh, and breaks out her Sheriff's voice. "Which pony do I have to beat up? Is it Lollipop?"
Lollipop takes an unbidden step forward and sticks her head through the upper and middle beams of the fence to snuffle Emma's pockets, Emma assumes searching for candy. Delicately, mindful of the resemblance her fingers bear to carrots, Emma strokes Lollipop's velvety nose.

"Not Lollipop," Ian says. "Lollipop's a good pony. It was that one!"

He points to the other end of the arena, where two more ponies are tethered in the shade next to the barn. One of them is massive and watching them with one, baleful black eye as if it knows they're talking about it.

"Malevolent little beast," Killian growls. "If Roland hadn't been on its back..." He shakes his head and dissolves into mutters.

Emma listens to the litany of threats and swears he's mumbling, her eyebrows climbing slowly higher as his scowl deepens.

"Did it really get him that bad?" she says to Ian.

"It was bad," Ian whispers, eyes wide in the shocked expression of a soldiers fresh from is first battlefield.

Emma turns to Killian. "Here, let me see it," she says.

Killian makes a face and splutters a protest—"I can't show you here!"—but she reaches out with her magic, finds the bruise on his thigh just below his left butt cheek, and touches it. Emma can feel the indents the pony's teeth made, feel where they actually broke the skin and drew blood, and she can feel how deep the damage goes.

Instinctively, she begins rubbing her magic into it, as if it was lotion she's applying.

"Swan, what are you—ahh..." He gasps, first in surprise, and then he hisses in relief.

Emma keeps massaging his thigh, until she feels the bruise raise to skin level, and then she withdraws. She raises her eyes from his posterior to find him looking at her, slightly dazed, slightly mesmerized.

"How did you do that?" he asks.

"I don't know," Emma says, shrugging. "It just felt right. Is it okay?"

"Much better, thank you."

"Did you fix his butt?" Ian says, craning sideways off of Lollipop's back as though expecting to be able to see Killian's healed bruise through his jeans.

"Yep," Emma says, hand darting in to tug Ian upright by his t-shirt sleeve. "I fixed his butt."

Killian throws his head back to groan at the sky, and mutters, "Can you two please stop saying 'butt'?"

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Emma shares her sandwich with Killian and Ian, and by the time they're done, so are the others. David returns to the arena and takes over leading Ian around on Lollipop so Killian can take a break.

Emma climbs onto the fence and sits on the flat top railing, and Killian climbs up beside her. Her
palms are flat on the wood to either side, and Killian rests his hand beside hers, so he can lay his pinky over her pinky, a small connection—except for when David passes by with Ian, and then Killian's the picture of perfect, hands-to-himself innocence.

Ruby and Belle put Rowan on the little white pony and start leading her around behind David, and Roland climbs onto the bigger, dark brown one's back unassisted and kicks it into a trot, easily passing the other two ponies. Robin and Will watch from the fence, doling out both encouragement and advice. Henry and Ava chose to remain at the picnic tables, likely to have some privacy.

Life goes on, Emma thinks, taking in the scene. The relative normalcy of the last week—since they laid Regina's body to rest—has lifted everyone's spirits.

"Has your father talked to you?"

"Hm?" Emma says, turning to Killian.

"About the pony," he clarifies. "Your father wants to buy that pony for Ian, for his birthday."

Emma tears her eyes from Killian and looks across the arena, where David is trotting Lollipop, jogging alongside her, and Ian's bouncing merrily atop her back.

"I don't know," Emma says slowly, ruefully. "Where would we even keep it?"

Killian cocks one eyebrow. "I believe the animal stays here at the barn, Swan. Your father said he would pay for its board."

Emma waits until David and Ian have passed in front of them, and Ian's giggles have faded from earshot before she says, "What do you think?"

He considers his words for a long moment, eyes on Ian's back, before speaking. "I think pets are a good way to teach children responsibility."

There's something in his voice that tells Emma he's not speaking his mind.

"Spit it out, Killian. You're his parent, too. I want to hear your opinion."

He looks over at her, a small crease between his brows.

They never really discussed how this thing—this parenting thing—will work, regardless of whether they work or not. Killian's made it easy so far. When it comes to Ian, there's no tension between them, no friction; he seems to understand what Emma has in mind and follows along.

But Emma doesn't just want him to follow her lead forever. Emma was Ian's sole parent up until this point, but it wasn't by choice, it was by accident. Killian didn't deserve to get cut out of Ian's life, and Emma doesn't want to punish him for it by making him take a backseat while she makes all the decisions all the time.

So far, Killian's proven that he wants to be involved, that he's capable of being involved, and that he loves Ian as much as Emma does. She wants him to express himself—there should be a push and pull involved, discussions, compromise.

"Thank you, Swan," he says, softly, and moves his hand to covers hers. Then, he sighs. "I know how much the boy likes that pony...however, I'm afraid a pony might be too much responsibility for a six-year-old."
"Too much responsibility for a six-year-old, or too much responsibility for Ian?"

"For Ian," he says, lips nearly quirking into a smile. "Perhaps we should start smaller."

"Like a dog?"

"Aye, or even smaller, like a fish. A very small fish."

Emma snorts. "I think you're right. He's not exactly the most mindful six-year-old I've ever met," she says, thinking of all the times she's tripped over his gym shoes by the front door or piles of his clothes in his room, or of how often she has to cap up the markers he leaves everywhere so they don't dry out. "Plus, someone would have to drive him up here every day, and unless you learn how to drive, I don't see how that's gonna happen."

He grunts wordlessly and looks away.

There were still several aspects of modernity he doesn't seem anxious to adopt; driving is one of them. The other, to Emma and Henry's amusement, is employment.

"He's already a pirate," Ian said, when Henry joked that Killian needed to find a job soon.

"That's not a job," Henry retorted.

"It is too a job," Ian said, with that look on his face that meant Henry would have to physically fight him to get him to change his stance on the issue.

Later, Killian admitted the real reason for his reluctance.

"I have no skills outside of piracy, Swan, and I'm not even certain anyone in this town would be willing to hire me."

"We'll figure it out," she replied.

It isn't exactly a pressing matter, especially since he's apparently in possession of a neverending supply of gold doubloons. If anything, they could always officially hire him as a deputy.

He turns back to her. "May I ask you something?" he says.

"Yea."

He's illuminated by a sunbeam, as if God himself peeled back the curtain of clouds to sharpen Hook's cheek and jaw line, bring out the reddish tinge to his beard, and make the blue of his eyes more vivid.

"Will you go out with me?"

His questions startles her, catches her completely off guard, and she stares.

Their first date—their only date—was two weeks ago. Since then they've found quiet moments, here and there, but, regardless of the sex usually involved, those weren't technically dates.

Finally, she smirks, and says, "I don't remember asking."

"That's because it's my turn to ask," he says, returning her smirk.

"Okay. I have a request though."
"Oh?" he asks, one eyebrow raising in a decidedly lascivious manner.

"Take me stargazing."

Now it's Killian's turn to be surprised. "You wish to go stargazing?"

"Yea."

"Alright, Swan, if that's what you desire, then that's what we shall do."

"Tonight?" she asks.

"If you think that can be managed."

"I think with the right bribes it can definitely be managed."

"Are we bribing Ian, or your parents?"

"Both."

He grins, and presses his fingers between hers.

There's a scuffle in the gravel behind them, and Emma and Killian crane around to see Will.

"How's your bum feelin', mate?" he asks, grinning.

In answer, Killian turns and gets down from the fence. Before Will can raise his hands to defend himself, Killian takes a casual step towards him and does something too fast for Emma to see, something that involves grabbing Will's arm, twisting it, and sweeping his leg out from under him.

Will lands hard on his back on the ground, and Emma hears the wheezing gasp that means he got the wind knocked out of him.

"Fair enough," Will coughs, while Robin roars with laughter.

Killian climbs back onto the fence, and resettles next to Emma.

She eyes him sideways for a minute before she asks, "Did you teach Henry and Ian that one?"

"Perhaps," he says.

"Good."

In the afternoon, after everyone's had their fill of horseback riding, they all head back into town. Henry drives Ava to the ice cream shop, for her Saturday evening shift, then he goes on his own to the warehouse by the docks to practice sword-fighting.

It was sort of embarrassing earlier, bouncing around helplessly on the back of that horse while Ava trotted literal circles around him, and he has the overwhelming urge to indulge in an activity he's good at.

Well, semi-good at.

That morning, he witnessed Hook and David spar, and realized that, in spite of how much he's learned and how much his skills have improved since the beginning, he still has a long way to go.
As he runs through some of the exercises Hook prescribed him, he relives Hook and David's mock battle in his mind. It was clear that the two men were using two different styles, although Henry couldn't pinpoint the characteristics of either fighting form—all he could tell was that David was physically much stronger, while Hook was faster.

Having grandpa and Ian at the warehouse in the morning with them for the past week has been an interesting change of pace. At first Henry was annoyed that people were butting in on his and Hook’s time, but then it became kind of fun—although Henry doesn't think he'll ever really enjoy getting kicked in the knees and elbowed in the nuts by Ian every morning, even if he does get to turn around and do the same to Hook and David afterwards.

Henry drops his arm, letting the tip of the practice sword hit the dirt, and catches his breath.

The guy time is pretty nice, too. Henry loves his mom, but she's not a guy—okay, he doesn't give a crap about any of those bullshit studies that say a single mom can't successfully raise sons blah blah blah. He doesn't believe any of that, it's just that Hook and David talk to Henry about things in a way Emma can't.

He blushes suddenly, remembering the "birds and the bees" talk he got in this very warehouse a week ago.

David's advice was more along the lines of, "Make sure she's comfortable and that it's what she really wants before you do anything," while Hook, understanding that "anything" had already happened, proceeded to give him a few precise yet vague pointers that Henry thinks Emma might slap him for if she knew.

They both cautioned him about being smart and using protection, but Henry very quickly ended that discussion because he already knew all that stuff, thanks to both health class and the internet.

Face warm, he lifts the wooden practice sword and lunges, trying to focus on his form and not what Ava's bare skin looked like, or how the frantic beating of his heart couldn't drown out the sounds she was making, or even how awkward it was to buy condoms from the same pharmacy he used to buy candy and comic books from when he was ten, the pharmacy where, coincidentally, he met Ava for the first time.

"Hey, bud."

Henry stumbles, and nearly pitches headfirst to the ground. He catches himself, and turns.

If Henry's surprised to see Neal standing there, it's only because he realizes he's surprised it didn't happen sooner—he showed up once after Emma told him not to, so why not a second time?

Henry squares his shoulders, plants the tip of the wooden practice sort in the dirt, folds both hands over the pommel, and says the shittiest, most impetuous thing he can come up with.

"My mom said you're not supposed to see me."

A flicker of anger passes over Neal's face, but then he's smiling and shrugging.

"You're getting pretty good with that thing," he says. "I thought maybe you and I could do a little sparring."

He raises his hand, and a wooden sword appears in it.

Magic doesn't bother Henry—his mom has magic, and it's pretty awesome; it's just that her magic is
light magic, good magic, and Neal's magic is the exact opposite. Seeing Neal using his Dark One powers, powers he got from murdering his own father, so casually makes Henry feel sick.

"No, thanks," he says, and turns on his heel to face the wall. "Hook's already teaching me."

He walks his practice sword over to the longboat Hook hides them in, lays it inside, and covers it and the others with the scrap of canvas that keeps them from getting wet or crapped on by birds.

"You'd rather spend time with Hook that with me?" Neal asks in a flat voice.

"At least Hook's never done anything to hurt my mom," Henry says, without turning around.

"Listen."

"Don't," Henry says. "Don't try to explain. I don't care. I really, really don't."

When he turns around, Neal's gone.

Henry sighs, and feels a knot a loosen in his belly. He takes out his cell phone and opens his text message thread with his mom, but thinks better of it and tucks his phone away.

---

Killian told Emma to meet him at the docks at sunset, and, as much as he would have loved to see her in that shimmery pink dress with the deliciously low neckline again, he instructed her to dress normally. During the daylight hours, the weather is comfortably warm, but the evenings tend to turn chilly, if not cold=plus, there's sand to contend with, and Killian can't imagine how her heels would fare on the beach of Heron Island.

The sun has just disappeared behind the buildings of Storybrooke to the west, and a velvety purple-black sky is encroaching from the east when Emma arrives.

"How's this?" she asks, gesturing to her jeans, boots, white sweater, and tan leather jacket.

"Stunning, as usual," he says. The color of her jacket complements the color of her skin and hair. They fall in beside each other and make their way down the pier. "How did it go with the boy?"

Emma lets out a sigh that's half frustrated growl. "He's clueless. He thinks I'm at the station doing more paperwork. My parents ordered pizza and picked out a movie. He should be fine."

"You don't enjoy lying to him," Killian observes.

"I'd prefer not to, but..." She shrugs, and then she smiles. "Mostly, I'm just afraid he won't want to be the Sheriff anymore if he thinks all Sheriffs do is paperwork."

Killian chuckles. "Cheer up, Swan, there's always piracy."

"Pirates don't do paperwork?"

"Alas, we do not."

They reach the end of the pier, where the same dory Killian used to ferry Henry and Ian to Heron Island is tied.

"Is this yours?" Emma asks, eyeing it.

"Nope," he says. "But I doubt whomever it belongs to will miss it for a few short hours."
Killian unties the dory and Emma gets in it ahead of him. She steps down into the hull with the care and caution of someone not used to boats, and Killian waits until she's settled before he climbs in after her.

He sits across from her, and sets his satchel carefully near his feet. Emma looks at it, but doesn't say anything. She's quiet while he rows them away from the docks, at first watching him, and then watching the water to either side of the boat. She has her hands clamped firmly between her knees, and her shoulders hunched.

"You're not afraid of the water, are you Swan?" he asks gently.

"Not exactly," she says, and Killian sees her force her body to relax. "I like swimming and stuff, but..." She leans slightly to the side to peer over the edge. "There's something about not being able to see what's in there that freaks me out, especially now because it's dark."

"There're no sharks in these waters, if that's what you're concerned about."

"No—I mean, I know there aren't any sharks in there, but that doesn't stop my brain from imagining that there are sharks in there."

"You leapt off the Jolly Roger into the sea in Neverland, love, and you didn't seem afraid of sharks then—or of vicious mermaids, giant squid, and massive, murderous jellyfish, for that matter."

"That was different," she says. "I would have done whatever it took to get Henry back." She's silent for a moment, and then she asks, "Were there really sharks in Neverland?"

"Loads."

She shivers, and tucks her hands back between her knees once more.

"You could look up, Swan. That may help keep your mind off of the water."

She tilts her head back. It's full dark now, and even though there's a waxing half moon, there are still plenty of stars visible.

"It's beautiful," she whispers.

*You're beautiful*, he thinks, drinking in the sight of her. He always associates her with the sun and bright light and warmth, but there's something to be said for how she looks now, glowing in the pale silver light of the moon with an ocean of stars reflected in her eyes.

"We'll have to bring Ian with us, next time," she says softly.

"Aye, love. We will."

Killian knows they're almost at Heron Island when, ten minutes later, the hull of the boat scrapes along the top of a rock. Startled, Emma's gaze drops back down and her hands dart out to grasp the sides of the boat.

"Relax, love," he says quickly. "It was just a rock. We're nearing shore."

They bump another rock, just off the starboard bow, and the dory jostles enough to knock over his satchel, making the objects inside clink loudly.

"What's in there, by the way?" Emma asks.
"Wine," he answers, in the most innocent voice he can muster.

It's not a lie: there is wine, and there's his sextant, but there's also a thick blanket he borrowed from the inn, and condoms.

After their first dalliance several weeks ago, Emma gave him a thorough speech about the necessity of being safe and being prepared. Having sex without protection had been risky and a tad foolhardy—Emma assured him that she's on birth control (she showed him a little pill she takes every day that supposedly helps prevent pregnancy), and that the test she took afterwards to determine whether or not she was with child came back negative.

Killian's relieved, certainly, although part of him wondered what would have happened if the test hadn't been negative...

When he saw her with that baby on her hip at Misthaven House, his first thought was that she must have looked that way once with Ian when Ian was a babe, but then he imagined her with another baby on her hip, a baby that didn't exist but could, in the future.

"Wine, huh?" Emma says, drawing Killian out of his thoughts. "Are you planning on getting me drunk?"

"Perhaps," he says with a grin.

"Can you row us back drunk?"

"Who says I'm getting drunk, Swan? I merely suggested that my intention was to get you drunk."

He gives her his best lewd wink and smirk, and she blushes and looks away.

They reach the western beach of Heron Island, and Killian manages to convince Emma to stay inside the dory while he pulls it ashore. She hands him his satchel before grabbing his hook to balance herself while she jumps out, and then they hike around the tip of the island to the eastern side, to the exact spot Killian went stargazing with the boys.

There's more moonlight than there was before, but Emma is just as eager as Henry and Ian were to have the constellations pointed out to her—and she doesn't giggle when he says sextant. She finds the Little Dipper and Orion on her own, and then Killian points out Lupus, Libra, Circinus, and the Herdsman.

"Alright," she says later, as Killian's tucking his sextant carefully back into his satchel. "I get the wolf and the scales and compass, but I don't get how the Herdsman looks like a herdsman."

"Something to do with a plow," Killian says. "Truthfully, I've never been able to see that one myself, either. Wine?"

He turns and offers her the bottle of wine, which she takes.

"Are we just gonna drink it out of the bottle, or-"

Next, he pulls two short tumblers—the only glasses he managed to pilfer from Granny's diner—from the bag, and, when she takes those, he wrestles the blanket out and presents it for inspection.

"Wow," she says with a laugh. "You're prepared."

"More than you know, Swan."
He spreads the blanket along the sand at the top of the beach, where it's drier and the ground is softer. They sit with their bottoms on the blanket, but their boots in the sand, and split the bottle of wine between them.

"Cheers," he says, lifting his glass.

She taps hers to his, and takes a sip before turning to stare out at the water.

"This is really nice," she says.

"I'm glad you enjoy it."

"Not just the wine. All of it."

He opens his arm and touches her waist gently with his hook, inviting her closer; she scoots across the blanket until her side is pressed firmly against his.

They drink. He keeps his arm around her, and lazily strokes her hip with the curved edge of his hook. Her arm lies along his thigh with her hand on the inside of his knee, absently running her fingers along the seam of his trousers. It's sending little anticipatory thrills up his leg to his cock, and he's rock hard and straining against the zipper by the time her hand wanders up to his belt.

He's warm and flushed all over, partially from the wine, and partially from the blood pounding in his veins, propelled by his racing heart.

He turns her head and kisses him. Her mouth tastes strongly of wine and she palms him through his jeans and he barely restrains himself from lifting his hips and grinding into her hand.

He fumbles his way into her pants, dizzy from her kisses and clumsy because of it, and she moans and bites his lip when he finds her slick folds and slides a finger through them and into her—but then she's pulling away.

He opens his eyes, shocked, worried he upset her, but she only stood up in order to remove her clothes. Standing, he does the same, taking his time despite the throb in his loins and the tingling pulses of fire spreading from his groin outwards.

He applies one of the condoms he brought with, and they lay back down side by side, limbs curled around each other, skin pressed together. They kiss, caress, tease, stoke the flames of each other's lust.

She's the first one to move. She turns him onto his back with light pressure on his shoulder, then rolls on top of him and straddles him. This is new; he's never had her like this before, and he likes it. He sinks into her heat and grips her thigh. Her inside walls squeeze him in response and Killian's certain she could make him come just from that.

She hovers above him, rolling her hips in a smooth, undulating motion not unlike the waves of the ocean. He stares at the creamy expanse of her skin, at her breasts, at the taut nipples he longs to suck into his mouth. Over her head the stars are arrayed, and they seem to gather behind her like a crown, with the moon a burning jewel at its center.

_I love you._

The words are on his lips, but he doesn't say them, because he knows she's not ready for them.

Not yet.
They take their time getting dressed, packing up, and returning to the dory, all the while exchanging kisses and small touches. Emma's glowing with contentment, and Killian's insides are humming with the same feeling.

As they row back, however, they notice a layer of fog drifting on top of the water.

"This again?" Emma sighs.

The fog thickens as they near the docks, and so does Killian's dread.

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It's a relief to reach the loft, and take shelter from the unnatural mist rising all around them. They jog up the stairs and into Emma's parents' home a bit faster than necessary.

Inside, Snow takes one look at their faces, and asks, "Is everything okay?"

"The fog's back," Emma says, sliding her jacket off and hanging it up on a peg beside the door.

Snow frowns. "It might be a good idea to have the Merry Men start patrolling the town on foot," she says, "I don't know what the point of the fog is if it's not to hide whatever Neal plans on doing."

She looks over at David, lying on the couch watching TV with Ian asleep on top of him, sprawled across his chest.

David nods. "I'll call Robin in the morning."

"Shit," Emma swears suddenly, turning back to Killian. "Henry. I don't want him out there in this. If Neal's planning something-"

Killian can see panic rising in her eyes, and, without thinking, he takes her hand. "Not to worry, love. I'll go get Henry. Why don't you give the lad a call, and I'll meet him wherever he is?"

Snow glances at Emma and Killian's linked hands before she looks up, a small smile playing over her lips, and says, "He's still at Ava's. The ice cream shop doesn't close until midnight on Saturdays."

Killian swipes his thumb briefly over Emma's knuckles before gently disengaging his fingers. "I'll be back shortly," he says, backing towards the door. She watches him go, tight lipped.

The fog is considerably thicker than it was less than ten minutes ago—it's damned near impenetrable. Killian navigates the streets towards Ava's ice cream shop mostly from memory. He feels watched, as he did with the previous fog, but there's an extra dimension to the chill that creeps up his spine that he can't quite define until he hears a familiar sound from behind him, and he realizes it's the sensation of knowing you're being followed.

He spins, hand groping for his cutlass but grasping only empty air. Above him, through the fog, Killian sees two pinpricks of light, rapidly growing larger.

"Bloody hell," he hisses, and braces himself.

---

Emma closes the door, ignores her parents looks, and goes upstairs. She changes into her pajamas, sweeps all the sand that cascades from her clothes under the dresser with her foot, puts her hair in a ponytail, and goes back downstairs. She's pouring herself a glass of water from the kitchen sink.
when Ian sits bolt upright on the couch and starts screaming.
Chapter 24

Killian's missing.

He's been missing for 12 hours, and all the king's horses and all the king's men, who have been searching since dawn, can't find him.

Neither Snow nor David try to reassure Emma that everything's fine, or even attempt to offer an explanation other than the obvious one: Neal did something.

Nobody says it, but everyone's thinking it, and the only thing stopping Emma from killing Neal is the fact that she doesn't actually know where he is—that, and a little bit because it would probably be emotionally scarring for Henry if his mom murdered his dad.

They've all been wide awake since midnight, when Ian finally calmed down and stopped yelling, "The shadow ate my dad!", Henry came home without Killian and without having seen Killian, and Emma realized, with a cold, sinking feeling in her gut, that something was very, very wrong.

Emma, David, and Henry went out immediately to scour the town. An hour's search yielded absolutely nothing, and that was when Snow called and told Emma she needed to get back to the loft immediately.

Emma returned to find Ian barricaded inside a fort made out of sofa cushions and Snow's quilts. He wouldn't come out, no matter how Emma coaxed, so Snow made coffee, and Emma sat in the armchair beside Ian's fort all night with a succession of coffee mugs in one hand and her cell phone clutched tight in the other.

She let Henry stay out with David, because she knew if he was confined to the loft he'd worry and fret until he became a total emotional wreck, like she's slowly becoming.

Although her body's still, her mind races. She can't think of a reason Neal would abduct Killian other than to hurt him. Over and over she imagines every worst possible scenario, every terrible place Neal could be holding Killian captive, every unspeakable torture he could be visiting upon Killian's body, every place they could find Killian's mangled, defiled corpse.

For some reason, her brain seems particularly fond of picturing Killian's body washed up on the beach like the bloated carcass of a dead whale, with crabs nibbling at his fingers and the waves lapping gently at his legs...

What Emma can't figure out is what Neal hopes to accomplish. Does he think murdering Killian will make Emma love him? Is he going to keep Killian alive and try to make some sort of deal, Killian's life for visitation with Henry?

"Ian's quite the architect," Snow says.

Emma wrenches her thoughts out of the horrifying twilight zone they're caught in, and looks around. Snow's there, easing yet another half full mug of cold coffee from Emma's hand. Emma lets go with difficulty, but before she can close her stiff fingers there's another mug of fresh coffee being pushed into her grip.

Emma stares at it, and then lifts her head and glances dimly around the loft. More time passed than she was aware of; it's the afternoon now, and the loft is full of bright sunshine and a light, refreshing breeze from an open window somewhere.
"Any word from dad?" Emma asks croakily.

Snow just shakes her head, sorrow in her eyes. "He said they're still looking. He has the Merry Men and the dwarves turning the town and the woods upside down."

"Henry?"

"David made him take a nap at Robin's. Ruby's over there watching Roland, so Henry's safe."

"Thanks," Emma says. She tries to smile, but only manages a small compression of her lips.

Snow touches her shoulder lightly, then prods Emma's arm. "Drink," she urges gently, guiding the cup to Emma's mouth.

Emma takes a sip of the coffee. The warmth wakes her up more than the caffeine, and her surroundings come into sharper focus. Snow's dressed in fresh clothes, but Emma's still wearing her outfit from last night. She vaguely remembers Snow asking her if she wanted to shower, and vaguely remembers refusing—her hair and clothing still smell strongly of the sea, and a little bit like Killian; Emma isn't ready to let go of that yet.

She hastily takes another enormous swig of coffee to steady herself, and turns her head to examine Ian's fort.

Snow's words float back to her. It is an impressive structure, certainly, but not the most impressive she's ever seen, as it's built more to be a sturdy hideaway than an elaborate playhouse, unlike previous models he's built in Boston.

Once, during a long rainy spell in the summer, Ian and Henry collected every cushion, pillow, blanket, and non-Emma mattress from around the apartment and turned the entire living room into a castle that they both slept in for a week.

Emma smiles at the memory. It was a "No Girls Allowed" fort, of course—except once a day when mom was needed to vacuum all the chip crumbs out of the carpet and dispose of the absurd amount of juice boxes, soda cans, and snack wrappers. Growing boys eat like crazy.

Thinking about food makes her stomach growl audibly.

"Are you hungry?" Snow says. "I can make you something."

She's starving and she sort of just wants to devour an entire tray of her mom's homemade PopTarts, but she also really, really needs to leave the loft and stop imagining Killian's dead body.

"Ian," Emma addresses the mountain of cushions and blankets in front of her. "You hungry yet, kid?"

There's only silence from inside the fort, but Emma knows Ian's awake, listening. He refused breakfast that morning, and every subsequent snack Snow offered him afterwards. He has to be just as hungry as Emma is.

"Wanna take a walk and get some lunch from Granny's? How does a grilled cheese and some onion rings sound?"

Slowly, after a long moment, Ian emerges. He crawls out of the fort, straightens, and stands there with his head slightly bowed, his shoulders slightly hunched, and his arms hanging limply at his sides.
"Okay," he says dully, not quite meeting her eyes.

Emma reaches out and brushes her fingers along the sleeve of his constellation-patterned pajamas, from his elbow to his hand. When he doesn't flinch or pull away, she tugs him by the wrist, and he stumbles into her hug. He melts against her, and Emma feels him grab two big fistfuls of her shirt.

She doesn't say anything, she just presses her cheek against his chair and holds him tightly.

"I'll go get him some clean clothes," Snow says, and moves away, towards the stairs.

Ian's trembling, and Emma can tell by his breathing that he's trying not to cry.

"You smell like my dad," he whispers.

Emma squeezes him tighter.

Killian can't be dead, she thinks. For Ian's sake, he can't be.

She takes a deep breath, inhaling Killian's scent, wondering if it's the last time.

Something wobbles inside of her, something that, if it breaks loose, will bring her entire being toppling down with it.

For my sake, he can't be.

---

After Ian gets dressed, they head to Granny's. The fog from last night has already disappeared, and as they walk Emma keeps an eye out, scrutinizing every nook and cranny and possible hidey-hole they pass as inconspicuously as possible.

Ian marches with his eyes fixed forward and a scowl on his face.

He still suspects the Shadow. Emma never told him that the Shadow was real, or that they caught it and destroyed it, but she would rather have him believe in the monster from his nightmares right now than know that the real monster is the one that's also Henry's dad.

He put on what he calls his "pirate shirt", which is like one of those tuxedo t-shirts only it's printed to look like he's wearing a greatcoat with giant lapels, a row of double buttons, and a golden-buckled belt with a dagger stuck through it. He has his hand resting over the hilt of the dagger, as if it's a real weapon he can draw at any moment.

Emma, likewise, brought her gun—holstered at the small of her back and covered by her shirt—but she also dove into the pool of her magic and has both hands submerged, ready to draw out a thread or a boulder or whatever amount she needs to and hurl it at Neal's head, should he and his stupid smile show up.

They arrive at Granny's without incident. Emma ignores the stares she feels on her and Ian as they walk through the door and make their way to the counter; ever since the whole town found out about Neal and Regina and the Dark Curse, Emma can't go anywhere without getting stared at, and while she doesn't enjoy it, she's getting better at pretending it's not happening.

They're halfway to two empty stools when Ian stops and whirls, making Emma stop too.

"I wanna check my dad's room," he says, in the tone of voice that declares he's ready to argue if Emma refuses.
"Ian," she says softly. "He's not up there."

Killian's room was the first place they checked last night, just in case.

"No," he says, doing the frustrated "you don't understand" wiggle. "When the police are looking for someone, they always search their house for clues first."

He looks at her imploringly with blue eyes that are copies of Killian's eyes, and Emma crumbles. She doesn't have the heart to tell him that it's pointless, or even to point out that his logic is a little off—he thinks the Shadow took Killian, so what clues could there possibly be in Killian's room?—and although there's a very good chance that finding Killian's room empty could be devastating, Emma suddenly wants to go upstairs very badly.

She wants to stand in Killian's room, to feel that connection to him, to feel as if, at any moment, he'll walk through his own door with a "Hello, Swan," and a grin.

"Alright," she says, then sighs. "You really need to stop watching Law & Order."

Ian grins and takes her hand to start pulling her towards the back of the diner—only something strange happens when he touches her.

She's apparently never touched Ian while holding onto her magic, because now, as she does both, she feels his magic the same way she feels her own—she sees it.

If Emma's magic is a forest pool fed by a mountain spring, Ian's is an underground lake, deep and cold, hidden away somewhere, as of yet undiscovered.

It's a strange sensation, looking at Ian and seeing him but also having her head filled at the same time with the image of that lake. She feels a chill, as if she's actually standing inside the cavern containing his magic, and knows that, if she wanted to, she could give Ian's magic a poke, and wake it up.

Shocked, Emma lets go of her own magic, and then there's only Ian with his raised eyebrow and head of tangled blonde hair that Emma definitely should have tried to comb before they left the house.

"Mom?"

She gives herself a little shake, and vows never to do that again—if she had brushed the surface of that lake, the ripples would have spread far and wide and disturbed things better left alone, for now.

She forces a smile. "Let's go."

Ian grins again and leads her through the diner and into the switchback hallway that connects to the inn. When they reach Killian's room, Emma slips her hand into the top of her right boot and pulls out a set of lockpicks. They're small and cheap, purchased primarily because they're easily concealed, but Granny's locks aren't exactly high tech and she has no problem jimmying open the door.

Ian rushes inside, past Emma. He glances around once, then runs to the bathroom and throws the door open. Emma holds her breath, but when Ian's certain Killian not hiding inside, he turns back to Emma with a determined frown on his face.

"Ok, let's start searching for clues," he says, planting his fists on his hips.

Relieved, Emma mimics his pose and nods dutifully. "Where do we start?" she asks, eyes already combing every flat surface and sizing up every piece of furniture.
"We should check his mail."

"I don't think he gets any mail," Emma says.

"Oh. Does he have a computer?"

"No."

"An answering machine?"

"Nope."

"Diary?"

I wish.

"Why don't we just start looking?" Emma suggests.

"Okay."

Ian makes a beeline for the bedside table, so Emma takes the dresser. She opens the top drawer to find it mostly empty, but orderly. Right away she sees the pistol nestled amongst the socks. She doesn't touch it—she doesn't know how volatile those old flintlock things are—and turns to Ian, "Hey, if you find any weapons don't touch-"

Ian freezes in the process of extracting a small pistol identical to the one Emma just found from the bedside table.

"Yea, like that," Emma says, unimpressed. "Put it back. Carefully."

She watches him to make sure he does as she instructed, then returns her attention to the dresser.

It feels intrusive, pawing through Killian's clothes, even if it's a careful, respectful pawing, and Emma finds herself silently apologizing while she delicately nudges his neatly folded t-shirts and underwear.

Unsurprisingly, there are no maps to Killian's location, ransom notes, or anything else even remotely useful hidden in the dresser. She closes it up, and crosses the room to the wardrobe. Killian's long jacket is hanging inside.

Emma runs her fingers along the lapel. It's difficult not to press her face into it, or to lift it off the hanger and hug it, hold it close like she wishes she could hold Killian close.

The more she thinks about it, the more she believes Killian's still alive—she would know if he wasn't, she's certain of it.

I'm gonna find you.

"He does have a diary!" Ian yells from behind her.

Emma looks over. Ian triumphantly flashes a black, leather-bound journal at her before he plops down on the bed and pops it open in his lap.

"I can't read it," he says, after a moment.

Emma rounds the bed and sits beside him. Leaning over, she sees the pages of the journal filled to
the margins with elegant cursive handwriting. She spies her name, and squints.

*He looks like Emma when he smiles.*

A small spot of warmth appears in her stomach. She reads on, and the warmth spreads.

*I introduced me to a sour candy that comes shaped like children today; I like them far more than I care to admit.*

*Emma smiles; she knows the book Killian means. Ian brought it home a week ago and regaled her, David, and Snow with everything he and Killian had learned from it. David actually smiled at Killian that night, and offered him a beer—it was also the same evening he asked if he could join Killian and the boys at the docks in the mornings.*

Emma uses her fingertips to gently close the journal.

"Put that back too," she says, quietly.

"Why?"

"Because it's private and we shouldn't be reading it. Your dad might be upset if he found out."

Ian nods. He replaces the journal in the drawer and closes it, then slumps sideways to lean against Emma. She puts her arm around his shoulders and reflexively starts pulling her fingers through his hair.

"Where is he?" Ian says.

"I don't know," Emma says.

"Is he dead?"

"No."

"But the shadow-

"That was just a dream."

She knows it's a huge coincidence that Ian had a dream about the Shadow attacking Killian around the same time he was abducted in real life, but Ian's been having those dreams for weeks—plus, the Shadow's dead.

She smoothes Ian's hair away from his forehead and presses a kiss on his brow, right atop the scar above his eyebrow. "He's out there, Ian," she says. "We'll find him."

"Promise?"

Over Ian's head, she looks at the drawings hanging on the wall, over the bedside table. She thinks of Killian's journal, of the record he's creating with words, similar to how Emma creates a record with photographs.

This can't be how it ends—Emma won't let this be how it ends.

"I promise," Emma whispers, and without thinking, she reaches deep into her magic, and floods the
Everything her magic touches, she's aware of. Ian sucks in a breath and stiffens, and Emma again sees an image of an underground lake in her mind, but she tucks it away, puts a barrier up between her magic and Ian's.

She can feel where every weapon Killian squirreled away is hidden—including the knife beneath his pillow, six inches away from Ian's left hand—and smiles when she also feels gold coins stashed away in places she never would have found otherwise; she's about to push her magic outwards, past the confines of the room, when something makes her stop.

There's something inside the wardrobe, something that feels bright and sharp against her magic, something that makes her teeth feel weird and her ears ring.

Simultaneously, she and Ian both twist around to stare at the wardrobe.

"Did you feel that?" Ian says, eyes wide.

"Did you feel that?" Emma asks.

Ian jumps onto the bed, runs across it, and hops off the other side. He opens the wardrobe, and pulls Killian's massive coat from its hanger. He reaches inside, rummages around a bit with a scowl on his face, then removes a delicate silver necklace, which he holds up by its chain for Emma to see.

"Is that-"

"It's the Wishing Star!" Ian gushes.

He jumps back onto the bed, dragging the coat with him, and flops down once again beside Emma. She takes the Wishing Star from him, and holds it cupped in one palm, and traces the design with the fingers of her other hand.

It smaller than she thought it would be, only a little larger than a quarter in diameter, and it looks more like a snowflake than a star. The white jewel in the center was probably beautiful once upon a time, but it's dim and smudged now.

"Can we use it to find my dad?" Ian asks.

"I don't know," Emma says slowly. "I thought it could only be used once, and you already used it."

Ian frowns, and Emma sees hope draining out of him.

Desperately, she touches the Wishing Star with a thread of her magic; it's not dead, exactly, but neither is it animate. It would take some serious juice to restore it, and somehow she knows that her juice isn't the right type of juice, and pouring everything she's got into it isn't going to work.

She closes her fingers over the necklace. "Sorry, kid."

His mouth quivers, but then his eyebrows pull down and he scowls.

"Let's look for more clues," he says.

He slides off the bed to his feet, and Emma's about to follow suit when the door creaks open. She whirls, startled, her free hand jumping to her gun, but it's just David; he's standing in the half-open door, one hand still on the knob, the other inside his jacket, looking just as surprised to see her and Ian as Emma is to see him.
"Hey," he says, visibly relaxing. He eases his hand away from the fun holstered at his side. "I didn't know you were here."

"We're looking for clues," Ian says grimly.

David grins. "You might be able to help me then."

Emma raises one eyebrow questioningly.

"Do you remember when you and your mother fell into that portal that transported you and her to the Enchanted Forest?"

"Yea," Emma says. That's when she met Killian for the first time.

"While you guys were gone, I tried to track down the owner of the hat that created that portal using a spell I got from Gold."

Emma stares at him for a long moment, brain working furiously, and then says, "You think you can find Killian using the same spell?"

David nods. "I already talked to the Apprentice. He said he just needs some time and something that belonged to Hook."

"How much time?" Emma asks.

"That depends. He's going to search Gold's shop to see if there's a locator spell already there somewhere, otherwise he'll have to make it himself; he said it doesn't take long to make, but it might take him a few hours to track down all the ingredients."

Emma looks down at Ian. His face is already bright with fresh hope. She looks back at David.

"You said you need something of Killian's?"

"Yea," David says. "Something with a strong connection to him."

Emma picks Killian's long coat up off the bed, and holds it up. "How's this?"

---

They have a plan.
They have a fucking plan.

Emma walks out of Killian's room feeling ten times lighter than she did walking into it.

The three of them eat lunch at Granny's counter, each easily devouring twice their own weight in grilled cheese sandwiches, onion rings, and soda.

Emma tries feeling around the diner with her magic, like she did upstairs, but there's too many people and too much information to process, so she draws it back—maybe it's not so useful then, unless she could learn to filter out all the useless details and only focus on what's important; she can probably ask the Apprentice about it, when she gets a chance.

Back at the loft, Snow, Henry, Robin, and Will Scarlett are waiting for them.

Ian runs immediately to Henry and hugs him hard around the waist. Henry hugs him back, smiling
tiredly. His hair is sticking up along one side of his head, and there are dark circles beneath his eyes, standing out against the paleness of his cheeks. Apparently his nap was not a very restful one.

"Any news?" David asks.

"There's no locator spell at the pawn shop," Robin says. "At least not one that we could find."

David crosses his arms over his chest and nods. "Where's the Apprentice now?" he says.

"Grocery shopping," Will answers with a grin.

"Does he need any help?" Snow says.

"Ruby volunteered," Robin replies. "The Apprentice gave her a list of plants in the forest for her to, erm, sniff out."

Will snickers, and Snows throws him a stern, chiding glare, which makes him blush and drop his eyes demurely to the floor.

"Coffee?" Snow offers.

"Yes, please," Robin says.

"Will?" Snow asks.

"Erm, yes please, mum," he mumbles, glancing up and then quickly down again.

Emma doesn't mind Will Scarlet. He's sort of goofy and cocky, but Emma thinks the cockiness is more of a defense mechanism than anything. He seems very young, maybe only a few years older than Henry, but he already has a look in his eyes like all the worst things that could ever possibly happen to him have already happened. It resonates with Emma on a deep level, and despite how obnoxious his smirk is sometimes, she can't help but like him.

Besides, Ian loves Will.

"Hey," Ian says loudly, bouncing over to Will with a grin on his face. "Wanna see my fort?"

"Of course I do, mate," Will says, indulgently. "Where's she at?"

Ian grabs him by the sleeve of his leather jacket and pulls him into the living room. "You can't come in though," Emma hears Ian say seriously. "You can only look."

Will raises both hands palm out in a gesture of innocence.

Emma smiles and watches Will bend over and stick his head inside Ian's fort, then she turns to Henry.

"You look tired, kid," she says.

Henry shrugs.

Emma reaches out and gives his upper arm a squeeze. "Why don't you go upstairs and try to get some more sleep?" she suggests. "We can't do anything else until the Apprentice finishes, so we may as well all rest."

"I don't know," Henry says dully, shrugging again.
"I think I'm going to take a nap too," David says. "There's no point trying to stay awake. We're going to need our energy for later."

Henry looks at him, and then back at Emma, and nods. "Alright," he says.

Emma gives his arm another squeeze, and then he turns and shuffles off towards the stairs. Emma sighs and takes a seat at the island countertop next to David. She could use some sleep too, but she doesn't want to take a nap unless Ian does, and she has no idea whether he slept inside his fort last night or not.

Snow slides a mug across the counter into Emma's hands. It's chamomile, Emma notices, the sleepiest of teas. She looks up to say thank you and notices Robin and Snow exchanging meaningful glances.

"What?" she asks.

Robin glances once more at Snow before stepping closer, and saying in a low voice, "We found something while we were out searching."

"What?" Emma asks, heart in her throat, ready to choke her.

"We found out where Neal's living."

---

Emma practically sprints out of the loft, remembering herself just enough to tell Ian she's only going to the store to help the Apprentice, and that she'll be back soon. David, Robin, and Will follow her.

Gold's house.

Neal's living in Gold's old house, and the worst part is, aside from the truly hideous paint job, is that Emma probably should have thought of it before.

No one, not her dad, Robin, Will, or even Neal, stops her from storming up the front walkway.

Her anger mounts with every step, until she can feel it rolling off her skin in waves. She flies up the stairs, plunging both arms into her magic as she does and drawing up as much as she can carry; she's about to fling it at the front door when she's forced to stop.

There are small symbols drawn all around the doorframe, and larger ones on the door itself. They're glowing bright red, and the feeling oozing off of them makes Emma's skin crawl. She recoils, and lets go of her magic. The symbols vanish.

She blinks at the door, trying to clear the afterimage of those symbols from her vision.

"Emma?" calls David.

Emma turns. David's waiting on the sidewalk, in plain view. Robin and Will aren't there, but Emma assumes they're close but concealed.

She nods at her dad, then faces the door again. She takes a deep breath, not to work up her courage but to cool her anger a bit, and pounds on the door.

Neal answers in less than thirty seconds. He pulls the door wide, shoves his hands in his pockets, and leans his shoulder into the doorframe.
"Hey, Em," he says. "I hope you're not here for the housewarming party. I don't have the place set up yet."

"Shut up," she says. "Where is he?"

Neal's confused face is almost comical. "Who?" he asks.

"Killian. Where is he?"

"You lost your pirate?" Neal smirks. "Have you tried following a treasure map?"

"Don't play games, Neal. Where is he?"

"I don't know where Hook is," Neal scoffs, shaking his head at her like she's being silly.

It's a lie.

Emma narrows her eyes. Neal never believed in her superpower, but he apparently does believe that he's a good liar—and maybe he is, to other people, but not to Emma.

"Is he in the house?"

"No."

That's true. Killian's not here.

"Is he still alive?" she asks.

"Emma, what are even you talking about?"

His old play, trying to make her feel stupid and irrational.

Killian's alive, Emma's certain of it. If he was dead, Neal would be flaunting it, throwing it in her face, but he's not.

"Neal, if you hurt him, I will kill you," she says quietly.

"I haven't hurt Hook. I haven't done anything. Look, he's a pirate, right? He probably just ran off."

"He didn't just run off," she says, and then, before she can stop herself. "He's not you."

Neal's smile vanishes. The cheerful light leaves his eyes, and they go flat. "I don't where Hook is," he says. "If I were you, I'd check the bars—or the brothels. I'm sure he just went back to his old ways."

"You don't know him," Emma says.

"And you think you do?" Neal sneers. "He broke up my parents, Emma, and now..."

He stops himself, and Emma sees a genuine flicker of alarm cross his face before it's schooled back to calmness once more.

Emma can't help the mocking smile that curls her lips. "And now what?" she asks, one eyebrow raising. "You think he's in your way? You think he's stopping you from being with me and Henry?"

Neal just stares.
"Apparently you haven't picked up on this yet, but you and me? That's not happening," Emma says. She watches for him, watches his eyes and the twitch in his cheek, and waits for that information to settle. "Now, are you going to tell me where Killian is, or am I going to have to find him myself?"

"I told you I don't know where he is," Neal says.

Emma nods. "Alright. I'd better not see you again after this," she says, "because if I do, I'm putting a bullet in your fucking head."

She doesn't wait to see his reaction; she turns on her heel and walks down the steps and down the walkway to join her dad on the sidewalk. Side-by-side, they make their way up the street to where they parked Snow's car. Will catches up to them from behind, and, ahead of them, Robin materializes out of a large, ornamental shrub.

"What did Neal say?" David asks in a low voice.

Killian opens his eyes—eye. One of them is stuck, apparently. In fact, the whole left side of his face feels tender and a bit crusty; he assumes the eye that won't open is either swollen shut or sealed with dried blood—or both.

He gazes around blearily with his good eye, trying to get his bearings. He's outside and yet not, it's day time and yet it's dark, he's upright and yet he can't possibly be standing on his own two feet. He closes his eye, takes several long, deep breaths, and tries to remember how he got into this mess in the first place.

It was nighttime, he was walking through the fog, on his way to meet Henry at Ava's ice cream shop and escort him safely back to the loft...he heard a sound, two glowing eyes appeared in the mist above him, too high above the ground to be a man, and then it attacked...

Pan's Shadow.

He almost didn't believe it—he still can't completely comprehend it—but he can't deny it. The Shadow survived.

The question is, why is Killian still alive? The last thing he remembers is the creature grabbing him, he assumed to rip out his shadow—so why isn't he in a coma, like the others were? Or dead?

Killian opens his eye once more and takes another look around. He's at the docks—below them, really. Judging by the width and length of the timber expanse over his head, he's beneath one of the lesser used wharfs south of the main harbor, not far from the warehouse he and Henry spar in every morning.

As far as he can tell, he's alone. There's neither human nor abnormally sinister shadow lurking in the semi-darkness around him.

Killian tries to move and finds that he can't; there are thick ropes across his chest, hips, and thighs, binding him tightly to what he guesses is a wooden post. He strains forward, but the ropes refuse to budge, so he ceases struggling. He sags against his restraints, letting them bear the burden of his weight so he can conserve what little energy he has while he plots his next move.

It's sometime right before or right after low tide, so it must be mid-afternoon or a little later.

His trousers and boots are dry, which suggests he was only moved to his current location recently, and the only reason to chain a person up this way is for them to die a slow, miserable death.

He tilts his head back to rest against the post, and stares out at the sea. The spit of sand he's standing on is currently dry, but he can see water nibbling at the edges of his little island, perhaps 20 yards away.

Not far enough.

The waves look almost inviting; there's hardly any wind, and the surface of the water is calm, glittering here and then with snatches of reflected sunlight. In few hours' time, however, that water will be anything but inviting. It will be cold, he knows, as it inches up his legs, past his thighs, his chest...

High tide will be well after sunset, but he'll be drowned before the sky reaches full dark.
Killian almost laughs.

Drowned in less than 8 feet of water. What a sad way for a pirate to go.

Only, Killian Jones doesn't intend to go anywhere.

He closes his eye again, and shifts his attention, listening for footsteps on the boards above, or voices. Emma should have realized something happened to him by now. She's probably up there somewhere, searching. The problem is, Killian's position isn't visible from higher ground, and he's not certain whether or not Emma would ever think to climb all the way down here to look—whether anyone would.

Perhaps if he screams loud enough, someone nearby will hear him.

He's about to give it a try when a voice interrupts him.

"Contemplating your demise?"

Killian's eye flies open and his head snaps up.

"Surprised?" Neal asks.

Killian's survival instincts kick in, and his mouth starts moving of its own accord.

"Not really," he replies evenly. "I figured you left me down here because you couldn't stomach killing me yourself, although I'll admit I didn't expect you to come watch."

Neal smiles slowly, then he slips his hands into his pocket, turns, and begins pacing a circle around Killian.

"I thought about drowning you this morning and just getting it over and done with," he says as he tracks to the left and disappears from Killian's line of sight. "But then I realized that drowning you in the dark is so much more...dramatic."

Neal reappears on Killian's right, close enough for Killian to feel his breath.

"Is it true what they say, that deep down every sailor's greatest fear is drowning?"

Killian looks at him sidelong for a moment, and then turns his gaze forward, letting the sight of the sea anchor him. He won't rise to Neal's bait; he won't let his temper make him lose control.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks.

"Revenge, I guess." Neal shrugs and steps away, moving to stand in front of Killian. "You can understand that, right?"

"Revenge for what?"

"For destroying my family."

"I already told you," he says harshly. "I didn't kill Milah. Your father did."

A small, amused smile tugs at Neal's lips, but he doesn't reply.

Killian remembers Baelfire's fury when he discovered Milah's portrait, when he learned that Killian was the pirate who supposedly stole her away from her family.
This isn't that. This is something else.

"You're not talking about your parents, are you?" Killian asks quietly.

"You said you'd back off and give me a chance with Emma," Neal says. "You lied."

"I didn't lie," Killian says.

After their dalliance aboard the Jolly Roger, Emma avoided him. Killian understood that she needed space, that he couldn't expect her to open her heart to him immediately, that, after everything that happened in Neverland and to Henry, she required time to heal and to think.

When he saw her in the diner with her son and saw the way she looked at him, he was reminded that the boy and his happiness were the most important things in Emma's life; when he saw Neal, hovering near them but not engaging, he decided to do the right thing and give the three of them a chance to be a family, for the boy's sake.

"Yes, you did," Neal spits. "You lied to my face, and then you seduced Emma behind my back."

The temporary postponement of Killian's pursuit of Emma Swan lasted for several hours—until Emma Swan pursued him.

She initiated their second encounter, in the men's washroom at Granny's after everyone else had gone home. Killian admits he didn't refuse—he couldn't refuse. His body answered the call of hers, and Killian was helpless to stop it.

Neal's lips twist in a sneer. "I shouldn't be surprised; that's what you do, isn't it? You seduce women and destroy families. If you hadn't gone and gotten Emma pregnant—if she hadn't had that kid..."

Killian feels the first bubbles of rage simmering in the pit of his stomach. His hand balls into a fist, nails biting the skin of his palm. He focuses on it, focuses on the pain.

"I did all this," Neal says, lifting his arms and sweeping them out in a gesture meant to take in everything around them, "for Emma and Henry. I fought to get back here for 7 years so we could finally be a family." He drops his arms to his sides, his hands slapping his thighs loudly. "Instead I find out that you ruined everything, and now Emma's stuck with your kid-"

"You watch your tongue," Killian growls. His anger is boiling just beneath the surface, barely held in check.

"Oh, like you even care," Neal says. "All you've ever cared about is yourself. You're just using that kid to get close to Emma again and you know it." Neal's demeanor changes abruptly, from scornful to magnanimous. He slips his hands back into his pockets and says, "Here, I'll make you a deal. If you promise to leave and stay away from Emma and Henry forever, I'll let you go. The Shadow can bring you back to the Enchanted Forest, and you can return to being a pirate."

"Can't do that, mate."

I won't leave Ian.

I won't leave Emma.

Neal grins, and his eyes glint strangely. "I was sort of hoping you'd say that," he says softly, and suddenly his voice is not his own—its sound reminds Killian of snakes slithering through dead; it's the voice of the Dark One.
Above, a clump of darkness detaches itself from the shadows clinging to the timber beams over Killian's head, and drifts slowly downwards to stand beside Neal.

"How is it still alive?" Killian asks, glaring at Pan's Shadow.

Neal smirks. "Fire didn't kill it the first time, so why did you guys think it would work the second time?"

The Shadow's eyes, fixed on Killian, glow brighter, like two white-hot coals. Apparently, it doesn't appreciate the amount of time's Killian's attempted to destroy it.

"So, the creature does your bidding now, is that it?" Killian says.

"We have an agreement," Neal says. "It helps me get what I want, and I'll make sure no one gets in the way of it getting what it wants—oh man, it really did a number on your face, by the way," he chuckles abruptly, lifting the back of his hand to his mouth to stifle his laughter. "I wish you could see."

"If you enjoy my black eye so much, why don't you untie me and I'll give you one of your own?" Killian suggests in a deadly whisper, leaning forward as far as the ropes will allow.

With a few final chortles, Neal regains control of himself. "No, no, that's not what's going to happen," he says, waving one hand dismissively. "This is what's going to happen."

Beside him, Pan's Shadow shape-shifts, and Killian's suddenly staring across the sand at his doppelganger. Ice floods his veins as he watches his own lips curve in a savage grin; the Shadow wearing his face winks at him and then disappears.

Killian tenses, straining every muscle against his bonds.

"What are you going to do?" he asks Neal hoarsely.

Neal's eyes are dancing, drinking in Killian's panic with sheer delight.

"You once told me that you didn't think Emma would take me back because I'd already walked out on her once," he says. "This time, you are going to be the one that walks out on her."

"No!" he shouts, and starts to struggle.

Better to die than to let Emma think he abandoned her and Ian. He can't let that happen to them, he can't let them be hurt that way.

He throws himself wildly from side to side, trying to loosen his bonds. He thinks he's made progress when Neal narrows his eyes, and the ropes across his chest tighten, pressing the air from his lungs so violently he gasps.

Neal's smile grows wider, and the fire in Killian's chest burns hotter.

"I won't let you do this!" he pants, glaring, then he throws his head back, and bellows, "EMMA!"

The only response he receives is more of Neal's chuckling.

The sun's beginning to sink low in the sky when the Apprentice calls to tell them he's nearly finished with the locator spell, and will bring it to the loft as soon as he can, very likely within the hour.
The news loosens the grip of the fist that's been strangling Emma's heart all day. Waiting was not easy.

Emma says goodbye and thank you to the Apprentice, hangs up her phone, and goes upstairs to wake up Henry. She's not surprised to find him already awake, lying on his back, staring at the fading streaks of sunlight on the ceiling.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," he responds dully.

"Did you get any sleep?"

He has his hands folded beneath his head, but he still manages a shrug.

"Everything alright?" she asks.

His lips twist in a sardonic smile, and he raises one eyebrow meaningfully at her.

"Yea, I know," she sighs, then gestures at the bed. "Can I sit?"

Henry shifts to his left to make space, and Emma perches lightly on the edge of the mattress.

Bad idea.

It's the first rest she's allowed her body in hours. She had to keep busy to prevent her thoughts from returning to imagining where Killian was and what might be happening to him, and wound up cleaning the entire first floor of the loft. She poured all of her anger and frustration into eliminating every molecule of dust, grease, and dirt within reach, and now she feels pleasantly, satisfyingly empty.

She can feel terror, creeping in at the edges of her exhaustion, but, for the moment, her exhaustion is too surmountable an obstacle for fear to take hold again.

"Are you alright?" Henry asks, pointedly.

"Yea," Emma says. "Just tired."

Truthfully, she's not sure whether she'll be able to stand up again. Her legs feel like two tubes of jelly attached to the bag of aches and pure fatigue that is the rest of her body.

"Didn't you try to sleep?"

"No, I...cleaned."

"You cleaned?" Henry says, grinning. "You?"

Cleaning is not Emma's favorite. She only ever does so reluctantly, and only because she's trying to set a good example for Henry and Ian. They both know how much she hates it though, which is probably why they're so resistant to the whole cleaning thing themselves.

"Yea, I know," she says, and because she's currently too drained to feel any real emotion, jokes, "Maybe Killian should get kidnapped more often."

Henry's grin fades. "Mom?"
"Hm?"

"Do you really think Neal did it?"

Emma does, but she can't bring herself to say so. Instead, she asks, "Is that what you were sitting up here worrying about?"

"I think..." He pauses and licks his lips. "I think it might be my fault."

"Henry, it's not-" she starts, but is interrupted by him moving suddenly to sit up.

"I saw Neal yesterday," he says. "At the docks. He came to the warehouse when I was there by myself practicing."

Emma feels like an ice cube slipped into her stomach. "What did he say?"

"He wanted to hang out but I told him I didn't want to. He asked if I'd rather spend time with Hook, and..." Henry's voice and eyes are pleading for forgiveness. "I said yes—I mean, I didn't say yes, but I implied it."

He frowns, gaze searching hers.

"It's my fault, isn't it?" he asks quietly.

"Henry, the only person responsible for Neal's decisions is Neal," she says firmly. "What happened to Killian isn't your fault."

"But what I said to Neal made him do what he did, didn't it?"

Emma takes a deep, steadying breath, and reaches for Henry's hand to cover it with her own. She looks at him, and chooses to see the adult in him rather than the little kid this time.

"Neal spent 7 years trying to get back to this world so that you, me, and him could be together again. He thinks Killian is in the way of that happening."

Henry's eyes widen slightly. "What about Ian? Does he think Ian is in the way?"

"I don't know," Emma says.

Something in Henry's gaze hardens. His frown deepens, and his eyes drift slowly to the side. After a moment, he shakes his head and looks back at Emma. "What if I talk to him? Tell him I'll start spending time with him if he lets Hook go?"

"It's not safe, Henry," she says. "He's not just Neal, he's the Dark One, and I think the Darkness has more control over him than he knows. Even if I believed you really wanted to go hang out with him right now, I wouldn't let you. I don't want him near you until we get the Darkness out of him."

"Do you think the Darkness made him do this?"

"I don't think Neal would do something like this on his own," she says, and it's the truth. As crappy of a human being as Neal is, she has to admit that kidnapping Killian is a bit more extreme than anything she thinks he's capable of—trying to fist fight Killian in public while both their sons are present and forced to watch would be more Neal's style.

Henry nods, and Emma can tell he's relieved. She gives his hand a pat, and then stands up—her legs protest, but she makes them obey. She wobbles for a moment, knees trembling, and when she's
"The Apprentice is almost done with the locator spell," she says. "He should be here soon. Why don't you change and come downstairs?"

His eyes light up hopefully. "Can I help? When you guys go to find Hook?"

"No, I want you to stay with Ian. I don't want to leave him alone."

"Grandma will be here, won't she?"

"That's not what I mean. He needs one of us. You or me."

"Mom-"

"Henry, please. I need you to do this."

Over the years they’ve learned each other’s languages. Henry knows when he can push and wheedle, when he can wiggle out of something, extend his privileges, put off or avoid punishment, but he also knows not to fight her on those mostly rare occasions when she won't budge.

He snaps his jaw shut, and his eyes flash, but he says, "Fine."

"Thank you," Emma says. She takes a step forward, leans down, and kisses Henry's forehead. "See you downstairs."

Truthfully, Emma doesn't want Henry joining them because she's afraid they might find Neal when they find Killian, and if Neal's there then Emma does not want Henry there, caught up in the middle of things.

She leaves Henry sitting on the bed, looking unhappy, and goes downstairs to find her other, equally unhappy son.

Ian's on the couch with David. He dismantled his fort just enough to be able to watch cartoons from inside of it, and he allowed David to join him. David's currently asleep, dozing with his head lolling along the back of the couch. Ian is tucked against his side, still stubbornly wide awake. His eyes flick away from the TV to watch her approach, but otherwise he doesn't move.

Emma glances at David—his mouth is wide open in a silent snore, which would be funny on any other occasion—before she reaches down to run her hand over Ian's hair, and whisper, "Hey, are you hungry?"

Ian shakes his head.

"Thirsty? Want some juice?"

He shakes his head again.

"How about chocolate milk?"

"No," he mumbles.

"Beer?"

Surprised, he gives her a small smile.
She smiles back, and brushes her thumb along his cheek. Killian's journal entry flashes across her mind: *He looks like Emma when he smiles.*

She's not sure if it's true; all she sees when she looks at Ian is Killian. He has Emma's coloring, her blonde hair and light skin and some pale freckles along his nose, but the shapes are all Killian's shapes, and the hue of Ian's eyes match the color of Killian's eyes exactly.

A spike of anguish runs through her.

What if Ian and Killian never see each other again? What if all he ever has of his dad is a month's worth of memories—memories that may fade over time?

Her fear returns full force, vaporizing her exhaustion.

What if *Emma* never sees Killian again?

The fist that gripped her heart all day tightens its fingers once more, painfully.

Emma's memories won't fade; she'll live every single day in agony remembering the way Killian looked at Ian, how his voice sounded when he talked to him and how he had a special smile just for his son; she'll remember how *she* felt around Killian, she'll remember the touch of his hand and the press of his body against hers, she'll remember his gentleness, the soft look in his eye he got sometimes, the way he made her feel safe...

Fuck.

Emma didn't even *love* Graham and his death put new cracks in her already fractured heart. If she loses Killian, it might break her entirely. She feels wobbly on the inside again, as if there's something in there made of glass, something perched high on a precipice, ready to tumble off, ready to shatter.

"Mom?"

Emma realizes there are tears stinging her eyes. She blinks rapidly to banish them but only manages to send a few streaking down her cheeks. Ian's face immediately begins a slow crumpling inwards, and Emma panics.

*Domino effect.*

If she cries, Ian will cry, and if Ian starts crying, then Emma will just cry more.

She swipes at her tears, not bothering to pretend they weren't there in the first place, and plasters her smile back on.

"Can you help me wake grandpa up? The Apprentice is gonna be here soon."

Ian's forehead un-crinkles, and his lower lip stops trembling. "And then you're going to find my dad?" he asks.

"Yea."

Ian nods, then twists onto his belly before climbing to his knees. He puts two hands on David's chest, and gives him a gentle shake.

"Grandpa," he says, then, louder. "Grandpa!"

David awakes with a great snort, his jaw snapping shut with an audible click of teeth, and jerks his
head up to stare bewilderedly at Ian.

"Hi," Ian says brightly, grinning.


"You gotta wake up. Dumbledore's coming."

David makes a confused face, then he says, "Oh," and looks at Emma.

"I'll make you guys some sandwiches," Snow calls from the kitchen. "You should eat before you go. Henry, are you hungry?"

Emma hears Henry say "Yes," over the sound of his feet on the stairs, but she doesn't turn around.

"We're going to find him, Emma," David says.

She nods, but doesn't respond.

David looks away, at Ian, and grins. "Tickle monster?"

"No!" Ian gasps, but it's too late.

David's arm shoots around Ian's waist and locks him against his side. His free hand locates the nearest armpit, and starts tickling. Ian dissolves into giggles and wriggles like a fish caught in a net.

Emma can't help but smile.

A month ago, all Henry and Ian had was her. She was solely responsible for all their needs, physical and emotional. It was fine—okay, it was better than fine; Emma loved it. She loves being their mom. But this is nice too. Better, maybe—or just more.

That's it. It's more.

She turns at looks at Henry, working on an assembly line of sandwiches with Snow in the kitchen. He's a changed a bit over the past month, in good ways. In spite of all the shit that's going on, Storybrooke is bringing out some of his old self, bringing out a lightheartedness Emma hasn't seen in him in a long time.

With one more glance at the tickle fight happening on the couch, Emma goes to help Henry and her mom. She's halfway to the kitchen when there's a knock on the door.

The Apprentice, she thinks, and veers off to the right, towards the door.

She's shaking with anticipation, beyond ready to go find Killian but also extremely frightened of the possibilities that await the end of their search, but when she opens the door all of that vanishes, and her heart jumps into her throat.

It's not the Apprentice standing in the threshold, it's Killian.

Emma takes several rapid, shocked steps backwards.

"Killian?"

He smiles at her. "Aye."
"Where have you been? What happened?"

Killian shrugs. "I've been around, love."

Killian steps into the loft and closes the door behind him. He stands there, one hand slung in his jacket pocket with his thumb on the outside, and his hook hand hanging loosely against his other side.

Emma can't move, she can't speak, she can't wrap her mind around what's going on. Killian's looking at her, but he's not really looking at her—there's something odd in his eyes, something detached and cold and inhuman.

Something's not right—Killian's not right.

Snow and Henry join Emma, and while Emma continues to stare, Snow says, "I don't understand. We've been looking everywhere for you."

"I needed some space," Killian says. "To think."

"Think about what?" Snow asks.

Killian takes a deep breath, and says, "I've decided to leave."

"Leave?" David demands loudly. He and Ian are there too.

"Aye. I'm leaving Storybrooke. I'm leaving..." Killian removes his hand from his jacket to gesture flippantly at Emma and Ian. "This." He sticks his hand back in his pocket, and shrugs again. "Family life isn't for me. I'm a pirate, that's where I belong. I'm returning to the Enchanted Forest."

"How?" Snow says. "How can you just leave?"

Emma doesn't hear Killian's response. She's looking at Ian, at the pure fury contorting his face and turning his cheeks red. It's like watching a pot of water bubble—and then boil over.

"You're not my dad!" he bursts out, interrupting whatever Killian was saying.

Killian's eyes flick to Ian. He falters for a moment, and then grins. "What?"

"I said you're not my dad!"

"Of course I am. I-"

Ian's hands ball into fists and he rushes at Killian. "No!" he yells, and pushes Killian hard in the stomach. Killian grunts and takes a step backwards.

"Ian!" David says. He reaches for Ian, and Snow hisses, "Emma!" in her ear, but Emma's frozen. She feels disconnected from the bizarre scene playing out in front of her. It's not real, this isn't reality-Ian shrugs off David's hands and gives Killian another shove. Killian takes another stumbling step backwards. Emma sees a vicious, nasty snarl cross his face, and as Ian rushes forward to give him a third push, Killian knocks him to the side with a sweep of his hook arm.

Emma feels like she's been punched. She snaps back to herself, just in time to see Ian's butt collide with the floor and his hands shoot up to clutch his head.

She moves, but Henry moves faster.
"HEY!" He bolts in and cracks Killian solidly across the jaw.

Killian staggers sideways—right into David.

David's arm slithers around Killian's neck and pulls him tight into a chokehold. Killian scrabbles at David's flesh, first with his hand, and then with his hook. David cries out as metal pierces his skin, but he grits his teeth and doesn't let go.

Emma runs to Ian. She picks him up, sets him on his feet, and turns, putting her body in between him and Killian and pushing him towards Snow's waiting hands.

As she spins around to face Killian and David again she seizes her magic. Without thinking, she whips out a rope of white light like a lasso, loops it around Killian's hook, and tears it from its brace. She's about to fling it away when she stops.

The figure grappling with David isn't Killian.

It looks like Killian, but it's not him.

Hiding inside of Killian's skin is the Shadow.

"Oh my God," she says. The rope of white light vanishes, and Killian's hook drops to the floor with a clatter.

"What is it?" David pants through clenched teeth.

Instead of telling him, Emma shows him—Emma shows everyone.

She reaches for the lapels of Killian's jacket, but instead of grabbing onto the leather she pushes her hands deeper, past the Killian disguise and into the Shadow. She sinks both hands into its dark form until she feels resistance, and then she holds on tight and shakes it.

The image of Killian crumbles and falls away, and then it's just the Shadow.

David shouts, startled. His arms loosen from around the Shadow—fractionally, but enough for the Shadow to break out of his grasp.

Emma holds on.

Emma still has both hands stuck wrist deep in its chest, and she digs her fingers in. The Shadow writhes in agony, glowing eyes narrowed to slits, and Emma curls her fingers more, hands nearly clenching into fists. She doesn't know what she's squeezing, but she doesn't care.

The Shadow screams, and starts pounding her arms with its own, hard enough that Emma starts to lose her grip on it.

_Fuck._

_Fuck, fuck, fuck._

Desperately, she dips into her magic again, draws it up out of the core of her being and funnels it down her arms and into her hands. White light pours from her palms and floods the inside of the Shadow, eating away at the blackness.

It spreads outwards, faster and faster until the entire inside of the Shadow is filled up. Fissures then appear on its surface, and white light bursts through the cracks, ripping them wider. Emma gives her
magic one final, enormous push; Emma's hands grow hot, the white light flares blindingly bright—and then the Shadow bursts.

There's an explosion of heat, and Emma gasps. She throws her arms over her face to shield it, but the heat and the light quickly fade, and she drops them almost instantly.

David's across from her, staring in astonishment at the spot Pan's Shadow just disappeared from. His wide eyes drop lower and meet hers.

"That was—I don't even..." He lets out a deep breath, like air rushing from a balloon, and says, "You destroyed it." He gives his head a little incredulous shake, and a smile creeps across his face. "That was amazing."

A pair of hands bury themselves in Emma's sweater, and she turns to find Ian.

"It was real," he says, balling his fists in her shirt. "Mom, the shadow was real."

She slips an arm around his shoulders and pulls him against her side. One of her hands cups the back of his head and cradles it.

"It was," she says. "But it's gone now." For real, this time. "It can't hurt you."

Ian frowns up at her. "What about my dad?"

"We're still gonna find him. He's-"

There's another knock on the door.

David moves quickly to answer it. He opens the door a little more aggressively than necessary, only to reveal the mild smile of the Apprentice. His smile quickly turns to a scowl, however, as he looks past David, at the air in front of Emma, and then at Emma herself.

Emma doesn't even bother asking what he knows or how he knows it, she just says, "You just missed all the fun. Do you have the locator spell?"

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It takes a few minutes to get Ian calmed down and settled in his fort with Henry and Roger the crab.

"I'll call you as soon as we find your dad," she assures him, then plants a kiss on his forehead, and leaves the living room to join the others near the door.

"I'll make sure they're safe," Snow says. She holds out Killian's jacket, neatly folded.

"I know," Emma replies. She takes the coat from her mom and gives her a brief hug, then she leads her dad and the Apprentice out of the loft, down the stairwell, and into the street.

The sun is beginning to set, and the sky is a blazing swathe of deep orange fading into magentas and purples. Emma's heart starts racing. She doesn't know why, but she feels like once darkness sets in, that's it, it's over.

She turns briskly to the Apprentice. "Okay, how does this work?" she asks.

"Hold on," David says, holding up a hand. "We should wait for Robin, Will, and-"

"We don't have time, dad," Emma cuts him off. "Pan's Shadow didn't just decide on its own to
pretend to be Killian and break up with me. Someone made it do that—**Neal** made it do that, and if he realizes we killed the Shadow, he might kill Killian."

She realizes she said *break up*, as if she and Killian were a couple.

*Aren't we?* a voice whispers inside of her.

With a silent growl, she shoves that voice way, way down, and focuses on glaring her dad into agreement.

He glowers back, stubbornly.

"*Please*, dad," she pleads quietly. "I can't let anything happen to Killian."

"And I can't let anything happen to *you*," he says, pale blue eyes full of worry, and then sighs. "I'll call Robin once we activate the spell and tell him we're on the move and which direction we're heading in. Hopefully they can meet up with us."

Emma nods gratefully, and then holds up Killian's jacket, offering it to the Apprentice.

"Just hold it steady," he says. He pulls a small vial of a translucent bluish liquid from his breast pocket, uncorks it, and pours it over the jacket. When the vial's empty, he returns it to his pocket.

"Okay, now what-"

The jacket shudders in her hand, and, surprised, Emma lets go. It doesn't fall, but remains hanging in midair.

It slowly unfolds and unfurls, until it looks as if it's being worn by an invisible man. The sight is eerie, and it makes Emma's stomach churn. She feels like she's staring at Killian's ghost—it's hovering at the right height, and Emma swears it's even positioned the way it would be if Killian was wearing it and doing his jaunty pirate captain pose.

After a moment, it starts drifting slowly down the street, heading south.

"Now we follow it," the Apprentice says. "It will lead us right to Killian."

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It doesn't take them as far as Emma expected—she expected a two hour's hike through the woods to some hidden cave or secret grotto, but instead the jacket takes them to the docks on the south end of town, ear where Henry and Killian practice sword-fighting every morning.

They're crossing the parking lot towards the sea wall and the piers when Robin and Will appear and jog across the gravel to join them.

"Where's Ruby?" David asks.

"A few minutes behind us," Robin says. "She'll be here shortly."

"Is this it then?" Will asks, nodding ahead, towards where Killian's jacket is slowly floating towards the water.

"I think so," Emma says. "I think we're close."

"We were already here," Robin says, squinting around at the jumble of warehouses, storage sheds,
and boats. "We didn't find anything."

"Neal could have moved him here after you guys looked," Emma suggests.

"He could have been moving Killian around to different locations all day," David says, agitatedly. "Or he could have used the Dark One's magic to hide him—we could have walked within five feet of Killian and not known."

"What a bloody prick-" Will starts.

"It doesn't matter," Emma interjects. "Look, I know you three have been searching all day and you're tired but this is it—this is the end. The only thing we have to focus on is right now, and then we can all go home and sleep."

Robin inclines his head slightly, and Will closes his mouth.

A wave of guilt washes over her, and she says, "I'm sorry. I really do appreciate everything you've done today. Thank you."

Robin smiles. "Killian's our friend, Emma, and so are you. You don't have to thank us."

Emma returns his smile.

More, she thinks. This is more.

David touches her sleeve. "We'd better hurry before we lose the light," he says quietly.

Emma follows him to Killian's jacket. It paused, as if waiting for them, and once they're near it again it continues drifting towards the water. It leads them right up to the edge of the sea wall, but then it falters.

"What's happening?" Emma asks.

"There's other magic here," the Apprentice says. "Dark magic. It's interfering with the locator spell."

"So we're close," she murmurs, and peers around. To their right is a series of piers, and to their left is a wharf, roughly fifty yards wide and jutting nearly twenty yards into the sea. She looks down, past the toes of her boots, just hanging over the edge of the sea wall, into the water below. The tide's coming in. It hasn't reach its peak, but it's probably up to at least four feet by now.

Emma has the sudden, horrifying certainty that Killian's down there somewhere, drowning or about to be drowned.

She looks back up at the jacket. It's shivering in midair, and suddenly it sags, as if the magic's draining out of it.

No!

She grabs the sleeve, runs the soft, worn leather lovingly in between her fingers, and then urges it to find him.

Fuck that other magic, she tells it. Find Killian.

Her own magic is still sizzling under her skin from destroying the Shadow, and she feels it pass from her hand to the jacket. It raises itself up, hovers boldly for a moment, and then plunges downwards.
Emma holds her breath, afraid the jacket will dive into the water, but just before it does it pulls up and glides along the surface. It swerves to the left, and disappears into the shadows beneath the wharf.

"Aw," Will says from just behind her. "I didn't bring me swim trunks—that's what they're called, right? Swim trunks?"

"Shush," Robin says.

Emma rakes her eyes from side to side, searching for a way down that doesn't involve jumping—and finds it. Nearby, there are iron rungs set into the concrete wall, forming a ladder that runs from the top of the sea wall down into the water.

"I'm going," she says, and starts towards it.

David grabs her arm, and halts her. She whips around, venom on her tongue, but David's eyes stop her.

"Let me go first," he says. "Just in case." When Emma nods, he turns to the others. "Robin, your bow's useless down there. Will you stay up here with the Apprentice?"

"Aye," Robin says. He draws an arrow from the quiver and his hip, and sets it to his bowstring.

David then looks at Will. "You're with us," he says. "You have your knives, right?"

"Of course," Will answers with a grin, and pats his hips.

"Alright, let's go."

David's the first one over the side of the sea wall and onto the iron rungs. When he's halfway down, Emma follows.

"Just jump," David says, when she's nearing the bottom. "The water's cold. Best to just get in and get it over with."

Emma takes a deep breath, and leaps. Her feet hit the bottom earlier than she was prepared for, and her knees buckle, but she manages not to submerge entirely. As it is, the water's chest-level on her, and it's icy.

Will jumps in beside her, splashing her only a little, and when he finishes gasping and spluttering, he says, "Would now be a good time to mention that I can't swim?"

"Seriously?" Emma asks.

Seriously," Will intones solemnly.

"We'd better start moving then," David says.

Together, the three of them start wading towards the wharf.

It's slow going; Emma's boots are flooded and heavy, the waves beat at her from the side, constantly knocking her off course, and the larger ones surge over her shoulders.

Also, it's **fucking cold**.

Within a minute Emma's shivering uncontrollably. She keeps her arms up and out of the water, but
that's almost worse; every time the wind blows she's hit with a fresh chills.

Will's just behind her. Emma can hear him panting and mumbling curses to himself. David's ahead, moving much faster, and he reaches the first row of posts supporting the wharf well before them.

"KILLIAN!" he bellows into the darkness.

There's silence, just the crashing of waves and the trickling of water, and then, "David?"

Killian's voice opens up a warm spot inside of her. She forgets all about the salt water in her mouth and shouts, "Killian! Killian, we're coming!"

"Emma!" he yells, relief and desperation clear in his voice.

Emma starts slogging through the water with renewed energy, and quickly catches up to David. They pass the posts side by side, and wade deeper into the darkness below the wharf.

"Killian," she says again, so he knows they're getting closer.

"Emma," he gasps—far closer than Emma anticipated.

In the murky light, Emma thinks she sees him, tied to one of the posts.

"Emma," he says again. "The water—they're not real, you mustn't be afraid."

"What?" she asks, and then she's forced to stop and brace herself as another wave sloshes against her, spilling more salt water into her mouth. She spits it out, ignores the cold water seeping into her ear, and starts walking again.

"What?" she repeats.

"-in the water, love," she hears, and then something bumps her leg.

Emma freezes, and nearly pees her pants.

Passing alongside her beneath the water is an enormous, pale shape.

She realizes what it is, and her insides immediately liquefy.

"Shark," she squeaks.

David stops. "What?"

"Shark," she says, swallowing the scream clawing its way up her throat. "There's a shark."

"Fuck me," Will swears under his breath, while David says, "Where? Are you sure?"

To David's right, on the open ocean side, a grey fin crests the water, and disappears again.

"There!" she says, pointing.

David twists around. "Where? I didn't see anything."

"Emma!" Killian says urgently. "Emma, listen to me. They're not real, love."

"The fuck are you talking about?" she cries wildly as she sees the fin again, this time to the left, and closer.
"I saw it too!" Will says. "Holy shit!"

Emma hears splashing, and then out of the corner of her eye she sees Will brandishing a knife.

David yells wordlessly and hastily sidesteps as the fin emerges near his elbow—then two fins surface simultaneously, then a third, and a fourth...

They're surrounded.

"Listen to me!" Killian shouts. "I'm telling you they're not real!"

"But-" Emma starts.

"IT'S A TRICK!"

Emma squeezes her eyes shut, sucks in a breath, and holds it.

Remembering what happened when she flooded Killian's room with her magic, she scoops out a handful and releases it now into the water.

It spreads, touches David and Will, and then Killian—Emma shudders when it does because she can feel his numb legs and battered torso and the stinging gash over his eye—but when it touches the sharks, Emma doesn't sense flesh and blood and bone, Emma only senses magic, a magic that feels slick and oozy, like oil.

She retracts her magic, and opens her eyes.

"It's a trick," she says, and plunges past David. Instantly, the sharks vanish.

It takes thirty seconds of extremely determined wading to reach Killian.

His teeth flash in a grin when he sees her, and he says, "Swan."

Emma wishes she could return the warm greeting, but the sight of his damaged face, even in the dim lighting, is horrifying.

"Fuck," she whispers, and raises her hand to cup his good cheek—the other side of his face is bruised and swollen, covered in congealed blood and pink streaks where the blood mixed with seawater.

He leans his face into her hand, and whispers, "Did you miss me, love?"

A laugh that's half sob bursts from her chest. Her free hand slides up Killian's chest and grips the lapel of his jacket.

"We're gonna get you out of here," she says.

He smiles once more and closes his eye.

David and Will splash up beside her, and round the post.

"Will." David says. "Knife."

Will hands David the knife he's already holding, then reaches his hand into the water, and pulls out another one.
"Be careful of my hand, lads," Killian says without opening his eye. "I've only got the one left, you see. It'd be a shame to lose it."

Will chuckles, and then he and David begin sawing away at the ropes. Slowly, Killian's upper body peels away from the post as David and Will hack through his bonds. When his torso is free, Killian sags forward. Emma catches him, wrapping her arms around his ribcage just as his head falls heavily on her shoulder.

"Emma," he says again, whispering her name like a prayer.

"I'm here," she whispers back. "I'm here. I've got you."

"I'd never abandon you," he mumbles.

"I know, Killian. I know."

"Or Ian."

"I know."

"I love you," he says.

His words shiver through her.

"What?"

He doesn't respond.

"Killian?"

Still, no answer.

"Shit, you guys need to hurry. I think he passed out."

"Almost there," David says. "Hold on."

His body grows heavier and heavier, and just when Emma thinks she can't hold him up any longer, Will and David finally finish. They tuck their knives away and help Emma lower Killian into the water up to his shoulders, and turn him onto his back.

They pull Killian's floating body through the water, retracing their steps back to the sea wall. The water's definitely higher, and Emma has to struggle to keep up with the pace David is setting. Eventually, she gives up and lets David do the heavy lifting while she concentrates on moving her legs and keeping Killian's head from submerging.

"I love you."

Something flutters in her stomach, but then something else, that wobbly thing inside her, that about-to-shatter thing, flutters too.

Emma tightens her fist in Killian's jacket, grits her teeth, and returns her focus to plowing through the water.

When they reach the iron rungs, David turns to her. "How are we going to get him up?"

"I don't know. Do we have any rope?" Emma says.
"Well, we did," Will says, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the wharf. "Should we have brought it with us?"

"I can go back for it," David says.

"Wait!" calls a voice from above.

Emma cranes her head back, and sees several silhouettes leaning over the sea wall. Emma recognizes Robin and the Apprentice, but she can't figure out who the other four are until she realizes they're backlight by flashing red lights.

One of the figures leans farther out, and long, dark hair falls over her shoulders.

Emma smiles.

Ruby's there, and she brought an ambulance.

From the shadows of a narrow alleyway between two warehouses, Neal watches the ambulance drive away.

"Well, that's unfortunate."

The voice is not his voice. It's a voice he's never sure if he's hearing with his ears or in his mind.

It's the voice of his father.

"Yea," he mutters—out loud, just in case.

"You could have stopped her, you know," Rumplestiltskin says.

Neal shrugs. "I couldn't hurt her."

He hoped the sharks would deter her. Emma hated sharks.

"Well," Rumple says with a sniff. "It's a good thing we have a Plan B. Is everything ready?"

Neal nods, and turns his head slightly so he can just see Rumple out of the corner of his eye. It's better this way, more real; sometimes, if Neal looks at him full-on, the image isn't quite right, and it's difficult to believe it's real.

But it is real.

*It is,* he tells himself firmly.

"Everything's ready," he tells his father. "I had the Shadow make contact before it took Killian."

"Good, good," Rumple replies, then, quietly, "It's a pity, losing such a fine servant."

"Yea."

They share a moment of silence over the Shadow's loss, and then Rumple says, "So, he'll be here soon, I take it?"

"Few days, give or take."

"Is he coming alone?"
"I doubt it."

"That could cause problems-"

"It's fine," Neal says, bristling. "He'll take care of Hook, and then I'll take care of him if I need to—them, whatever. I know what I'm doing."

"Very well. Once Captain Hook is out of the way, you're free to be with Emma and Henry."

"Yea..."

He pictures Emma's face, when she told him that they weren't happening. He recalls her voice from beneath the wharf: *I'm here, I've got you.*

No, he thinks savagely. *It's just an infatuation. That's all it is. She'll get over it.*

Right?

"The pirate must die," Rumple reminds him, stepping closer. "If you want to be a family with Emma and Henry, Captain Hook has to go."

"I know, dad. I know," he says, rolling his shoulder, brushing Rumple off. He feels a sudden piercing pain in his head, a pain that makes his vision go blank and has him doubling over, and when he recovers, Rumplestiltskin is gone.

Emma watches the paramedics rig up some elaborate pulley system, lower a stretcher, and then hoist Killian up the sea wall. She watches them transfer him to another stretcher, and then put him in the ambulance.

Emma goes with him—she doesn't ask permission, she just gets into the back beside the paramedics and glares a challenge at them. She holds Killian's hand on the ride to the hospital, though he doesn't wake.

She watches the doctors clean him up, examine him, get him hooked up to IVs and monitors. She hangs in the back, letting the hospital staff do their thing. When they're gone, she heals Killian's bruises, smoothing them away like she smoothed away his pony bite the previous afternoon. She doesn't dare touch the cut, however, and when a nurse comes in to stitch it up, she moves out of the way again.

And then she waits.

David's in the hallway with Robin. They sent Will to escort Snow, Henry, and Ian to the hospital. Emma instructed them to keep the boys out of sight until Killian wakes; she doesn't want Ian seeing him unconscious and thinking he's dead.

She paces to pass the time, and to ease the anxiety gnawing at her insides.

Killian's safe, but he almost died.

He almost died and if he had...

Emma goes to the window. Someone opened it, and Emma presses her face into the gap, gulping in fresh air.

"I love you."
In her mind, she sees Graham crumpling to the floor.

She can't do this.

She feels as if she's being torn in half. She knows what that feeling she has for him is. She knows and she's afraid.

She thought she was ready for this, but she's not.

"Emma?"

David's voice.

Emma turns. Her dad's in the doorway. He has his cell phone in one hand.

"Your mom wants to know if she can bring Ian up. She said he's, um," David half-smiles, and gestures with his phone. "Causing a scene."

Distantly, Emma can hear Ian. As she listens and tries to discern what he's saying, she realizes his voice is getting closer.

"I think she's already bringing him," Emma says. She crosses the room, squeezes past David, and goes out into the hallway.

Ian's on the other end, grappling with Henry while Snow and Will stand by awkwardly, poised to intervene.

"LET ME GO!" Ian shouts, thrashing from side to side, trying to pull his arm free from Henry's hand.

"Stop!" Henry yells.

"No! You're stupid! Let me go!"

"Hey!" Emma barks

Both Henry and Ian freeze.

"Mom-" Henry says, but Ian recovers faster and uses the opportunity to escape. He sags and drops to his knees, letting his own body weight tug his arm from Henry's grasp, and then he scrambles to his feet and sprints down the hallway.

Henry makes a grab at Ian's backpack, but misses.

"MOOOOOOOOOOM!" Ian roars as he runs.

Emma sets her feet and clenches her stomach muscles. Ian crashes into her, a cannon ball of tears and flailing limbs.

"I wanna see my dad!" he bawls, but he makes no move to get past her.

Emma closes her arms around him, and he shakes against her, huge sobs wracking his small frame.

She feels David next to her, leaning close. "Killian's awake," he says in her ear.

Emma nods, and carefully glances over her shoulder. She can see Killian through the doorway, lying
in bed. He has his head up, and wide, alarmed eyes fixed on her and Ian. Emma presses her lips into what she hopes is a reassuring smile, and turns back to Ian.

"It's alright," she soothes. "It's alright."

"I wanna see my dad," he says, voice quaking in between sobs.

"I know," she says. "We can go in and see him when you stop crying."

"I wanna go now!"

"Ian, buddy, if you go in there crying he's gonna get worried, okay? You gotta calm down first."

He shivers, and then nods.

Emma can feel Killian's eyes on her back while she holds Ian and waits for him to calm down.

"I'll, um, leave you three alone," David says. "Unless you want me to stay?"

"We'll be okay, dad," Emma says. "I'll text you guys in a little bit."

David kisses Emma's temple and then the top of Ian's head before leaving. He joins the others still waiting at the end of the hallway, and then they disappear around a corner.

Emma gives Ian's shoulders a little pat. "You ready?"

He steps back. "Yea," he says with a snifflle.

Emma slips her hand over Ian's, and they walk into Killian's room.

Killian grins brightly at Ian. "Hey there, lad," he says. His voice is hoarse, and cracks halfway through, but his smile doesn't dim.

Ian pulls his hand free, and before Emma can stop him he's at the bed, clambering over the safety rail, and falling into Killian's lap.

Killian winces, but he lifts his arm so Ian can tuck himself against Killian's side. Killian eases his arm around Ian's shoulders, and slowly lowers his head until it's resting atop Ian's.

"I missed you," Ian whispers.

"I missed you, too."

"I love you."

Killian smiles softly, and turns his head to press a kiss to Ian's hair. "I love you, too."

He resettles his cheek on Ian's forehead, but as he does his eyes widen suddenly and dart to Emma's.

"I love you."

Emma wonders if he remembers saying it.

He's looking back and forth between her eyes, and Emma decides he's wondering the same thing—rather, he's wondering if he said it out loud.

She keeps her face carefully blank, and, after a moment, Ian breaks the tension.
"I brought you a book," he says.

Killian blinks, and then returns his attention quickly to Ian. "Oh? Would you like me to read it to you?"

Ian grins up at Killian. "No. I'm going to read it to you."

Killian raises an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Mmmh!"

Ian sits up fast, the movement making Killian wince again, and starts shrugging off his backpack. Emma steps over to the bed and helps him pull it over his head and set it on his lap. He unzips it and digs around for a few seconds before pulling out a dark blue book and presenting it triumphantly to Killian.

Killian squints at it. "The Cat in the Hat?" he says, confusedly. "Why would a cat want a hat?"

"It doesn't want a hat," Ian giggles. "It has a hat."

"Oh. My apologies." He eyes the book for a moment. "You can read this?"

"Uh-huh!"

To demonstrate, Ian opens the book and flips to the first page. "The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play. So we sat in the house all that cold, cold, wet day."

Killian grins, impressed, as Ian turned the page and continues reading.

Smiling, Emma moves to take Ian's backpack so he has more space, and as she does, her hand brushes Killian's. He moves his fingers, reaching for hers, but she jerks away and takes a step backwards.

Killian pulls his head up, startled, and stares at her, but Emma keeps her face turned away. Her heart's thundering in her chest, and she feels like she's being torn in two again.

She wants to go to him, hug him, touch him, bury herself against his other side and bask in his warmth, in the safety of his arms, but she can't.

I can't do this.

"Be right back," she mutters, and flees the room.

She takes two steps outside and has to stop. Her knees buckle and she collapses sideways against the wall.

One hand flies to her mouth to stifle her sobs, while the other clutches at her heart.

In her head she sees Graham again, dead on the floor of the police station—and then it's Killian, his lifeless corpse tied to the post beneath the wharf.

I can't, I can't, I can't.

That ready-to-shatter thing inside of her is her heart. Carefully, she pushes it back, back from the ledge, and begins building a wall around it.
Inside the room, she can still hear Ian reading, and she can feel Killian's silence.
Emma leaves the room, and she takes a piece of Killian's heart with her, as surely as if she ripped it from his chest.

Warmth drains from his body, until he feels like he's back in that dark water beneath the wharf again, and the only thing holding him in the moment, the only thing informing him he's not currently dead or drowning, is the bit of heat tucked against his side and the sound of Ian's voice.

"And I said, 'How I wish we had sss...suh..." Ian tilts his head back, forcing Killian to tear his gaze from the doorway and look instead down at his boy.

"What's this word?" Ian asks.

Killian follows Ian's finger, and reads, "Something. That word is 'something'."

"Oh." Ian furrows his brow at the book. "Okay. Something. And I said, 'How I wish we had something to do!'"

Killian's eyes drift back to the door.

"Too wet to go out and too cold to play ball."

Is Emma out there, somewhere nearby? Or is she as far away right now as physically possible?

"So we sat in the house. We did nothing at all."

When Emma found Killian, he told her he loved her. He doesn't remember making a conscious decision to say it—he was nearly delirious with fatigue at that point, and the words spilled from his lips before he could stop them.

It doesn't matter that he meant them, or that he will always mean them, what matters is that Emma wasn't ready for them, and he doesn't know what damage he caused by saying them.

In his mind, he sees the sheer panic rising in her eyes when he tried to touch her hand.

Killian needs to find her. He needs to explain.

He has his stump planted in the mattress, ready to lever himself off the bed, when he realizes he can't.
"We looked! And we saw him! The Cat in the Hat!"

Ian's there. Ian who clearly has not slept recently. Ian who has a bit of a bruise on one cheek that Killian hopes it merely a coincidence. Ian who's very firmly nestled beneath Killian's arm, and is using Killian's chest as a pillow, and his stomach as a platform for his book.

Killian relaxes his stump arm and tucks it beneath the thick blanket that covers him from waist to toes. Comforting his child is the most important thing right now. As much as he wants to go to Emma, he knows she can wait more than Ian can. When she returns, Killian will put things right.

---

An hour passes, but Emma never returns.

Ian's asleep with his head resting on Killian's chest. He made it halfway through the book before his yawning spurred Killian to take over, and by the time Killian finished reading, the lad was a goner.

Alone again, Killian's thoughts seethe. Sleep pulls at him, but he knows his memories lurk just around the corner, and if he closes his eyes he'll be back beneath that wharf, tied to a post, watching his own death creep across the sands, inch by inch.

He hears the waves, and a tremor passes through him.

A hole opens up inside of him and quickly expands, filling Killian up until his whole chest feels like a great, hollow void. Darkness creeps in at the edges of his vision, eating away at the pale white walls of his hospital room. The cut over his eyebrow stings suddenly, and his ribs and thighs throb where the ropes bruised them. His legs are frozen, numb. The sound of waves grows louder...

He clutches Ian closer, and turns his face into the boy's hair. The smell reminds him of the loft. It grounds him, as does the small hand that tightens in the thin cotton gown he's wearing.

The waves recede; the darkness recedes; his racing heart slows.

He's safe. He's safe, and he's with Ian.

"I love you."

He's not certain if he's remembering saying it to Emma, or to Ian. Perhaps both.

When the tide started rolling in, Killian's thoughts turned to Emma and their son. If those were truly to be his last moments, then he wanted his final thoughts to be of them.

Finding solace in memories of Emma Swan is a familiar pastime for Killian Jones. His recollections of her are well-worn, oft-trodden paths. He has precious few memories of Ian, however—a month's worth is not nearly enough, and thinking of Ian only reminded Killian of how much he missed, and how he couldn't bear to miss any more.

"I love you."

Three words may have brought everything he and Emma carefully built over the past few weeks toppling down. If something breaks between them, the repercussions could hurt Ian, and Killian would only have himself to blame.

He gently traces his thumb along Ian's temple.

The wounds made when one is young tend to linger, and Killian can't lose this. He can't lose the trust
the boy has in him, or the uninhibited affection.

His thumb reaches Ian's cheek and finds the bruise there.

*The Shadow?*

He hopes not. If that demon hurt his child...

"Can we come in?"

Killian looks up. Snow White is in the doorway. Henry is standing just behind her, nearly a full head taller.

"Aye, of course," Killian says, and offers them a small smile.

They slip into the room, and come to stand by his bedside.

"Where's Emma?" Killian asks, in as inconspicuous of a tone as he can muster,

"Oh, she and David went back to the loft to clean up and put on some dry clothes. She wanted me to tell you she'll be back soon."

Killian nods, pressing his lips together hard to keep the smile from sliding off his face. Things must be much worse than he thought, if Emma's gone so far as to remove herself from the same building as him without even a word.

Suddenly, it's as if there's a massive weight on his chest, crushing him, squeezing the air from his lungs.

"How are you feeling?" Snow asks.

"I've felt better," Killian admits. He thinks of Emma's face, her closed-off expression, the walls going up behind her eyes, and grimaces.

"Can we get you anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

He needs to be alone—rather, he needs for Snow and Henry to leave so he can leave. He needs to talk to Emma, and if she won't come to him, then he'll go to her.

"Are you sure?" Snow presses. "Another pillow? Some more blankets?"

"I'm *fine,*" he repeats.

"What about something to eat or drink?"

"No, I-" Killian catches sight of Henry's wide-eyed, meaningful glance at Snow and then back, and hastily adjusts his answer. "Erm, perhaps another blanket, after all."

Snow brightens and bustles away. There's a closet across from Killian's bed. Snow opens it, reaches inside, and pulls two blankets from the top shelf. When she returns, Killian can only watch as she removes the book from his lap, replaces it in Ian's backpack and then removes Roger, slides the orange stuffed crab gently beneath Ian's arm, then unfurls the blankets and lays one over Ian, and the other over Killian.
The change in temperature is immediate. Killian didn't realize his legs were still cold until all of a sudden they weren't anymore, and he didn't realize Ian might be cold until he feels the boy's limbs relax.

"There," Snow says, brushing her fingers over Ian's forehead, smoothing away the stray, slightly wavy locks. As she pulls her arm back, she presses her fingers to Killian's wrist. It's light and brief, as if Snow's not certain Killian wishes to be touched, but its significance is unambiguous.

"Thank you," Killian murmurs. It's been a long time since someone treated him with such motherly tenderness. In fact, the last person he remembers being particularly motherly towards him is his own mother, and that was nearly two centuries ago.

Snow smiles warmly. "I'm going to go find the nurses and have them bring you something to eat," she says. "You should eat before you go to sleep. You need to regain your strength."

This time, Killian doesn't protest.

Snow leaves, and Henry fills the gap.

Killian has it in mind to ask Henry to watch Ian so Killian can make his escape and locate Emma, but he notices Henry's expression, and the request dies on his lips.

"Hey," Henry says.

"Hey," Killian returns.

"I'm glad you're okay."

Killian knows those words are Henry's equivalent of Snow touching Killian's wrist.

"Me too, lad," he says, hazarding a grin. "I hope I didn't worry everyone too much."

He expects a witty response, but instead Henry blurts, "I'm sorry my dad did that to you."

Killian's grin evaporates. "Don't apologize, Henry," he says firmly, "What Neal did is not your fault."

Henry shakes his head. "But-"

"No," Killian says, just managing to keep the growl from his voice. "Don't blame yourself for things that are beyond your control. That can be your gift to me."

Henry's eyebrows lift to his hairline, and then one of them draws down. "Gift?" he asks, perplexed.

"Aye, that what you do, isn't it? Bring sick people gifts to make them feel better?" Killian replies evenly. He remembers Ian and Roland drawing 'get well' cards for Robin when Robin was in the hospital.

"Uh, yea, I guess?"

"Well, I'm sick," Killian says, and uses his stump arm to gesture at his hospital bed. "And as such, I request that you cease holding yourself responsible for what your father did."

Henry blinks. "O-okay..."

"Now, since that's settled, why don't you sit down, relax, and tell me what I missed?"
Slowly, Henry smiles. After a minute, he does as Killian suggested.

Killian listens and does his best to be attentive, but he finds his thoughts drifting constantly to Emma. The seconds crawl by, and the weight on his chest grows heavier.

Emma made it all the way to the vending machine when David offered her a convenient excuse to leave the hospital.

"I'm gonna run home and shower," he said.

Emma tried to tell herself that she was going back to the loft because her own clothes were still damp and because she smelled enchantingly like decayed seaweed, harbor water, and her own body odor, but she knew it was a lie.

She was running away. She was trying to put as much distance as possible between herself and Killian, until she built that wall around her heart so high and so thick that she could look at him again without it hurting.

Every time she closes her eyes she sees Killian tied to the post beneath the wharf, so she keeps them open. While she walks, she stares at her feet; on the car ride back to the loft she stares out of the window at the passing buildings; while she showers she finds a tile on the wall with a crack in it and keeps her eyes fixed there.

Piece by piece, she puts her armor back on. Brick by brick she grows her walls.

She's not sure how long she's been standing in the shower before she finally blinks and comes back to herself. The water is scalding hot, but Emma doesn't feel it. She can't feel it because she's stone now. She's stone and nothing can hurt her.

When she gets out of the bathroom, David is hanging up on a phone call.

"That was your mom," he says. "She said Ian fell asleep."

Emma pulls the towel she was drying her hair with off of her head and slings it over one shoulder.

"Good," she says. 

_God, that kid needs sleep._

"Is he with Killian?"

"Yea," David says. "Your mom wants to leave so that Hook can sleep too, and she wants to know if you want her and Henry to bring Ian back here so you don't have to."

"No," Emma says. "Tell her not to move him. Just let him sleep. He needs it. Plus, he might get upset if they try and move him." She slips the towel back over her head, and starts towards the stairs. "He's fine with Killian. I'll get him when I go there later."

David's voice stops her. "Wait, later?"

"Yea," Emma says, turning towards him and massaging her hair through the towel in what she hopes is a nonchalant, totally innocent manner. "I'm going to take a nap for an hour, and then I'll go back to the hospital."

"Okay," David says slowly, furrowing his brow.
Emma throws him a quick smile, then continues towards the stairs, forcing herself to walk at a leisurely pace and not to run. She takes five steps before David speaks again.

"Emma, is everything okay?" he asks.

No.

"Yep," she says, not bothering to stop and look and smile at him this time.

"Are you sure?"

Nope.

"Yes, dad."

She doesn't know how she gets up the stairs without stumbling, but she does it. Once she's at the top and out of view she silently drops to her knees. She drags the towel off her head, and buries her face in it—she would scream into it if she wasn't certain David would hear and then come running.

I can't do this.

Panic wells up inside of her and sets her pulse racing.

I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't do this.

Emma Swan is not stone.

Emma Swan is the farthest thing from stone—at least, she is where Killian Jones is concerned.

She can't lose him, but she's just not capable of pretending he doesn't exist, or that he doesn't matter.

"I love you."

Her armor falls away, the wall she built crumbles, and at the same time it's like the clouds part and shed a beam of the purest sunlight on her heart. It quivers suddenly left open and vulnerable, exposed and defenseless, but instead of shying away from it Emma embraces it.

She knows the name of the feeling she has for Killian. She knows, but if she even thinks it she won't be able to do what she needs to do.

In her mind, she sees Graham's pale, shocked face as he lay dying.

Emma can't let that happen to Killian.

She won't.

Slowly, she lowers the towel from her face and drops her hands into her lap. She takes deep, calming breaths until she's in control of herself once more.

Emma Swan isn't stone, but to protect Killian, she's going to have to pretend to be stone.

They released Killian from the hospital Monday morning, after his "overnight observation" in which it was determined that, aside from prolonged exposure to ice cold water, a few bruises, and a gash over his eye, he was perfectly fine. He spent the rest of the day at the park, sitting on the sunniest bench he could find, basking in the warmth and the light like a lizard on a rock, for the first time in
his life not longing for the sea.

Ian and Henry kept him company. Ian brought a notebook and his markers, and, taking turns, the three of them played endless rounds of tic-tac-toe, hangman, and dots and boxes. They also played a game called checkers, which turned out to be a more simple version of chess.

While Ian took a break from checkers to perform death-defying stunts on the playground equipment, Killian asked Henry about chess. Henry said he knew how to play, but that he couldn't find a set at the loft. He also claimed that he once attempted to teach Ian, but Ian was so distracted by galloping the knight pieces around the board that Henry quickly gave up.

"Perhaps when he's older," Killian said. "In the meantime, I'd be more than happy to be your opponent, if you're looking for one."

"I don't know if you could handle it. I'm pretty good," Henry replied with a grin. "I was on the chess team for two years at school."

"Well, I wasn't on a team, but I'm a fair player. Challenge accepted."

Afterwards, Killian took the boys to dinner, and then dropped them off at the loft. He hoped to see Emma, to talk to her, but she dodged him as effectively in the evening as she had in the morning. In front of her parents and her sons, there was nothing he could do but to bid them all goodnight and take his leave. He would have to wait until he managed to get her alone.

On his way back to the inn, he stopped off at the toy shop he bought Ian's stuffed crab at and purchased a chess set. The fact that it helped fill the emptiness inside of him made him feel a tad foolish, but he clung to it nonetheless.

In his room, he drank until he felt detached. He tried to sleep but the moment he closed his eyes again he began reliving his hours beneath the wharf.

The previous night having Ian alongside him kept the nightmares at bay. Emma had been there too—in the hallway, separated from him by a wall and doing her best to pretend he didn't exist, but still there. Alone, he felt trapped by the four walls of his room, so he left the inn and went for a walk instead.

He's been prowling the darkened neighborhoods tirelessly for hours when a flash of dancing blue and red lights from behind him catches his eye and makes him turn. He expects another ambulance, but instead sees the squad car pulling up to the curb.

Emma.

Killian holds his breath, only to feel a massive stab of disappointment as the vehicle draws level with him and the lights blink off—David's driving. The passenger side window rolls down with a faint, mechanical hum, and, catching the hint, Killian approaches.

"Can I help you, officer?" he asks jauntily, pulling inspiration from a cop show he happened to watch on television with Henry and Ian one afternoon a week or so ago.

"Get in," David says curtly.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"I'm serious."
"Serious? I thought you were 'Charming'?"

David levels him with an exceptionally unimpressed stare, and says, "You know, you're really making me regret rescuing you last night."

Killian swallows down the remainder of the lively quips on his tongue, and inclines his head, chastised.

"My apologies," he mumbles, and gets inside the squad car. As soon as he's settled and has the safety belt strapped firmly across his chest and lap, David urges the car away from the curb and back onto the street.

They drive in uncomfortable silence for six blocks before Killian decides to break the tension.

"How did you find me?" he asks.

David glances sideways at him, and Killian sees a small smirk tugging at his lips.

"I got a few phone calls about a man dressed in black with a hook for a hand stalking the neighborhood."

"I was not stalking," Killian protests indignantly. "I was merely taking a walk to clear my head."

David glances at him again, but he's no longer smiling. If Killian were a braver man, he might call the expression in David's eyes concerned—but Killian likes his life, or at least enjoys having one, so he chalks it up to the lighting, and then forgets he ever saw it in the first place.

"Can't sleep?" David asks quietly.

Killian scowls—at the windshield, because he likes his life.

"No," he replies gruffly. The pleasant haze from the half-bottle of rum he consumed has long since faded, leaving him feeling especially raw around the edges. The emptiness in his chest is a gaping, gushing wound.

David doesn't say anything else, so Killian turns his head to watch the houses pass by. Eventually, the houses become shops, and within a few minutes they're driving down the wide, lit up corridor that is Main Street.

Despite the late hour, Granny's sign is still on, glowing brightly against the black sky like a beacon. The sight makes Killian nauseous. Back in his room is the last place he wants to be.

As if David heard his thoughts, they ride right by Granny's, and keep going.

Killian cranes around to ensure that it was truly Granny's they passed and that he wasn't just hallucinating, then he whips around the other way to check whether David's awake or not.

He is.

"You passed Granny's," Killian says.

"Yep," David replies.

Killian hesitates a heartbeat, then asks, "Where are we going?"

"For a drink."
"A drink?" Killian shakes his head. "I've already had a few, mate. It didn't help."

David shrugs. "Maybe talking will."

Killian snorts derisively. "What could we possibly have to talk about?"

He doesn't know what instinct is making him so hostile, but he can't stop it.

"Oh, you might be surprised," David says lightly.

Killian doesn't know how to respond, so he keeps his mouth firmly closed, lest he dig himself a hole he'll never be able to crawl out of.

David parks the squad car in front of a nondescript brick building. Killian follows him out of the vehicle and around the building to an equally nondescript side door, beside which is a small sign that reads, "Aesop's Tables".

The inside is empty, save for the bartender. The walls are some garish shade of red or orange, made even more unpleasant by both the dim little lamps and the roaring fireplace. Somewhere in another room music is playing, sad and slow.

Suddenly, Killian's room at the inn doesn't seem so bad after all.

"Is this where Emma, Snow, and Ruby go when they have their girls' nights?" Killian asks David in a low voice.

"No, they go to the Rabbit Hole."

Killian eyes the unfamiliar, oddly shaped bottles lined up on glass shelves behind the bar. "And why aren't we going to the Rabbit Hole?"

"If you'd ever been to the Rabbit Hole, you'd understand," David says, then he slaps a smile on his face, greets the bartender with a merry wave, and leads the way to two stools at a small table tucked into a corner.

Killian puts a visit to the Rabbit Hole on his list of things to do—for curiosity's sake—and goes after David.

The bartender waits politely for them to seat themselves before approaching their table. Killian's never seen the man before, and although he looks friendly, it's the dead of night and Killian and David are the only patrons, so out of habit Killian keeps his hook visible and allows both the threat of its danger and of Killian's name and reputation to discourage any criminal thoughts the man might be having. The bartender sees it, glances quickly from it to Killian's steely expression, but doesn't comment.

David doesn't comment either. Rather, he quickly orders a Guinness, then looks expectantly over at Killian. Killian's stomach turns over at the thought of beer, but he orders the same.

The bartender moves away—unhurriedly, Killian notes, which leads him to also note the man's considerable height and broad shoulders; he's calculating the reach of the man's arms and speculating how swift he might be when David's voice breaks into his thoughts.

"Did you really think that was necessary?" he asks flatly, one eyebrow raised.

"You can't blame a man for being cautious," Killian says unapologetically, then he asks, "Why are
we here, David?"

He's weary, his head feels as though it's full of heavy stones jostling against one another, and this bar has him longing for his bed. Whatever David wishes to talk about, Killian wants to get it over with quickly so he can return to the inn and continue failing to fall sleep.

David sits up straight, and lays his hands on the table. "We're here because I want to apologize."

Killian jerks to attention so fast he nearly tumbles from his stool. "I beg your pardon?"

David doesn't blink, he just continues calmly, "When the Shadow was pretending to be you, I believed it."

Killian cringes internally. Henry told him the whole tale, and although Killian knows the Shadow was revealed and Emma destroyed it, it still infuriates him that it happened at all, that the creature said those things to Emma and in front of their son wearing Killian's face.

"There's no need to apologize," Killian says dismissively. "You had no reason at the time to believe otherwise."

"No, I should have been suspicious," David says. "But I wasn't. And it made me realize that I've been treating you unfairly. I've still been trying to see the worst in you, despite all the evidence to the contrary. I'm sorry."

Killian stares, speechless. The bartender returns and discreetly sets their drinks on the table in front of them, then disappears again. Still, Killian can't move. He's grown so used to the man's treatment of him that he no longer questions it, he just tolerates it as a natural condition of his existence on this earth.

David flushes suddenly, and grows flustered. "I know it's not an excuse for my behavior, but I just wanted to stop Emma from getting hurt, and you're a—well, you're a—"

"A pirate?" Killian ventures.

"A pirate with a particularly sordid reputation," David says. "If the tales are true, there are a lot of notches in your belt, Hook."

Somehow, the fact that David's misgivings stem mostly from Killian's reputation as being a bit of a man-whore is uplifting.

Killian smirks, and lifts his glass of Guinness to his lips. "Most of those tales are exaggerated, I can assure you," he says, before taking a sip. "Save for the one where I have a foot-long co-"

"Alright," David says loudly.

Killian's smirk grows wider, and he takes another sip from his beer. He lets David stew for a long moment, then says, more seriously, "I paid an extravagant price for that particular reputation. A pirate captain that didn't partake, as it were, would be seen as a very odd pirate captain indeed. It's best to be seen by one's enemies as a man with simple motivations, and simple hungers."

David nods—grudgingly, but Killian will take it.

"Apology accepted, mate," he says. He extends his glass towards David. David takes up his own drink, and taps it lightly against Killian's; they drink, draining half their beers, before setting their glasses back upon the table.
Killian clears his throat. "Can I ask why you're telling me this now?"

David fiddles with his glass, idly rotating it by infinitesimal degrees, before finally sighing and lifting eyes filled with guilt to Killian's. "Because of Emma. She was so afraid she was going to lose you, and I...I was afraid for her." David licks his lips and drops his gaze back to his beer. "I don't want to be a deterrent to her being happy."

Perhaps it's the combination of the Guinness and the rum and the exhaustion, but one single part of what David said rattles around strangely in Killian's mind.

*She was so afraid she was going to lose you...*

Realization sinks in.

He leans backwards until his shoulders hit the wall.

Killian's a bloody idiot. He lost sight of the larger picture, so focused was he on the words he let slip beneath the wharf.

*She was so afraid she was going to lose you...*

Emma's pushing him away because she's afraid he'll get hurt because of her.

Emma's trying to protect him.

Slowly, he grins.

David glances up, and does a double-take. "What are you smiling about?" he asks.

Killian's grinning because he feels as if an enormous weight has been lifted from his shoulders. Killian's grinning because if there's one aspect of Captain Hook's reputation that is true, it's that he's a survivor. Emma has nothing to worry about; if Killian can convince her of that, then everything will be fine.

Killian props his elbow on the table and drops his chin into his hand. "You know, David, I think I might be growing on you."

David frowns.

"Don't worry," Killian assures him. "I tend to have that affect on people."

While David glares, Killian drains the rest of his Guinness in one gulp, then signals the bartender for another round before turning back to David.

"Now," he says boldly. "Tell me again all about how you think I'm the key to your daughter's happiness?"

"Don't push it," David growls.

---

David drops him off at the inn an hour later. Killian's a little unsteady as he makes his way carefully up the stairs to his room. He collapses on the bed, not bothering to remove his clothes or shoes, and wrestles his cell phone from his jacket pocket.

He taps at the screen until he pulls up his text message thread with Emma, and types: *I need to see*
He doesn't expect an immediate response, but he gets one anyway. He just let his hand fall back onto the mattress when his phone buzzes. He instantly brings the device back up to hover before his face and reads, *Tomorrow afternoon. Our usual place.*

Killian responds with an *okay* and several emojis, then closes his eyes, and falls asleep.

---

The only thing that gets Killian out of bed the next morning and to the warehouse by the docks where he's meeting David and the boys for a sparring session is the fact that he'll see Emma right after.

David looks about as haggard as Killian feels. "I tried convincing them that we should wait another day for this, but Snow's a little upset with me for how I came home last night," David tells Killian as he hands him a Granny's to-go cup full of coffee. "She got Ian so riled up it was impossible to say no."

Killian takes the coffee and sips it hesitantly.

Ian is indeed very riled up. He's hopping around like an adrenaline-crazed rabbit, the dark blue baseball cap atop his head wobbling dangerously, beaming so brightly Killian actually has to squint to look upon him.

"Henry, why don't you grab two swords and show Ian a few of the warm-up exercises I taught you."

"Really?" he screeches. He was very vocal about his unhappiness with not being allowed to learn how to sword fight. He attempted several persuasive arguments, most of which boiled down to, "let me do it because I want to".

Killian stood fast, until now.

"Aye, lad, really," he says.

Ian beats Henry to the longboats they stash the wooden practice swords in and pulls one out. It's nearly as tall as him, and very likely too heavy for him to wield properly, but it will keep him occupied long enough for Killian to locate his head and screw it back on.

"Is it weird being here?" David asks.

Killian shakes his head—slowly, because it hurts—and says, "No."

He thought he might feel uncomfortable being so near the spot where he almost drowned nearly 24 hours earlier, but it isn't. His ribs still ache where the ropes were tight across his chest, and the stitches in his forehead itch, but aside from those two things and his hangover, he feels back to normal; the only thing the sound of the waves is doing to him right now is making his headache worse.

He watches Ian swing the sword around with savage glee, and smiles behind the cover of his coffee cup.

At first, he didn't want to drag Ian into this particular world—this world of human brutality, of the
need to defend one's life or the life of others with violence—but that world showed up anyway. Pan's Shadow struck Ian and might have hurt him further had there not been adults around.

But there won't always be adults around to protect Ian—Killian or Emma might not always be there, and Killian will be damned if he leaves his boy defenseless.

Killian's going to ensure his child has every tool for survival at his disposal, starting with this.

"We should get one of the extra swords cut down to Ian's size," David suggests.

"Aye," Killian agrees. "These ones are far too-"

Ian swipes the wooden sword in a wide arc that's a little too enthusiastic and ends up slapping Henry hard in the thigh. Henry yowls and leaps backwards, Ian splutters out a wide-eyed apology, but Henry's already raising his own sword for a downwards chop that knocks Ian's sword from his hands.

"HEY!" Ian shouts.

"You hit me," Henry says, scowling.

"On accident!" Ian protests.

"It still hurt."

"I said I was sorry!"

"Sorry doesn't make it stop hurting."

Henry reaches over, and smartly taps the underside of the brim of Ian's hat, fipping it clean off the boy's head. Cheeks flaring red, Ian takes two stomping steps forward and punches Henry squarely in the thigh.

Henry stares, shocked.

Killian stares, and tries to summon up some sort of preventative command.

David says, "Uh...."

Ian sticks his tongue out, raises his hands to his ears, and waggles his fingers.

"You little-" Henry snarls, and grabs Ian.

Killian drops his coffee cup and runs to intervene when he hears Ian's yelps turn into giggles. He stops. David skids to a halt beside him and bumps his arm.

"Is it...okay to let them do that?" Killian asks, trying to determine if the tussle he's watching is friendly or not. He's seen Henry and Ian bicker, but he's never seen them scrap before.

"I don't know," David says. "You had a brother; did you two fight like that?"

"All the time."

They watch for another moment. Henry's much larger, but Ian's quick and elusive. It's like watching a tree try to wrestle a squirrel.
"Do you think we should call Emma and ask?" David says.

There's a squeak of old hinges and a crunch of gravel behind them, and a voice asks, "Are we late?"

Killian and David both turn. Robin, Will, and Roland are stepping through the warehouse door.

"Oh," David says. "I forgot to mention that I called in reinforcements for today."

Will looks at them, then past them, to where Henry and Ian are still trying to wrestle each other to the ground, then back to Killian and David. "You boys taking bets? What are the odds on the small one taking down the big one? I've got a fiver on me."

Struggling not to roll his eyes, Killian turns sharply back towards Henry and Ian and strides across the warehouse to separate them. He tugs Ian off of Henry, gets his body in between the two boys, then gets an arm around Ian's waist and lifts him off the ground.

Ian grunts in surprise but doesn't squirm, and, ignoring the fresh twinges in his still-aching ribs, Killian carries him back to David braced against his hip like a sack of grain.

"If I put you down, will you behave?" Killian asks Ian when they reach David.

"No," Ian replies stubbornly, and, impressively for the angle Killian's holding him at, folds his arms over his chest.

"Then I guess I'll just have to hold you like this forever," Killian sighs with mock disappointment, then, to David, Robin, and Will, says, "Looks like we won't be able to join you this morning. Perhaps another time..."

Will pulls an exaggerated frown. "That's too bad. I brought all me best moves today."

Ian wriggles the tiniest bit in Killian's grasp.

"I was gonna show you how to break someone's nose with your 'ead," Will adds.

"You will not-" Killian growls.

"YEA! SHOW ME!" Ian crows.

Emma's at the docks, sitting on the bench she and Killian usually meet on when they have a few spare minutes and want some alone time. They've shared many coffees, donuts, rum, and kisses here. It has a nice view of the harbor, especially at sunset. Emma likes it.

She glances down at her phone, resting in her lap clutched between both hands, and then back to the horizon. The sight of the sea is not especially calming—she still remembers too vividly how cold it was and how Killian almost drowned in it.

Her insides quiver at the memory, and the tremor passes to her legs, which start jiggling up and down nervously.

She's made up her mind.

She's going to ask Killian to take Ian to Boston.

It's the only way she'll be able to get Killian to agree to leave, and it's perfect because both of them will be out of danger once they're out of Storybrooke. If Killian and Ian are safe and out of the way,
Emma can concentrate on how to deal with Neal.

Emma looks to the left, where all the ships are docked. With the only road out of town blocked, Killian and Ian will have to leave Storybrooke by water. They already determined that the exit to the sea is open, they'll just have to hope Neal doesn't try to stop them.

There's one ship that definitely looks like a pirate ship, but that one's probably not an option because it's a bit conspicuous. A smaller boat would be better, stealthier.

She hears footsteps approaching, and before she can stop herself she turns towards the sound.

Killian's walking towards her. Emma sees him, and her heart swells. Ignoring him yesterday was the hardest thing Emma's ever done—and she's pushed two babies out of her vagina.

His eyes find hers, but just as she's about to smile she remembers herself.

Stone.

Emma has to be stone.

She smooths her features into a calm, cold mask, and waits for him to reach the bench before asking, "Where're the boys?" in the most unfeeling voice she can manage.

Killian sits beside her, wincing as he eases himself onto the bench, and says, "Will Scarlet took them to Granny's for breakfast. He owes me—I'll explain later."

Emma nods. While Killian adjusts his position, searching for the most comfortable way to sit on a hard bench with what Emma guesses are still some pretty sore ribs, she studies him. She didn't get a good look at him yesterday, but she thinks he's moving around more easily. He's definitely hungover—which explains where her dad was last night and why he's also hungover. What the hell were they doing?

Killian catches her frowning at him, and smiles.

It's...it's disconcerting. Emma feels her mask slip slightly.

"I missed you," he says softly, and that's disconcerting too.

Emma tightens her fingers around her phone until the hard edges dig into her palms, but it doesn't stop the warmth that's building in her stomach. She drops her eyes quickly to her hands, before the warmth creeps up to her cheeks.

Shit.

She needs to hurry up and get this over with before she loses the ability to keep that fake wall between her and Killian. If she can't make him leave now, she'll never be able to.

"Killian, I need to ask you somethi-"

"Wait," Killian says. "Before you do, there's something I want to say."

Emma waits, keeping her eyes averted. When he doesn't speak for nearly a full minute, she looks up to find him staring over her head, eyes wide, lips parted slightly, face ghostly pale.

"That's my ship." he whispers hoarsely.
"What?"

Emma follows his wide-eyed gaze right to the tall ship she noticed earlier.

"That's the Jolly Roger," Killian says. "If she's here..." He trails off, then his hand darts out to grip her arm. "Emma, if the Jolly Roger is here then that means Blackbeard is here as well."

"Blackbeard?" Emma asks. "You mean the bloodthirsty pirate you stole a magic bean from?"

Killian's fingers tighten, and his face drains of its remaining color.

"Emma, Henry and Ian stole the magic bean from Blackbeard."

The warmth inside of her dies, and ice floods her veins.

"If Blackbeard sees them he might recognize them," Killian says. "It doesn't matter that they're children; he won't hesitate to enact revenge."

Emma shoots off the bench and starts towards the ship, but Killian holds to her arm, and pulls her back. She whirls, tugging on her arm.

"Killian!"

He's shaking his head at her. "They're not there. They'll have deboarded as soon as soon as they weighed anchor." She stops struggling, and his hand slides down her arm to her wrist. His fingers trail over her palm and Emma finds herself grabbing them. "We have to get back to town."
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

This is 1/3 of what I originally wanted to write for this chapter, but I actually really don't like writing long chapters, and when I do I actually feel like I write worse and worse the longer the chapter gets, so I'm going to do the thing that's better for me but annoying for readers (I wish I could be one of those writers that can plot out their story and then deliver all the things per chapter that they are supposed to) and split the chapter. The next bit will be finished in like...literally three days, so at least it won't be a long wait!!!

Henry's sprawled in one of Granny's stiff metal patio chairs, head leaned back and legs stretched out in front of him, beneath the table. It's not super comfortable, but it's currently his best option, and it's in direct, baking hot sunlight, which actually feels good compared to the relative chill of the warehouse; he worked off all the stress that had been building inside of him and tying all his muscles and internal organs into knots, so now he's content to just roast slowly in the sun, let his body finally relax, and produce some Vitamin D.

Ian's in the chair next to him, draining the battery on Henry's phone playing Minecraft. Henry doesn't even care, nor does he care that his thigh is bruised and throbbing where Ian hit him with a wooden sword and then punched him—all he cares about is that this morning felt normal.

The bell over Granny's front door tinkles, and Will Scarlet's voice calls, "Bacon or sausage?"

"Bacon," Henry answers without looking.

Ian doesn't reply, so Henry gives his chair a nudge with his foot.


"That wasn't an option," Henry says. "Bacon or sausage?"

Ian's head snaps up. "To drink?" he asks, nose wrinkling.

Henry tuts. "No. To eat."

"Oh, bacon."

"Bacon," Henry repeats, loudly so Will can hear.

"Thank you," Will says, and disappears again.

Ian returns his attention to Minecraft, and Henry resumes basking.

They had a good workout that morning. Grandpa David and Hook were pretty obviously hungover, so it was mostly just Robin and Will teaching them hand-to-hand techniques.

Robin seems to fight in a clean-cut, honest manner, like David, while Will definitely has the same do-whatever-it-takes-even-if-it's-cheating mindset as Hook. The whole scrappiness thing might not
be as gallant as being highly skilled with a sword, but Henry can see its usefulness. He's still not sure what category he falls into yet, or even how you get into a category—is it based on training? Experience? Your personality? All of the above?

His sunbathing is abruptly cut short when someone steps up to their table with a quiet scuff of boots on concrete. Henry opens his eyes, expecting to see Will, but instead he sees Blackbeard, gazing at him coldly from beneath the brim of his tricorn hat.

Henry's so surprised he doesn't believe Blackbeard or the dozen other pirates surrounding him are real—until Blackbeard speaks.

"Well, well, well," the man drawls. "I came here looking for Hook, but I think I may have just found something far better." His eyes drift almost lazily over to Ian, whom he looks up and down slowly. Finally, he grins in a way that chills Henry's blood, and says, "My, my, you look just like him."

For once in his life, Ian's smart enough not to comment. He looks from Blackbeard over to Henry, as if asking him what to do. Henry doesn't have a plan. His mind is blank. All he can think about is how the Minecraft theme playing from his phone's tinny-sounding speakers is an absurd soundtrack for the moment.

The bell over Granny's front door tinkles again, and Will's booming voice announces his return. "Alright, lads. Our food will be right...out..."

Henry hears Will's footsteps stop at the bottom of the stairs, and then, "Who're you lot?"

Blackbeard looks at Will. "Kill him," he says to the men on either side. "Take the boys."

The patio is immediately plunged into chaos. Blackbeard takes a step back, and his entourage draw their weapons and swarm past.

Survival instincts Henry didn't even know he had kick in. He plants his foot firmly against the base of the table and launches it at the three closest pirates, the ones advancing towards him and Ian with the intent to kidnap clear in their eyes. The table doesn't hit them, but it makes them scatter, buying Henry just enough time to get to his feet and drag Ian out of his chair by his t-shirt.

He gives Ian a shove towards Granny's, shouts, "RUN!" and then turns back.

Henry picks up the chair he just pulled Ian out of and swings it like a baseball bat. He manages to hit a guy, hard enough to knock him down, but the force of the blow jars Henry's hands and arms and he has to drop his makeshift weapon.

Will flashes past then, leaping over the chair and the downed pirate and throwing himself at the next two in line. He takes them down in a whirl of knives—it's impressive, but Henry quickly realizes it's useless.

There are too many pirates, and not enough of Will Scarlet.

Henry bends to pick up the chair again, intent on helping, but notices a cutlass on the ground. He reaches for that instead, thinking at the very least he can occupy a pirate or two, but he's not fast enough—a boot appears to kick the cutlass away from his fingers, and then it kicks him in the chin.

His head jerks back and he loses his balance. He falls sideways, landing hard on his hip. Before he can get his legs beneath him someone grabs him by the collar and tries to lift him. Henry wraps his hand around his attacker's wrist and digs his thumb viciously into the soft underside. There's a shout from over his head, and Henry thinks it's because of him—until a body drops to the ground beside
him (and half on top of him), a body with an arrow sprouting from their chest and glassy, unseeing eyes.

"Fuck!" Henry hisses. He kicks the body's limp arm off his lap and scrambles backwards, then twists around to see Granny on the stoop, reloading her crossbow.

He also sees Ian, frozen, standing halfway between the brawl on the patio and the safety of the diner, staring past Henry with a horrified expression.

"Ian, run!" Henry shouts.

There's a grunt of pain from behind him that Henry recognizes as coming from Will Scarlet, and Ian's eyes widen further.

"Get out of there!" Granny yells. She raises her crossbow, fires another bolt past Henry, then lowers it and begins reloading.

Still, Ian doesn't move.

"IAN!" Henry bellows.

And then Ian's grabbed. A pirate with a black bandana swoops in from the right and snatches him. Granny drops the guy with her crossbow before he's gone three steps, but another pirate with long braids takes his place instantly, pulling Ian from his arms before he even hits the ground—and this one's smarter. He clutches Ian to his chest and backs away with Ian held like a human shield between him and Granny.

Henry leaps into action. He doesn't have a weapon, but it doesn't matter. He sprints across the patio as fast as his legs will carry him.

Granny has her crossbow aimed, but she can't fire with Ian in the way. Ian's kicking and punching every inch of the braided pirate he can reach. The pirate winces with every blow, but his grip on Ian remains strong.

Henry almost reaches them—but then the pirate's aiming a pistol at Henry.

Henry ducks, tucking his head down, hoping the bullet misses him. He hears the burst of gunfire and braces himself, prepared to get shot, prepared to keep running and tackle the guy anyway...

Instead of pain there's a strange whooshing in his ears and his body feels suddenly feather light. He thinks maybe this is it, maybe he's been shot. Maybe he's dead, or dying, and he's hallucinating—hallucinating a lot of purple smoke.

His head clears, and normal feeling returns to his body. His feet connect solidly with the ground once more. He's still running, only instead of tackling a pirate, Henry tackles a very sturdy table.

He crashes to the floor alongside a cascade of dishes, hash browns, and a ridiculous amount of forks. There are panicked exclamations from all around, alongside the sound of scampering feet and chair legs scraping against tile.

Henry's eyes fly open.

He's in the diner.

How the fuck is he in the diner?
He sits up, heart beating frantically in his chest, and looks around wildly—a roomful of terrified customers stare wildly back.

Inside, it's silent. Outside, Henry can hear the muffled sounds of fighting.

"NO!" he yells. It takes him two seconds to climb back to his feet and get to the front door. He grabs the handle and yanks, shaking the door on its hinges, but it doesn't open.

Neal did not expect Blackbeard and his men to go after Henry.

He intended to keep his involvement in bringing Blackbeard to Storybrooke a secret, but the moment he sees one of the pirates point his pistol at Henry, he has no choice but to intervene. With a wave of his hand and a plume of purple smoke, he teleports Henry into the diner.

The other kid is putting up one hell of a fight, but his flailing is no match for the arm locked tight around his chest. Neal raises his hand again, but a voice stops him.

"Wait," Rumplestiltskin says.

"For what?" Neal asks, keeping his eyes on the pirate with braids.

"Let the pirates take him."

"I...I don't know," Neal says.

The kid may be Hook's bastard, but he's still just a little kid.

"Let the pirates take the boy," Rumple repeats, "and Emma will see just how dangerous it is for her and Henry to be involved with Captain Hook."

Neal shakes his head, even as he lowers his arm to the side. "What if the kid gets hurt?"

"He won't," Rumple assures him.

"How do you know?"

"Trust me."

Neal's fingers curl into a fist. He watches the kid get dragged across the patio; he watches Granny, unable to fire at the pirate with braids, fire into the crowd of his fellow pirates instead; he watches the guy with the knives try to rescue the kid, but get taken down the moment he turns his back to his attackers.

Blackbeard and his men retreat with their prize, leaving as quickly as they came. Granny follows and manages to shoot one more pirate down before they're out of range. Neal waits another full two minutes, until the pirates are well and truly gone, before releasing the lock on Granny's front door, and then he disappears.

Killian rushes towards Main Street with Emma a half step behind him. He can hear her on the phone, having a quick, breathless conversation with her father, but by the tone of her voice Killian can tell David and Robin are no closer to Granny's than he and Emma are. He wills his legs to move faster, despite how very unwilling they are, despite the spikes of pain all along his ribs, despite the pounding in his head, despite the terror gripping his heart like a vise.
His thoughts race more rapidly than his feet. If Blackbeard sees the boys, he'll recognize them. If Blackbeard sees Ian—actually sees him—he'll know he's Killian's son, and, knowing that, he would very happily hurt Ian in order to hurt Killian.

Luckily, it's a short run to Granny's, and Killian's well-acquainted enough with the route to be able to lead Emma through several shortcuts, but when they arrive, they find they're already too late.

Granny's patio and front sidewalk are littered with the bodies of Blackbeard's men.

Granny herself stands amongst them, her crossbow at her side. She's looking down at something on the ground, and as Killian and Emma draw nearer, Killian sees Henry crouched at her feet. He feels an enormous swoop of relief—until he notices Will Scarlet.

Will's lying on the ground, bleeding out from several stab wounds to his chest and arms. Henry has a dish towel pressed against Will's stomach, over what Killian assumes, from the pool of blood Will's lying in, is the worst of the man's injuries.

Granny catches sight of Killian and Emma before Henry does, and turns. Killian glances around for Ian, and concludes that the boy must be safely in the diner when Granny says, "They took him."

The words hit Killian like a physical slap, as if he ran headlong into a brick wall.

"No," he says.

He doesn't want to believe it; he wants Ian to be safe—he needs Ian to be safe. Blackbeard can not have Ian. Panic is rising in his chest, drowning him from the inside out.

Henry turns his head towards them. He has a bruise and a smudge of dirt on his chin, and a smear of blood on his lips. One of his hands is stained entirely red from the blood-soaked towel its pressing to Will Scarlet's belly.

"Mom," he says, and uses his cleaner hand to lift something off the ground next to him and hold it out towards Emma.

It's Ian's hat. The dark blue one with the red 'B' on it. The one Ian wears nearly every day. The one he was wearing the night Killian first met him.

Emma takes the hat from Henry with shaking hands. Without thinking, Killian reaches out to touch the hat as well.

It's slightly smashed, and there's a partial boot print on the blue fabric. It likely came off because Ian struggled, and whoever had a hold of him then trampled it as he made his escape. Seeing the hat this way, left behind, sends a shudder up his throat that Killian swallows down just before it turns into a sob.

Emma looks at him then, and Killian nearly flinches; he expects to see accusation in her eyes—or anger, or hatred—but all he sees is determination. Her face is pale, colorless, but her mouth is set in a thin line, and her fierce green gaze says one thing: We're going to get him back.

It calms his frantically beating heart. He nods in response, as if she spoke the words out loud, and brushes his fingers briefly against hers.

Together.

With a firm hand, Killian gets his emotions under control, then carefully wraps them up and tucks
them away. He steps away from Killian Jones, and slips into Captain Hook, the man with a core of cold iron, the man who can be calculating and patient, the man who isn't currently having his insides ripped to shreds by fear.

He turns back to Granny and Henry. "When?" he asks.

"Five minutes ago," Granny says, then she gestures up the street with her crossbow. "They went that way."

North.

Blackbeard and his men have only a small head start, but they'll be moving fast. They'll be seeking a secure location—a hidey hole seems unlikely, given that they kidnapped Ian knowing Killian would pursue them. They'll need somewhere with strategic value, somewhere that's easily defendable but also easily escapable. Blackbeard likely sent scouts out ahead to find just such a location, and he could also have sent a few of his men back to the Jolly Roger, to ready her just in case they need to flee the realm entirely. If Ian weren't involved, Killian would secure the Jolly Roger first before going after Blackbeard, but today he doesn't care, today he just needs Ian safe.

"H-hey," a voice gasps. "I-I'm sorry,"

Killian jolts, and tears his eyes from the street to look down at Will Scarlet. He assumed Will was unconscious, but finds the man awake, staring blearily up at him from a face taut with pain.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

Killian steps quickly over and around the piles of bodies and drops to his knees beside Will. He places his hand bracingly on Will's shoulder.

"You've nothing to apologize for mate," he says quietly.

Will makes a face, either because he disagrees or because he's in pain—or both.

"I...I couldn't..." he pants.

"Shhh," Emma says, kneeling beside Killian. She finds Will's hand and holds it. "It's alright. You're going to be alright."

Will shakes his head, then he closes his eyes, and whispers, "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

Will grimaces and shakes his head. "I'm not afraid of dying," he says. "If I...if I die-" Will pauses for a moment, face crumpling further, and then chokes out, "If I die I can see her again."

Her.

Killian has no idea who her is, but Killian recognizes all too well the tone Will uses when he says it—she was a lover, and she's gone.

He squeezes Will's shoulder, hoping desperately that he's providing the man comfort rather than hurting him even more.

"You're not going to die," Emma says softly. She reaches up with her free hand and runs her fingers along Will's brow, as Killian's seen her do to Ian countless times. "You're going to be alright. The doctors here will take care of you. They're on their way."

She looks across Will's body at Henry, and
"You called an ambulance, right?"

"Yea," Henry says. He's pale, with the battle-shocked expression of someone who's seen real bloodshed for the first time.

The heart of both Captain Hook and Killian Jones break for the boy, even while, at the same time, it bursts with pride—Killian's seen far worse reactions to first battles. He catches Henry's eye, and gives him a nod he hopes Henry understands means Killian both acknowledges and empathizes with what Henry's just been through. Henry presses his lips together in a brief, miniscule smile, and returns his attention to Will. Killian does the same.

Gradually, beneath Emma's ministrations, Will's face relaxes. Killian thinks he's fallen unconscious again until, just when he hears the first wail of approaching siren in the distance, Will mutters, "If I do die, tell Alice."

Killian, Emma, and Henry exchange glances, then look up at Granny, who shrugs.

Emma's the first to turn back to Will. "Tell Alice what?" she asks gently.

"Just tell her," Will says.

He doesn't speak again, but he clings to Emma's hand until the ambulance arrives. As soon as it skids to a halt against the curb, men in dark blue uniforms pile out towing a load of equipment.

Killian, Emma, and Henry back out of their way, and while Emma and Henry watch over Will, Killian checks for other survivors. Unfortunately Blackbeard himself is not among the dead—not that Killian expected him to be. However, every body on the patio is, in fact, a body; every one of Blackbeard's men lying on the patio is dead, either by Will's hand or Granny's.

On any other day Killian would be elated, but today, when he needs information on Blackbeard's whereabouts and intentions, it's a disappointment. As he kicks aside cutlasses, pistols, and knives, his anxiety returns.

They need to find Ian.

Killian knows his boy, and he also knows the general temperament of Blackbeard's men. The longer Ian's with them, the better the chances are that his runaway mouth agitates them to the point of kneejerk violence—that is, if the fight Killian knows the boy is putting up hasn't already caused physical retaliation.

Killian picks up one of the discarded cutlass and tests its edge and balance before rejoining Emma. She's holding Ian's hat, turning it round and round in her hands. Killian touches her wrist and she stills. She glances at him briefly, and then turns to Henry.

"Henry," she says, and although Killian spies the slight tremor in her hands, her voice is steady. "Go with Will."

Henry pulls a frown that's both confused and surprised.

"Please," Emma adds.

"Mom, are you mad at me?"

"No, Henry, I'm not mad. I'm..." She purses her lips suddenly, and her forehead crinkles.
"I tried to save him," Henry says. "The guy took him and I tried to get him back but then all of a sudden I was in the diner and the door was locked...I couldn't get back out. I'm sorry, mom. I tried-"

His face crumples, and Emma pulls him into a hug. He's a full head taller than her and he has to stoop so that her chin can go over his shoulder and she won't suffocate, but with her arms around him and his face tucked into her hair and her hand on the back of his head, he looks like a child.

"It's not your fault," Emma says. "I don't blame you. There's nothing you could have done."

Henry shakes his head.

Killian reaches out and puts a hand on his arm. "We're just glad you're not hurt, lad."

Henry raises his head to look at Killian, and Killian smiles gently. It snuck up on him, caring for this boy as much as he cares for his own son, but it feels as though it was inevitable.

"We don't want you in any more danger," Killian says. "Please, go with Will to the hospital so that we know you're safe. Can you do that for us?"

Henry nods, then eases himself out of Emma's arms and steps back.

"Make sure Will knows you're there," Emma says, swiping discreetly at her eyes.

"Okay." Henry starts backing towards the ambulance, where the men in blue uniforms are loading Will Scarlet into the back of the vehicle.

"We'll call you when we have Ian."

Henry's lips quirk. "Ian has my phone—at least, he'd better still have it."

Emma chuckles. "Well, if it's gone I'll buy you a new one. Stay with Will."

"I know, mom."

"Henry?"

"Yea?"

"I love you," Emma says.

Henry smiles. "I love you too, mom."

Henry jumps into the back of the ambulance, and as Killian watches the ambulance pull away, lights flashing and sirens blaring once more, he sees David, Snow, Robin, Ruby, and a gang of Merry Men approaching from the south, still a block away yet.

Emma sees them too, and then turns, arms folded beneath her breasts, and leans her shoulder into Killian's chest. Ian's hat is crushed between them. Killian slips an arm around her, pulling her closer, and presses his lips to her forehead.

Her body is rigid against him, and one—or both—of them is trembling, but she doesn't pull away. Instead, she melts into him, and says, "Let's go get our son."

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Ian's been punching and kicking the pirate dragging him through the woods for at least five minutes, but the guy still hasn't let go. A long braid flops over his shoulder, and Ian pulls on it, but then the
pirate shakes him so hard his teeth rattle, so Ian doesn't try that again and instead settles for punching and kicking him and any other stinky pirate that comes close enough.

And they are stinky.

Like, really, really stinky.

Ian thinks he should tell them, because maybe they don't know.

"You smell bad," he says.

"Shut up."

The hot, reeking air that engulfs Ian then makes him gag. He stops trying to punch the guy in the head and claps both hands over his nose and mouth.

"Ew, brush your teeth."

"I SAID SHUT UP!" the pirate roars, and as Ian's hit with another wave of the pirate's rotting breath he starts giggling.

"You smell like you kissed a dog's butt!"

That earns him another rough shake.

"I swear to Poseidon," the pirate growls. "Another word out of you and I'll kill you-"

"Another word out of you and I'm gonna suffocate so-"

There's a wordless snarl from over his head, Ian sees the flash of a knife as the pirate draws it from his belt and raises it, and the arm across his chest suddenly releases him.

As soon as Ian's feet touch the ground he's off. He only takes three steps before there's another pirate blocking his path, so he pivots right and starts running that way—only to be cut off again. He turns left, and bumps into the first pirate.

He takes a stumbling step backwards and then he's grabbed by the wrist and spun around—but he's ready for it. As he turns he slithers his other arm out like a snake and puts his finger right in the braided pirate's eye—it's squishy but also kind of hard and that's not what Ian thought an eyeball would feel like.

"ARRRGGH!!" the pirate bellows.

"Ugh," Ian says, wiping his finger on his shorts.

"WHAT'S GOING ON BACK THERE?"

The woods go quiet.

Two huge hands grab Ian's upper arms. The pirates standing in front of him step aside, and Blackbeard shoulders past them.

Ian notices that he walks funny, and decides it's because one of his legs is wooden from the knee down. He stops and glares around at all of his pirates.

"How is it," he asks in a voice that's somehow very quiet and very loud at the same time, "that the
most feared band of pirates in all the realms cannot control this one small child?"

Nobody answers him.

Blackbeard then looks at Ian with icy blue eyes, takes two limping steps forward, and bends down so that his face is very close to Ian's face. He opens his mouth, but Ian speaks first.

"Your crew smells," he says.

Blackbeard quirks an eyebrow. "My what?"

"You should make them take baths."

The other eyebrows raises.

"You smell okay though," Ian adds.

Blackbeard blinks then, very slowly, and one corner of his lips curls up into a smile. "You are going to behave from now, boy," he says, in the voice that's just quiet this time. "Do you want to know how I know this?"

Ian scowls, but doesn't respond.

"I know this because if you don't behave I'm going to throw you off the cliffs and into the sea before your daddy has a chance to watch you die. You want to see your parents one last time, don't you?"

Blackbeard leans in closer, and Ian has an idea. He tucks his chin into his neck and rocks backwards as far as the hands holding onto his upper arms will let him.

Blackbeard narrows his eyes. "What are you--"

Ian jolts forward and slams the top of his head into Blackbeard's face. Blackbeard howls and covers his nose with his hand. He staggers away from Ian, and when he lowers his hand from his face, it's covered with blood.

Blackbeard's face contorts, and he screams, "TAKE HIM TO THE CLIFFS!"
"Let's go get our son."

Emma's surprisingly calm.

It's not sitting-on-the-beach-enjoying-a-mojito calm, but neither does she feel the need to rain down death and destruction—at least not yet; she'll hold off on making her final decision until she lays eyes on Blackbeard.

Maybe she's so calm because Killian's calm, or just that, with his arm around her, she feels like she (they) can do anything.

Or maybe it's because she knows she can kill the bad guy this time if she has to and she won't feel guilty afterwards.

Or maybe it's because she knows exactly how to find Ian.

While Killian catches up the others, Emma turns inwards. She dips a finger into her magic, and finds it vibrating with impatience; it knows what she wants, and it's wondering why the hell it took her so long to ask.

Emma takes a deep breath, slowly returning her attention to the outside world, slowly drawing up an armful of her magic and holding it steady.

Killian's talking, and Emma listens for a moment. She can tell how guilty he feels about Blackbeard going after the boys, and he's trying to make up for it by shouldering the burden of leading the group. He wants to run a search grid in the woods. It's a good idea—but Emma doesn't plan on wasting so much time.

"We don't have to search," she says.

She takes a step back, just enough to be able to see Killian's face, but not far enough that his hand leaves her waist, and lifts Ian's Red Sox hat away from where she's been clutching it to her belly.

"This is going to take us right to Ian."

Killian stares at the hat with a tiny crease between his brows, then he blinks, meets her eyes, and says, "A locator spell."

She nods.

"Do you have one?" David asks.
Emma shakes her head. "No, but I don't need one." She can see everyone watching her, but she keeps her eyes locked on Killian's. "I can make Ian's hat find him. I did it with your jacket, when the locator spell failed. I can do it again."

"Are you certain?" he asks, so quietly Emma's not sure anyone else can hear.

"Yes," she whispers. "Trust me."

His fingers tighten briefly on her waist. "I do," he says, and Emma sees more than just the truth of those two words in his eyes.

"I love you."

Emma swallows hard and forces the heat rising in her cheeks to retreat. When this is over, when they have Ian back, she's going to have to think about some things—including how much of an idiot she is for believing she could push Killian away.

She gives him a brief smile, and takes another step to the side, giving herself some space. His hand slides from her waist to the small of her back, and remains there, a small, reassuring source of heat and pressure.

Emma focuses on the hat, and begins pouring her magic into it.

*Find Ian,* she thinks.

"I bought you," she mumbles. The hat was Ian's birthday gift the previous year, along with tickets to an actual game. "If you don't listen to me," she continues, "I swear to God I'll throw you in the trash and buy him a fucking Yankees hat instead."

The hat quivers in her hands.

"Now, find him."

The hat shudders, and then, slowly, it pulls itself from her fingers, and begins floating away.

Killian's hand disappears from her back. He slips the cutlass he borrowed from one of the dead pirates off his hook, and Emma removes her gun from its holster.

"Let's go."

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The hat takes them north, up the street exactly as Granny indicated, and then into the woods.

Emma and Killian head the group. Emma's parents trail her and Killian by a few paces, with Granny and Ruby another five feet or so behind them. Robin and the Merry Men are fanned out to either side in two long lines, arrows knocked, strings drawn, ready to fire at a moment's notice.

Emma's only vaguely familiar with these woods—they searched the forest to the south of town rigorously when they were looking for Little John and then for Pan's Shadow, but largely ignored the north woods as they aren't physically connected to the south woods; however, when Ian's hat veers left and begins drifting determinedly to the east, Emma starts getting nervous.

There are cliffs overlooking the sea to the east. Some of them are pretty low and kids actually use them as diving boards into the sea in the summer, but some are very high and have clusters of massive, jagged rocks at their base—is that Blackbeard's plan? To throw Ian off one of the cliffs into
the ocean?

If Blackbeard wanted Henry and Ian dead, why didn’t he kill them on the patio? That would have been much easier than trying to kidnap them. Emma doesn't know a lot about Blackbeard, but she doesn’t think he's the type of guy that gets his rocks off torturing kids, which means this goes beyond wanting revenge for what Henry and Ian stole, and the obvious answer is that this has something to do with Killian.

As the ground begins its gradual upwards slope towards the cliffs, Emma lets her footsteps bring her in closer to Killian, until their arms are touching. Keeping her eyes ahead, she asks in a low voice, "What did you do to Blackbeard?"

Killian visibly recoils at her words. Emma quickly catches his wrist before he can pull away entirely.

"I don't blame you, Killian," she says.

If she blamed Killian for what Blackbeard’s doing to Ian, then she'd have to blame herself and Henry for what Neal did to Killian—and then she'd have to start blaming her parents for Regina casting the Dark Curse and making her grow up an orphan.

She doesn't blame Henry or herself or her parents for the actions of others, nor will she ever. No one made Regina cast the Dark Curse, no one made Neal hurt Killian, and no one made Blackbeard kidnap Ian. It doesn't matter the motivation, assholes choosing to do bad things are just assholes choosing to do bad things.

Killian turns his head slightly to watch her warily from beneath his lashes, just out of the corner of his eye. Emma slides her fingers from Killian's wrist to cover his hand where it grips the cutlass.

"I just need to understand why this is happening," she says.

Killian huffs out a breath, and Emma hears an eternity of regret in that one miniscule sound. He turns his gaze from her to Ian's hat, still leading them eastward.

"Do you want the list, love? Or just my most heinous offense?" he asks.

"Right now I want to know why he took Ian."

Emma sees the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching as he grinds his teeth, and it's a long moment before he speaks.

"When we were all returned to the Enchanted Forest seven years ago, all of our possessions were returned as well," Killian says. "Blackbeard and I have been rivals for decades, Swan, so when he found the Jolly Roger before I did, of course he took it for his own. In taking it back from him, I both caused him to lose his leg to a shark, and did something far, far worse: I humiliated him in front of his crew—twice, actually, if you count the incident in the tavern with the magic bean."

"He wants to make you suffer," Emma says.

"Aye. He does."

They walk in silence. The trees seem to be thinning with every step they take, and their path grows steeper and rockier. Emma thinks Killian might keep throwing her looks, but she has to concentrate on tiptoeing around small boulders without losing her balance or making too much noise—she envies the way the Merry Men pick their way up the slope like a goddamn pack of mountain goats.
Suddenly, Killian stops and snags her arm with his hook, turning her. His voice is an urgent whisper as he says, "Emma, Blackbeard's expecting us. When we arrive, he'll want to gloat and draw out my suffering for as long as possible."

He glances down the path, but Snow and David have fallen far behind, sticking close to Granny, who's struggling but stubbornly refusing aid. The Merry Men have paused, but they're too far away to hear their conversation.

Killian's eyes meet Emma's again, and Emma sees the plea in them. "I'll try to trade my life for Ian, but even if Blackbeard agrees, he may try to kill Ian anyway. You have to do everything you can to get Ian out of there, even if it means leaving me behind-"

"No," Emma hisses. Her anger flares up out of nowhere, sending bursts of heat along her skin and making her cheeks flush.

Killian blinks. "Emma-"

"No," she repeats. "We're not doing that."

"Emma, I know...." He glances down the path again. Snow and David are getting closer, drawing within earshot. Killian grimaces, uses his hook wrapped around her elbow to tug her closer, and plunges on. "I know raising a child on your own is a heavy burden, and I know Ian's been solely your responsibility for six years. I understand Ian's in danger because of me, but please, Emma..."

He trails off, eyes flicking back and forth between hers, and Emma feels lost—not because the blue of his eyes does insane things to her, but because he's taking this in a direction she did not expect.

"Is that what you think this is about?" she asks. "That I blame you?"

"Is that not what this is about?"

"I already told you that I don't blame you!"

He frowns. "Then why won't you-"

"Because I can't lose you," she snaps.

"This isn't about protecting me, Emma. This is about protecting our son."

"I know that!"

"Then you have to trust me-"

"Killian, of course I trust you!" Emma shouts.

He stares, shocked.

Her heart gives a little tremble, but she doesn't fight it.

"I love you."

Emma can hear those words clearly in her mind as if they just left Killian's lips. She can feel eyes on her, but she ignores them.

"Of course I trust you," she tells Killian again, quietly. "Especially when it comes to Ian."
Killian shakes his head, uncomprehending, still questioning.

"I've lost too much already," she says. "I won't lose you too."

Killian's shoulders relax, and his hook glides down her arm to her wrist.

"I know you've got the weight of the world on your shoulders, love," he says softly, "but you don't have to worry about me. If there's one thing I'm good at-" Here his eyes glint and he quirks an eyebrow- "it's surviving. I'm not going anywhere, love. There's nothing on hell or earth that can tear me away from you again, understand? You need to get Ian out of there. Let me handle Blackbeard. I'll meet you at the loft when I'm finished with him."

He smiles, and Emma feels her heart stop trembling. She nods, and turns her hand so she can wrap her fingers around Killian's hook. His gaze drops to her lips, and Emma thinks he might have kissed her if not for her dad clearing his throat at that exact moment.

"Now might not be the best time for that," Snow says, politely. Behind her, Ruby's smiling. Granny, on the other hand, looks both out of breath and completely unmoved; Emma would consider suggesting the old woman stay behind if she wasn't afraid of what Granny might do to her with that crossbow.

"It might be a good time to discuss strategy though," David adds, and Emma realizes that they're close enough to the cliffs that she can hear the ocean.

The ocean, and something else, something she can't possibly be hearing.

She frowns and gives her head a shake, but she still hears it. She turns, cocking her head, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound.

"Emma, love, what is it?"

"Do you hear that?" she asks.

"Hear what?" Snow says.

"Minecraft," she mutters, striding over to the bush the theme song is playing out of. She squats, reaches inside, rummaging through branches and leaves and a few thorns, until her fingers find Henry's cell phone.

She pulls it out and turns, showing Killian and her parents. The Minecraft theme is now clearly audible.

"Emma, how did you even hear that?" David asks.

She snorts. "You have no idea how many hours I've had to listen to this song," she says. "I've had nightmares to this song."

She unlocks Henry's phone—knowing the password for all his electronics is one of her stipulations for being allowed to have said devices in the first place—taps at the screen, and closes the game, abruptly cutting off the noise.

The silence is immediately shattered by a scream in the distance, and as soon as Emma hears it, her calm shatters as well.

She sucks in a breath to shout Ian's name only to have a hand fastened roughly over her mouth.
"Wait," Killian says harshly in her ear.

Emma squeezes her eyes shut and clamps down hard on every muscle in her body. She knows Killian's right, she knows if she calls for Ian she'll give away their position and forfeit completely the element of surprise, but her entire being is crying out for her kid, wanting to reassure him that she's there and that she's coming for him.

Ian screams again, and this time Killian barely gets his hook arm around her in time to keep her from bolting. She strains against him, but his grip is like iron.

"He's okay, Emma, he's okay," Killian whispers. "They're not hurting him. He's just scared."

Emma shakes her head. She knows Ian's scared and that's _exactly_ the problem. He's not even six yet—he shouldn't be out there getting terrorized by a bunch of pirates.

To her right, Emma hears David giving orders to the Merry Men, sending them off into the forest towards the cliffs, towards where they heard Ian's screams coming from. Emma needs to go with them. She needs to get her kid back. She needs to put her fist through the face of every pirate that even _looked_ at Ian.

She throws herself against Killian's arm, but still he manages to hold onto her.

"Emma, please," Killian growls, the effort of trying to restrain her clear in her voice. "I promise you, Ian's okay. We'll get him, but you'll have to wait!"

Her vision blurs as tears sting her eyes, but she keeps pushing forward, boots scrabbling in the dirt.

"Emma—bloody hell, woman! If you run in there guns blazing, Ian's as good as dead!"

Instantly, she freezes. Although he whispered them, Killian's words ring in her ears as if they were shouted.

Her heart is pounding her ribcage, and a single tear slips down her cheek, but she's calm again. Slowly, she gets her breathing back under control, and, slowly, Killian relaxes his hand, and then removes it from her mouth entirely.

David and Snow are ahead, crouching in the bushes with Ruby and Granny. The Merry Men are almost out of sight amongst the trees. A few of them have their bows slung over their shoulder and knives drawn.

Killian sees where she's looking.

"They're going to take down the lookouts first," he explains, helpfully. "Once they're out of the way, we'll be able to sneak up on Blackbeard and the rest of his men without them knowing until it's too late—and we also won't have to worry about an ambush from behind."

Emma nods. Killian removes his arm from around her chest, but he doesn't step away.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"No, you were right," she says, taking a shaky breath. "Thank you."

Ian's hat is still hovering, waiting. Emma extends a thin thread of magic, touches the hat, and makes it disappear and then reappear in her hands. She swipes her thumbs along the blue fabric.

_We're coming for you, kid_, she thinks. _Just hold on a little bit longer._
If not for Killian, Emma would have charged right into the middle of what's probably a trap, and not only would she have dragged everyone else along with her, she might have accidentally caused Ian to get hurt—or worse.

Emma turns on her heel to face Killian. "Thank you," she says.

"You already thanked me, love-"

"I know, but...I really mean it. I would have fucked this all up big time if you hadn't held me back."

He presses his lips into a smile and drops his eyes demurely. "I've said it before, Swan: we make quite the team."

"We do," Emma agrees quietly, and she's not just talking about in battle or on rescue missions, she sort of also means Ian.

Killian raises his eyes once more, and Emma can tell by the look in them that he understands. He moves his arm, lifting it away from his side and turning his hand palm-up. Emma takes the invitation, and slides her fingers through his.

"I love you."

Robin emerges unannounced from the trees to their left, making Emma jump—Killian, the absolute bastard, is not surprised and actually smiles at her reaction. Emma turns sharply towards Robin before she can decide that she needs to smack the smirk right off of Killian's mouth.

"I just got the signal from my men," Robin says. "We're ready."

Emma looks once more at Killian, and sees Captain Hook staring back at her. "Remember what I said, Emma," he says, voice low and with a hint of thunder. "Get Ian out of there, and don't worry about me."

Emma feels a nervous flutter in her stomach, but she bites her lip and nods.

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She creeps towards the cliffs alongside her parents.

Killian is farther down the line to her right, separated from Emma by Snow, Ruby, and Granny. He's hoping physical distance between them will keep her safe—Blackbeard took Ian to hurt Killian, so if he knows Emma's important to Killian, he might try to hurt her too.

Emma gets it; she totally does—but she doesn't like it, because, first of all, fuck Blackbeard. Not only can Emma take him, she would also love to see him try to hurt her. In fact, she dares him to try and hurt her. She just needs that one, tiny excuse, and he's toast.

Secondly, Emma wants to believe the whole "I'm a survivor, love" thing, but it's hard when she's had to rescue him twice from Pan's Shadow, and once from Neal. Killian's resilient and resourceful, but he's not indestructible. Emma wants to be close to him in case he needs her, because she meant what she said: she won't lose him.

As they near the cliffs, the sound of the ocean grows louder, and Emma can hear voices, low, rowdy, and accented like Killian's. They pass several bodies lying amongst the bushes with their throats cut and their eyes staring blankly at the sky overhead.
The sight makes Emma feel queasy, and it takes Snow whispering "Don't look!" to get her to tear her eyes away before she throws up.

Being a bail-bondsperson is a dirty job, but that...that's something else. Those men Granny and Will killed were killed in self-defense. These men...

She clenches her jaw and takes several deep breaths in through her nose. That's not her problem right now. Now she needs to focus on getting Ian back. She can worry about the morality of slitting men's throats later.

Or just...never. Maybe never. Never sounds good.

Emma has both arms entirely submerged in her magic, but she also has her gun ready; she knows her shooting accuracy, but she's not entirely convinced that she can wield her magic accurately, especially not if Ian's in the way. There's an extra clip in her pocket, just in case she runs out of bullets, and after that she guesses she'll just have to borrow a sword from a dead guy, like Killian did. She's not an expert, but she did throw a sword at a dragon once and killed it, so...

The waves crashing against the rocky cliffs is now a roar, nearly drowning out the voices of the pirates, and all of a sudden, they're there. They clear the trees, passing silently from dappled shade into blazing sunlight, and step out into the open space Blackbeard and his men are gathered in.

Emma thinks she knows where they are; it's one of low cliffs that kids jump off of—actually, if Emma's right, there's a narrow path that leads down along the cliff face all the way to a little beach. Which makes sense, actually. Blackbeard wouldn't back himself into a corner. He'd make sure there was an escape route.

Emma glances around quickly, calculating. There are about twenty yards in between them and the cliff edge. The pirates are closer to the cliff than to the trees, and they haven't noticed Emma and the others yet. Apparently, they have a lot of confidence in their lookouts.

It takes her five seconds to think all of that, another two seconds to realize Robin and the Merry Men aren't there and are probably covering them from hiding spots surrounding the clearing, and one more second to locate Ian.

He's right in the middle of the group. A guy the size of the Jolly Green Giant and wearing only a little bit more clothing has one massive hand wrapped around each of Ian's arms. Ian's kicking every inch of the guy he can reach—toes, shins, kneecaps, and one well-aimed blow to the groin—but the guy doesn't even flinch, he just stares down at Ian impassively while the other pirates laugh.

Seeing Ian alive and fighting his ass off sends a jolt of relief through Emma, but seeing Blackbeard and his men laughing at his struggles makes her blood boil.

Fucking assholes.

She's about to announce their presence by telling them what a sorry bunch of losers they are for being amused by emotionally torturing a child when Ian spots her.

His whole face lights up, and he yells, "MOM!" as if she's picking him up from school rather than rescuing him from a bunch of bloodthirsty pirates.

Every one of the men gathered near the cliff edge whirls around. Cutlasses and pistols are drawn, battle faces are slapped on, and several pirates take several threatening steps forward—until a commanding voice halts them in their tracks.
"Stop," it says.

They do, and then they move to the side, giving Emma an unobstructed view of a man in a long red coat who looks exactly like Emma always thought pirates were supposed to look like, rising slowly from the large boulder he was sitting on. He reaches his full height, and turns his cold eyes on the group, sliding his gaze from one face to the next until he finds Killian.

"Finally," he says, grinning. "Captain Hook. We meet again."

"Blackbeard," Killian returns solemnly.

"MOM!" Ian shouts again, completely unaware of the drama taking place above his head. "Mom, I broke Blackbeard's nose!"

Blackbeard's grin slips.

"I hit him with my head!" Ian adds brightly, only to be shaken roughly by the giant man holding him.

Emma's finger, resting lightly on the trigger, twitches.

Patience, she tells herself. If you shoot that guy now, everyone will start fighting, and you'll lose sight of Ian.

"Is that true?" Killian asks Blackbeard with a wicked smirk. "Did a five-year-old really break your nose?"

Blackbeard doesn't answer, but the faint smear of blood beneath his nostrils and the bruises blossoming beneath his eyes tell the story for him.

Killian turns his smile and twinkling eyes to Emma. "Swan, permission to hive-five the boy for breaking Blackbeard's nose?"

Emma thinks he's crazy for taunting the guy holding their son hostage, but she said she trusts him, and she does, so she goes along with it.

"Permission granted," she says.

Blackbeard notices Emma, then, and when he looks at her she shivers.

"So this is the wench you sired the pup with," Blackbeard says, grin returning. "She's not exactly your usual type, Hook, is she now?"

Emma lets the words roll over her. If Blackbeard thinks he's going to get a rise out of her and retake control of the situation by calling her names, then he's an idiot. She keeps her face blank and her eyes fixed just over Blackbeard's shoulder, locked on the guy holding Ian

"Still," Blackbeard sniffs. "I suppose I can see the appeal. Never took you for much of a family man though, Hook. Does she know all the things you get up to? Rather, does she know all the women you get up to?"

It doesn't bother Emma, as she knows it's a lie and Blackbeard's just trying to upset her, but David loses his cool. With a growl, he hefts his sword and takes two quick strides in Blackbeard's direction.

"Dad," Emma warns, snatching at his arm, at the same time Snow hisses, "David!" and lowers her bow to grab at his wrist.
"David, stop!" Snow says.

"Dad, c'mon!"

David takes two more steps before he finally stops, Snow's fingers snagged in his shirtsleeve, but he doesn't lower his sword or temper his glare.

Blackbeard gawks. "Dad?" he asks, looking in between David and Emma.

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma sees Killian use the distraction to inch smoothly forward, and resettles her hands around her gun—if Killian goes for Blackbeard, then Emma's taking down the guy holding Ian.

"Oh my, it's a family affair," Blackbeard says, chuckling. "I truly didn't expect such a response. This is going to be even more fun than I imagined."

Emma snorts. "You really think you can kill all of us?"

Blackbeard shrugs with his arms, rolling his wrist so that his cutlass sweeps upwards in a wide arc, its polished steel blade flashing in the sun.

"I suppose it would be difficult," he says, sighing exaggeratedly. "You lot are outnumbered, but I've seen what the old woman can do with that crossbow, and if any of the rest of you fight as hard as the fellow with the knives did then...we're in for quite the battle."

He looks them over once more, languidly, and then says, "However, I'll be satisfied as long as Hook dies—I might even let you all go if you leave him to me."

"Not happening," David says loudly, and before Emma can be surprised that the words she was thinking came out of her father's mouth, Killian rushes forward.

Emma makes to follow, but Blackbeard smiles, raises an imperious hand, and wags his finger back and forth. "Ah-ah-ah," he tuts, forcing Killian to skid to a halt. "Not so fast, Captain. Take one more step and I'll make sure your whelp ends up on the bottom of the ocean."

Killian's feet remain frozen, but Emma sees his grip on his cutlass tighten and his body tense.

"You don't believe me," Blackbeard says. His eyes narrow, and his grin widens until it's a leer. "Splendid," he breathes, then turns to the giant holding Ian, and calls, "Caesar, our dear Captain Hook doesn't believe me."

With a grunt and a mighty heave, Caesar lifts Ian into the air by his shirt and thrusts his massive arm out over the edge of the cliff, dangling Ian. Ian yells—the same sound Emma heard earlier—and fumbles at the giant's wrist, searching for something to hold onto.

"LET HIM GO!" Emma shouts. She takes an involuntary step forward, swinging her gun up as she does.

"If I were you, I'd be careful of your word choice," Blackbeard drawls.

Caesar extends his arm farther. Ian kicks his legs in terror, but it only makes his body swing wildly from side-to-side.

"MOM!" he cries.

Emma can see his face, teeth gritted, bared, eyes wide and scared—and then he squeezes his eyes
shut.

Suddenly, all of the hairs on Emma’s body raise, and she feels as though she’s been doused in cold water. Her magic shudders, and in her mind’s eye she can see Ian's magic—it's shuddering too, surface rippling, practically boiling...

Ian screams, and out of the clear blue sky appears a bolt of pure white lightning. It careens towards him, and Emma holds her breath, but it misses both Caesar and Ian and instead strikes the ground at their feet with a thunderous crackle and boom and a bright flash.

Killian reacts faster than Emma does. He leaps forward even before Emma notices the cliff is crumbling, even before Caesar shouts and loses his grip on Ian.

It takes Emma a split second to realize what he's doing, what's happening, and then she starts firing.

Ian drops out of sight, and Killian races faster.

To either side, pirates fall away, dropped by bullets or arrows. Those that are foolish enough to get in his way he dispatches with an expert pass of his cutlass.

Not once does he slow down.

He hears David bellowing from his left, and the clang of swords; to his right he hears animal growls and men screaming. Ahead, two men collapse simultaneously, one with Snow White's ivory-fletched arrow sprouting from his chest, and another with Robin's brindle-fletched arrow through his eye.

Blackbeard appears in his path, sword drawn, peg leg braced in the dirt. He raises his cutlass, and Killian raises his own in response, but the moment before they clash there's the crack of gunfire. The force of the bullet that erupts Blackbeard's shoulder spins the man around, out of Killian's way, and then there's nothing but five feet of open air between Killian and the cliff.

Flinging his cutlass to the side, Killian takes two massive strides, reaches the edge, and dives off.

He has a split second to note that there's no sign of Ian, realize the boy must still be underwater, and then he's plunging into the waves.

Luckily, the precipice is not so high that Killian breaks all his bones on impact. The shock of it, however, is brutal, and all his instincts scream at him to seek the surface immediately. Equally luckily, when he grits his teeth and forces his eyes open, he sees Ian almost immediately.

The boy is just ahead, floating limply a few feet beneath the surface, a dim shape save for the pale limbs and face.

Killian reaches him and drags him upwards. He gasps when they break the surface, pulling in lungfuls of sweet, sweet air, but there's no reaction from Ian. The boy's face is slack, and Killian can't tell if he's breathing or not, so he gets his arms through Ian's, props him against his chest, and kicks for shore.

He moves his legs steadily, glancing behind him every so often to ensure he's on course for the beach. He reckons he's halfway there when Ian jerks to life in his arms. The boy convulses, spewing water, and then his hands are scrabbling at Killian's arms and there are heels battering his thighs.

"Ian! Ian, it's me!"
Ian tries to twist around to see him, and Killian glimpses one wide, terrified blue eye.

"It's me," Killian repeats. "You're alright. Lean back. I've got you."

Ian relaxes and drops his head onto Killian's shoulder, then, with a small whimper, he starts shivering.

Shit.

Killian kicks faster, ignoring the burn in his thighs. The sun is hot on the top of his head, but the water is icy, numbing every inch of him. Gradually, movement grows more and more difficult, but Killian keep going, keeps kicking for shore.

"Hold on, lad," he says. "Almost there."

Ian's response is more violent shivering.

It feels like an eternity passes before Killian's heels finally bump the sand. He gets his feet beneath him, turns Ian in his arms so they're chest-to-chest, and stands.

Ian latches onto him like a monkey, and presses a cold nose into Killian's neck. Killian clings right back, grateful to have Ian safe in his arms.

"Are you hurt?" he asks.

Ian shakes his head.

Suddenly it hits Killian just how close he was to losing the boy, and even though he's holding Ian, even though he knows his son is safe, his guts clench painfully.

That was close.

Too close.

He cups Ian's head, finger sliding through wet, dark gold hair, and lays his cheek over Ian's temple.

I have to do a better job protecting him.

"KILLIAN!"

Killian pulls his head up to see Emma sprinting along the beach, closely followed by her parents.

"He's alright!" Killian calls back. "We're coming!"

He begins wading to shore, but Emma doesn't wait. She leaps from sand to water and splashes towards him. She meets him halfway, when the water's still up to Killian's knees, and crashes into them so hard Killian nearly loses his balance and falls—Emma's crushing hug, however, keeps him on his feet.

Ian raises his head, and Emma takes it in both hands and plants a series of loud, wet-sounding kisses all over his face, making the boy giggle.

"I'm so-" she says in between kisses- "glad-" another huge kiss, on Ian's nose- "you're okay!"

She finishes, and then she just looks at Ian as if she's seeing him for the first time, and then she looks at Killian.
"How the hell are you both not hurt?"

Killian shrugs. "I told you, love, I'm a survivor," he says, then grins and tilts his head in Ian's direction. "Apparently, it runs in the blood."

As does vexing Blackbeard.

Emma's hands move from Ian's face to Killian's shirt collar, too fast for Killian to comprehend her intentions, and then he's helpless to stop her pulling his mouth to hers.

The breath whooshes out of him as their lips meet; his eyes fall shut, his pulse slows, his whole body goes still, every cell focused on the warm, soft feel of Emma's mouth against her own. He slides his hook arm out from between them and wraps it around her waist, tugging her closer until she's fitted perfectly to his side. He can feel her heartbeat from where her breastbone is pressed to his ribs, thundering so hard it sends vibrations through his chest.

One of her hands skims up and around to the nape of his neck, his own fingers tighten in her shirt and his pinky finds its way underneath the hem and touches the skin at the small of her back—and then Ian squirms in his arms.

"Still maybe not a good time for that guys," Snow calls.

Killian and Emma break apart as quickly as if another lightning bolt appeared out of nowhere and struck them.

Ian's smiling bewilderedly at them, as if not sure whether to be amused or disgusted—or both.

Killian can see the questions clamoring in the boy's head, but before he can comment, Emma clears her throat, says, "C'mon, let's get you guys to shore and get you dry," and starts shoving Killian towards the beach.

Miraculously, Ian remembers he's cold then, and slumps against Killian, shivering pitifully.

"Can we get hot chocolate?" he asks.

Emma side-eyes him, and then catches Killian's eye. Killian grins in agreement.

Little con artist.

Less than an hour later, Ian's charming the pants off of every nurse in Storybrooke General. Emma watches from the chair beside his bed as they bring him thick, soft blankets, extra pillows, hot chocolate from their own personal supply, and a stack of Highlights magazines that haven't had all the puzzles inside them scribbled on.

Emma, Killian, and Henry, on the other hand, are left to fend for themselves, so Emma sends Henry to the cafeteria for snacks and drinks. Killian leaves too, and when he returns ten minutes later he has a paperback copy of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory tucked beneath his hook arm.

He takes the book in hand and walks hesitantly up to Ian's bedside—after Emma watched him cut through a half dozen pirates like a hot knife through butter, watching him so nervous now brings a smile to her face, a smile she has to hide by propping her elbow on the arm of her chair, dropping her chin into her hand, and curling her fingers over her lips.

"Ian," Killian says, making Ian look up from the "spot the difference" puzzle he's doing in one of the
magazines. Killian gestures awkwardly with the book, and scratches behind his ear with his hook. "I, erm, bought this for you, and I thought we could—rather, I thought perhaps I could read to you. To make you feel better. Like you read to me to make me feel better when I was in the hospital."

Ian's response is essentially to forget that he has a lapful of Highlights magazines—or that Highlights magazines even exist at all—and scoot over to one side of the bed so fast that he almost topplies off the edge. Emma catches his shoulder and pushes him back upright with one hand, and stops the cascade of Highlights magazines from hitting the floor with the other.

Smiling lopsidedly, Killian perches on the mattress, one leg on the floor, and one leg resting on the bed, crooked so that his boot doesn't touch the blanket. Ian then scoots back the other way, until he's nestled against Killian's side with his head on Killian's shoulder.

Henry returns when Killian's half a chapter in. He passes out the goodies he scored from the vending machines, then takes the other chair, and while Killian reads, Emma, Henry, and Ian eat. Emma listens, but most of her attention is focused on Killian and Ian. She watches Ian's rapt expression, she watches how Killian's expression changes as he reads and brings the voices of the characters to life, she watches how Killian keeps glancing at Ian to see if he's still listening, and the way Killian's lips quirk slightly in a smile every time he sees that he is.

A few visitors pop in and out. David and Snow bring Roger the crab. Granny brings them actual dinner and fresh hot chocolates (she accidentally hands Emma the one meant for Killian, and Emma almost spits it across the room when she realizes it's so spiked with rum it's basically just rum). Robin drops by to greet Ian and ruffle his hair, and he whispers to Emma that Will's out of surgery and stable, and that Blackbeard's also out of surgery, stable, handcuffed to his bed, and has two Merry Men guarding him.

After visiting hours, after Ian and Henry are both asleep, and Killian's moved back into the chair next to her, Emma's mind wanders back to the cliffs, to Killian diving into the water after Ian without a moment's hesitation and without a thought for his own safety—Emma's pretty sure he had no way of knowing how high the cliff was, or if there were rocks at the bottom.

There's literally no one Emma trusts more now with Ian's life than Killian—and that right there is why she has to ask him what she's about to ask him.

"Killian?" she says, breaking the comfortable silence that's fallen over the room.

"Aye?" he asks softly. The lights are dim, and both Ian and Henry are on the bed, breathing the gentle, quiet breaths of two boys sleeping peacefully.

"I need to ask you a favor."

Killian turns to look at her, and shifts his arm so she can slide her hands into his.

"Anything, love," he says.

Emma takes a deep breath. "I need you to take Ian to Boston."

Somehow, he seems unsurprised.

"Is that what you really want?"

"Yes."

He looks disappointed. "I thought you understood that you don't have to worry about me."
"It's not about that—okay, at first it was about that. But now..."

She looks at Ian. They're ridiculously lucky he's not hurt, and they're also ridiculously lucky that, as far as Emma can tell, his magic is dormant again. In fact, he doesn't seem to have a clue that he summoned a lightning bolt—nor does he even seem to remember a lightning bolt at all.

But that's just it: they were lucky.

"We could have lost him today," she says. "A thousand things could have happened differently, and he could have gotten hurt, or died, or..." She trails off, and takes another deep breath.

Killian's fingers squeeze hers. "Tell me what's on your mind, Swan."

She closes her eyes, briefly. Henry said he was trying to save Ian, and then all of a sudden he was in the diner. Emma asked Granny about it, and she said there was a big cloud of purple smoke, and then Henry was gone.

Which can only mean that Neal was there.

Neal saw Henry getting attacked by pirates, and saved him—which, you know, Emma appreciates.

But she can't ignore the fact that Neal also saw Ian getting attacked—he saw Ian getting fucking kidnapped—and he did nothing.

Emma has no idea what the hell he was thinking, but she can't forgive that. It's beyond his usual shittiness. It's fucking cruel.

"I have to do something about Neal." She opens her eyes, scowls, and turns to Killian. "It's gotta be me. I know it does. I don't know what exactly I'm going to do yet, but I know I can't do it if I'm constantly worrying about what's going to happen to Ian."

Killian's watching her, a crease between his eyebrows and profound sadness in his eyes.

"Emma, I-" His voice hitches, and he pauses to lick his lips before continuing- "I don't want to leave you here."

"You're not leaving me here," she says. "My parents are here. Robin and the Merry Men are here. Ruby. Granny. The Apprentice."

Killian's shaking his head. "Emma, I can't-"

"Killian, you have to. Please. You're the only one I trust to keep Ian safe. I can't go through all that again. I can't-" Her traitorous lower lip starts trembling, and she bites it to keep it still. "I can't lose him, Killian. He's my baby. Please get him out of Storybrooke."

Killian swallows hard and turns his head sharply away.

"This isn't about pushing you away," she says.

Emma sees his jaw working, but he doesn't speak.

"It isn't," she says, firmly, and he looks over at her again. "I don't want to push you away, Killian. I actually sort of want the opposite of that."

His eyebrows lift, and his eyes widen slightly in anticipation.
A tremble passes through her. She knows what he wants, she knows what he wants to hear, but she can't—she can't focus on herself right now, not when Killian and Ian were both kidnapped and nearly killed within three days of each other.

"Please take Ian to Boston," she pleads again.

Emma expected him to be disappointed—which he clearly is—but she also expected him to be angry, or frustrated, and pull away from her...

But he doesn't.

He huffs out a breath, nods, and presses his lips into a resolved line.

"Alright, Swan," he says, thumb stroking her knuckles. "I'll take the boy to Boston."
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

This ended up being more of a "all the things I sort of wanted to do at the end of Chapter 28 but had to cut" chapter than anything. I know everyone's stressed about Emma and Killian being separated while Killian and Ian are in Boston, but it'll be fun I promise! And don't worry, we're nowhere near the climax yet! Enjoy, and as always, thank you so much for your patience and for your wonderful, wonderful words!!!

Agreeing to Emma's request was difficult. Killian almost takes it back immediately, but he refrains, because he sees the immediate relief that his promise to take Ian to Boston grants Emma, and he can't bring himself to ruin that.

Killian understands better now her terror; he feels it as well, thrumming in his veins, sharp-edged. They live in a town full of magic, threatened by monsters both human and inhuman, and now the possibilities for Ian to be put in danger again suddenly seem endless. Killian needs to keep the boy safe, and he needs to do a much better job at it than he's apparently been doing. What happened with Blackbeard is unacceptable, and even if Emma doesn't blame him, Killian still blames himself—extenuating circumstances aside, the fact remains that both Henry and Ian would not have been so at risk if not for their association with Killian and for Killian's history with Blackbeard.

While Emma sleeps beside him, half in her chair, half on the hospital bed next to Ian, Killian stares at the clock, running his fingers over his lips as he thinks.

Part of him believes he can make it up to Emma by doing as she asks, by taking Ian to Boston, while the other part is convinced the only way to redeem himself is to remain by Emma's side and prove himself worthy of it, prove to her that he's capable of protecting Ian better than he has so far.

Killian knows he can't do both. He also knows that duty is more important than desire, and right now his sole duty is to Ian, as his father.

That's Killian's role.

He understands this, and yet he can't bring himself to fully accept it, because protecting Ian right now means going to Boston, and going to Boston means leaving Emma, and Killian can't bear the thought of leaving Emma—not in general, and especially not with Neal lurking around.

His gaze drifts from the clock to the bed. It's just past eleven. The boys have been asleep for nearly two hours, and Killian hopes they won't wake until tomorrow morning, well-rested and feeling as if the events of the past few days were merely a bad dream.

Killian watches them for a few moments.

There's no physical resemblance between the two, but the brotherly bond is apparent—at least to Killian's eyes. He sees it in the way Ian is molded to Henry's side with his legs thrown over Henry's knees and both his hands gripping Henry's elbow, and Killian also sees it in the way Henry has his arms crossed over his chest but his shoulders and face turned towards Ian and his nose just brushing Ian's hair.
Killian and Liam used to fall asleep like that, when they were forced as lads to share a bunk aboard Captain Silver's ship. Killian feared the dark, and he feared the nightmares that plagued him when he slept, so he clung to his brother for comfort. Liam was determined to be stoic, a pillar of fortitude, a well of strength for Killian to draw on, and while Liam never hugged him back, Killian always felt the gentle pressure of Liam's cheek atop his head, and Liam's warm breath in his hair, and it was enough.

Ian can never know the loss or the loneliness that Killian experienced, and neither can Henry.

Killian stands, and crosses the room to the closet, where he pulls two blankets from the shelves, as he witnessed Snow White do. One blanket he places over Henry and Ian, and the other he settles around Emma.

Lightly, he brushes his fingers over her cheek. He longs to place a kiss there, but despite her having snogged him rather soundly on the beach earlier, he senses that she's still keeping herself pulled back and guarded, she still has her armor on—it's not the armor that protects her heart; it's battle armor.

Killian tucks a stray strand of sunshine hair behind Emma's ear, and then withdraws his hand.

He meant what he said. She feels as if the weight of the world is upon her shoulders. All Killian wants is for her to allow him in, to allow him to help her bear that burden so she doesn't have to do it alone. He knows how difficult it is for her, he knows the timing and the circumstances aren't perfect, but Killian's a patient man. He can wait for as long as it takes for Emma to be ready to move forward once more.

With one last lingering look at Emma and the boys on the bed, he leaves the room and enters the hallway. Emma won't sleep for much longer, so he has only a brief window to do what he's about to do.

The waiting room, where Emma's parents insisted they would be spending the night despite Emma's insistence that they return home and rest, is a few doors to Killian's right. The hallway is silent, deserted, and darkened. There's a warm glow from near the end, where two nurses sit behind a long desk. They look up from their computers long enough to ascertain that Killian is not an escaping patient, smile at him because they recognize him as Ian's father, then return their attention to the screens in front of them.

Killian steels silently past each doorway, but as he approaches the one that leads into the waiting room and catches a glimpse inside, his footsteps slow.

Snow and David are seated in the chairs closest to the hall. Snow has her head resting on David's shoulder, and David's cheek is pressed against her hair. Their arms are entwined and their hands are joined on the armrest between them. David's thumb traces slowly over Snow's knuckles, and they're whispering.

Killian pauses, hesitant to interrupt, wavering between waiting for an opportunity to politely announce his presence and retreating to Ian's room to allow the couple some privacy—until he hears Snow say, "David, if Emma goes back to Boston, I'm going too."

The bold statement has such an *Emma* ring to it that Killian nearly gives himself away by laughing. He fights it down, pressing the backs of his fingers firmly to his lips as an extra precaution.

"What about the town?" David asks.

"I don't care about the town," Snow mumbles stubbornly.
David chuckles. "Yes, you do."

"Okay, fine, I do," Snow admits, tone softening. "But...we can find someone else to be mayor. Hold elections. Let the town decide who they want to replace me. This isn't the Enchanted Forest. They don't really need us here, David. Not anymore, at least. They'll be fine on their own."

"What about Neal?"

"Do you have to be the voice of reason right now? For once in our lives, can't we just run away and go live happily ever after with our daughter?"

There's another, deeper chuckle from David. "I don't think we're those kinds of people, Snow. If we were, we would have abandoned your kingdom 35 years ago, outrun Regina's Curse, and lived our lives out quietly somewhere with Emma."

"Maybe I don't want to be that kind of person anymore," Snow says sullenly.

Killian hears David place a kiss on Snow's brow. "I don't really think we have a choice."

After a moment of silence, in which Killian again contemplates either interrupting or withdrawing, Snow sighs.

"Alright, if Emma goes to Boston, you and I can deal with Neal. Emma doesn't need to be here for that. We can take care of it—and then we can go to Boston."

"What if Neal decides to go to Boston first and go after Emma?"

"Then Hook can deal with Neal."

"I didn't realize Hook is with Emma in Boston in this scenario."

Snow tuts. "Of course he is, David—oh my God, you're not still upset about Emma and Hook, are you?"

Killian presses himself as flat against the wall as he can manage when he sees Snow pull her head out from beneath David's cheek and sit up to face him.

"I'm pretty sure that ship has sailed," she says, matter-of-factly and with one eyebrow raised in an almost pitying expression. "It sailed, David, and there's a pirate on it."

"I only meant," David says patiently, "that if we stay here to fight Neal, we could use Hook's help."

"Oh." Snow blinks, surprised. "Wait, when did you change your mind about Hook?"

"When did you change your mind about leaving Storybrooke?" David counters.

"Was it before or after he jumped off a cliff to save our grandson?" Snow wheedles, eyes glinting with amusement.

"Before," David says, only a tad reluctantly. "Now, your turn."

Snow smiles sadly and tucks her body against David's, slipping her head beneath his chin once more.

"At first, I didn't believe that Emma would really go back to Boston," she says. "I thought we could convince her to stay. I thought I could make her see that her home is with us, but...I realized it isn't. Her home is with Henry and Ian, and it's not safe for them here. Emma has to protect her sons, and
you and I have to protect them, too—all three of them."

David's arm is around Snow's shoulders, and he gives them a squeeze, clutching Snow tighter. "You think protecting them means we might have to lose them?" David asks, gently.

Snow nods into David's neck, and David turns his face into her hair; his hand moves from her shoulder to the back of her head, cupping it against his lips.

"We won't," he whispers, and, even from the hallway, Killian can hear the strain and the desperation in his voice. "If Emma decides to go back to Boston we'll make arrangements here, and then we'll go too. We won't lose her again, Snow. I promise."

Killian shrinks on the inside as he watches Emma's parents hold each other.

The love between Snow White and Prince Charming is legendary. In every land Killian's sailed to, he's heard their story, although most versions of it end happily; they rarely ever mention what became of them, or the loss of their daughter, or how a moment that should have held the greatest joy for them became the moment of their deepest suffering.

Killian thinks that perhaps they deserve the chance to stand at Emma's side and help her face down Neal more than he does right now. All they've ever desired is the honor of being her parents, and they've already missed so much. Killian can empathize with that, and he's only lost a fraction of the time with Ian that they have with Emma.

"Pardon me," he says loudly, clearing his throat and stepping fully into the doorway. David and Snow startle and whip around with more than a little bumping and tangling of limbs. When they're sorted out and settled, Killian asks, "Might I have a word?"

David and Snow look immediately to each other. A silent communication passes between them, and Killian sees what he expected to see: sorrow, morphing slowly into resolve.

David turns back to Killian, hands moving from hips to biceps as he crosses his arms over his chest. "Are you going to do it?" David asks.

"Yes," Killian says. The squirm of shame in his guts surprises him, and he drops his eyes, suddenly unable to meet either Snow or David's gaze.

"You don't want to go," Snow observes, and the compassion in her voice wraps around his soul like a warm blanket.

Killian pulls his head up, willing his spine to straighten despite its best effort to crumple.

"Emma wants Ian safe," he says. "So do I, and I agree that taking him to Boston is the optimal way to ensure that, but..." His eyes flicker downwards again of their own accord. "She insists on staying here-"

"I'm not surprised," David interjects dryly. "Emma's stubborn like her mother."

Snow smacks his arm hard, but David doesn't blink, or react in any way, so Killian plunges on.
"It doesn't feel right leaving Emma to face Neal on her own," he says. "I don't want her to be alone."

It pours out of him like a confession, and afterwards he feels naked, but there's no judgment in Snow or David's expressions; instead, they turn to each other once more.

Killian watches them from beneath his lashes.

This hadn't been his intention. His intention had been to formally request Snow and David's assurance that Emma would be protected while he was away. He knew he had no right to ask for such a thing, but he was bloody well determined to do it anyway.

He hadn't intended to appear so vulnerable, to reveal his anguish at feeling helpless.

David's arms unfold and fall to his sides. Snow reaches out, and slips one of her hands into David's before she looks at Killian, and says, "You're not leaving Emma alone, Hook. We're here. You don't have to worry about her."

"You have to protect Ian," David adds. "Let us protect Emma."

You don't have to worry.

Let us protect Emma.

A rush of gratitude washes over Killian—for Emma's parents being who they are and loving their daughter with a fierceness Killian admires; for David's acknowledgement of Killian's role in Emma's life, even though he has no reason to do so as there's nothing official or even clearly defined; for the two people looking at him and seeing past the pirate to the man behind the reputation.

For two people seeing him, something Killian has experienced in the centuries he's been alive fewer times than he currently has fingers.

Not trusting himself to speak, he nods, pressing his lips into what he dearly hopes is a smile that communicates the depth of his appreciation, and makes to slip from the room before he says or does something to tarnish the moment.

"Hook, wait," David says.

One foot in the hallway, Killian turns back.

"There's a vending machine on the other end of the hallway that I think you should check out."

The gravity from moments before breaks.

"Pardon?" Killian asks, dumbfounded. Either embarrassment has made him slow, or David's statement makes very little sense.

"Yea," David says. His tone is casual, but his pale blue eyes are drilling holes in Killian. "It's past the room Ian's in, and to the right."

"Er..." Killian says, glancing from David to Snow, who's looking at her husband with just as much confusion as Killian feels.

David shrugs, "It has PopTarts," he says. "Ian likes them."

"Alright, mate. I'll go have a look." Killian's about to step backwards out of the waiting room, away from the weight of David's gaze, when he remembers his manners. "Would either of you, erm, like anything? From the vending machine?"
"No thank you, Hook, we're fine," Snow says briskly. She loops one of her arms through David's, and takes a firm hold of his wrist with her other hand. "We're going to try and get some rest. Let us know if you need anything."

Killian catches the veiled request for privacy, and takes his leave. He hears Snow's hissed, "What was that about?" as he retreats down the hallway towards Ian's room. When he reaches the doorway, however, instead of turning into it, he pauses, staring down the hallway in the direction David indicated.

Sighing inwardly, he goes. He has no idea why David is so insistent that he purchase PopTarts from a specific vending machine, but-

He's just turned right around a corner and caught sight of the vending machines when he catches sight of something else: Blackbeard.

Killian's standing directly in front of Blackbeard's room. He can see the man inside, strapped to his bed by the cuffs on his wrists and his one remaining ankle, lying comfortably on a soft mattress surrounded by pillows and covered by a blanket when he should be rotting at the bottom of the sea.

His rage bubbles to the surface as the memories come crashing back, as the image of Caesar dangling Ian by his shirt collar over a cliff crystallizes behind his eyes.

David sent him this way because he knew—he knew, as a father, what he would do in Killian's position.

His confusion clears, leaving him with only a blinding anger that sets the blood in his veins boiling and propels him into Blackbeard's room too fast for his brain to think better of it.

The two Merry Men on guard duty, likely alerted of his approach by his rapid footsteps, are already at attention when Killian strides inside, but one glimpse of the expression on his face and they vacate, slipping silently and unobtrusively past him and into the hallway.

Blackbeard grins at Killian—a grin that turns into a strained grimace, but even through the pain, Blackbeard manages to drawl, "So you've finally come for me, eh?" with all of his usual infuriating attitude.

Killian stalks to Blackbeard's bedside, fighting the urge to sink his hook into Blackbeard's chest, to rip his heart out and make Blackbeard watch its final, feeble beats.

Killian stops within arm's reach of Blackbeard's bed.

As much as he wants for that to happen, as much as he wants to make the man die slowly, make him suffer, he can't.

Blackbeard's unarmed and cuffed to his bed. He's weak. Defeated. Killian's committed more than enough terrible deeds in his lifetime, but he's never murdered a man that couldn't defend himself. Murdering Blackbeard would be bad form, and now, more than ever, Killian has a reason to stick to his code.

Ian.

"Well?" Blackbeard prompts. Killian notices that, despite the man's tone, his eyes are glassy, and he's having trouble focusing them.

Killian examines the clear bags of clear liquids hanging over Blackbeard's bed, and finds the one he's
looking for.

*Morphine.*

He remembers it from his own time spent in this very same hospital several years ago, when he was run over by a car. There's a thin tube running from the bag to Blackbeard's arm, where it's held in place by a narrow strip of tape.

Killian's gaze travels from the IV to Blackbeard's injured shoulder. It's covered with a thick pad of bandages, stained through with only the smallest drop of blood.

At first, Killian thought Emma's intention was to wound Blackbeard, but now Killian thinks perhaps it's more likely she was aiming to kill, and the only thing that stopped her and saved Blackbeard's life was Killian being in the way.

"What are you looking at?" Blackbeard asks, and this time Killian's able to detect the slur in the man's voice.

He moves his eyes lazily from Blackbeard's wound back to his face, to see a sneer that's lopsided, as one half of Blackbeard's face is slack. The man received a heavy dose of morphine, which must mean the bullet Emma put through his shoulder is causing him a lot of pain.

In his mind, Killian hears Ian's screams as he was held out over the water, he sees the boy's terrified expression, his kicking legs; he sees lightning strike, and then he sees Ian fall.

Something uncoils inside of Killian, like a snake, and whispers, *Hurt him,* and Killian finds himself obeying.

He takes the curve of his hook and presses it hard against the spot of blood on the otherwise pure white bandage taped to Blackbeard's shoulder.

Blackbeard's hiss of pain is immediate, and immensely satisfying. His entire face contorts, contracts, save for one eyes which he manages to keep open and fixed on Killian.

Killian puts on his best leer and leans close.

"Your grudge is with me, old man, not with my son," he says silkily. "You're lucky he's unharmed; if you had hurt him, you'd be dead."

He applies more pressure to Blackbeard's wound, and Blackbeard's one open eye narrows a fraction.

"If you touch my son again, or Emma, or Henry, I'll finish what that shark started seven years ago, and have the mermaids scatter the pieces of your corpse across all the seas in all the realms, so that your soul never knows rest. Have I made myself clear?"

Teeth gritted, Blackbeard nods jerkily, and Killian straightens, wiping his hook clean on the bedclothes before returning it to his side.

Blackbeard lets out a shaky gasp. Killian sees a single tear slip from the corner of one of his eyes, but the sight doesn't move him. Instead, he finds the morphine line and tugs on it smartly, ripping it from Blackbeard's arm with a snap of breaking tape and a spurt of blood.

Blackbeard jolts and his arm convulses, but the straps hold.

"*What's that?*" he demands.
Killian drops the tube. "You'll see," he says, and with a final grin, he leaves, feeling Blackbeard's glare hot on his shoulders.

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He takes a walk around the ward to cool down, and finds an open window in a deserted corner that, judging by the smell, the nurses must use to smoke their cigarettes on duty. Killian leans his head and shoulders out, taking huge gulps of refreshing, cool night air, before pulling himself back inside and retracing his steps to the vending machine.

He empties his pockets, and uses every coin and paper bill in his possession to purchase an armful of snacks and drinks, including PopTarts. On his way past the Merry Men guarding Blackbeard's room, he offers them each a can of soda and a bag of potato chips, which they accept with nods of thanks.

When Killian returns to Ian's room, he finds Henry and Emma still asleep, but Ian awake and sitting up.

Ian smiles when he sees Killian, and closes the book he had open on his lap.

"Hey there, lad," Killian says quietly. "Hungry?"

"Mmhm," Ian answers.

Killian tips his load of treats onto the foot of the bed. "Take your pick," he says.

Ian tucks his legs underneath him and rocks forward, onto his knees. He reaches out, pokes through the pile, and selects a package of PopTarts labeled 'S'mores'.

Killian smiles, amused. "Anything else?"

"Nope," Ian says, and gleefully rips open the wrapper. He pulls out one of the rectangular pastries, and holds it out towards Killian. "Want one?"

Remembering that sharing food is one of the family things that Ian, Henry, and Emma do, Killian takes the pastry with a grin and takes an enormous bite.

"Mm," he hums, through the crumbs and the chocolate and the other flavor that he thinks might be marshmallow.

"They're my favorite," Ian says, and takes an equally enormous bite from his own PopTart.

Killian and Ian chew in agreeable silence for another minute. Killian didn't realize how hungry he was, but paces himself, taking bites when Ian does, forcing himself not to devour the PopTart like a ravenous beast. When they finish, Killian's eyes stray to the other snacks, but Ian asks a question that causes all thoughts of food to vanish.

"Will you read to me more?"

A warm bubble swells to life in Killian's stomach at the sight of Ian's eager face and the way he's clutching the book Killian bought him in his lap hopefully.

"Of course I will," he says.

Killian presses his fingers to his lips, a gesture for silence, and then holds his arm out. Ian untangles himself from the blankets, and with Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in one hand, he waddles along the bed until he can get his arms around Killian's neck. Killian heaves the boy onto his hip, and
carries him across the room to an armchair that's far enough away from Emma and Henry for Killian's voice not to disturb them. He sits, and Ian arranges himself comfortably across Killian's lap with his head on Killian's shoulder.

Killian's about to open the book, but he pauses.

It's moments like these, moments that seem small and inconsequential, that Killian can't take for granted, because perhaps these are the moments that mean the most.

Ian senses his hesitation—or at least notices that Killian hasn't started reading yet—and sits up to look at him curiously.

Killian looks back, taking time to notice all the things he's noticed before: the ocean blue eyes rimmed by dark lashes; the thin, pale scar over his eyebrow; the golden freckles on his nose and cheeks; the grin that's no longer gap-toothed, but is amusingly more rabbit-toothed now that the front two are too large for the surrounding baby teeth.

He's going to grow, he's going to change, and Killian's going to be here for all that.

"I love you, lad," he says softly.

Ian opens his mouth to speak, but Killian doesn't give him a chance. He wraps both arms around Ian and pulls him close.

"I was afraid I'd lose you today," he says softly. The boy's hair smells like sea water, and it makes Killian's chest constrict painfully.

He clutches Ian closer, and the book slips from his fingers and thumps to the floor. He closes his eyes, trying to fight the tightness in his throat, but all he sees is the image of Ian floating in the water, unconscious.

Ian's arms squeeze Killian. "I thought the Shadow was going to kill you," he whispers.

Now, in his mind, Killian's chained below the docks, the cold water rising, the light fading...towards the end, he was certain he'd die that day; he was certain he'd never see either Ian or Emma again.

A hand brushes Killian's arm. Startled, he snaps open his eyes to see Emma, crouching beside the armchair with one hand on his wrist and the other on Ian's head. Her green eyes are calm, steady, and she gives him a gentle smile.

"How about I read to you?" she asks, fingers stroking slowly through Ian's hair. "Both of you."

Killian lets out a breath, feeling the anguish in his chest loosen as he does. "I'd like that," he says. "Ian?"

Ian tilts his head back, off of Killian's shoulder, and nods. "Mom does the voices good."

"Better than me?"

Ian grins. "Way better," he says, eyes widening dramatically.

Killian chuckles. "Should I be offended?" he asks Emma.

"Nah. You just need practice." Emma winks at him, scoops the book off the floor, and crosses the room to fetch her chair over. "I've got a few years of experience on you. You'll catch up."
In Boston, Killian thinks.

In Boston, he'll be able to glimpse what Emma, Henry, and Ian's lives have been like for the past seven years. He can see Ian's baby photos, see how he grew.

A little shiver of excitement passes through him.

Boston is an opportunity. In Boston, perhaps Killian can make up for some lost time.

"Alright," Emma says, stopping at the bed and surveying the horde of vending machine goodies with her fists on her hips. "Are there any more of those PopTarts I smelled earlier?"
Emma only just finished reading Ian back to sleep and Killian into drowsiness when she informed him that she wanted them to leave for Boston as soon as possible. Despite the melancholy that threatened to crush his soul at the imminence of leaving Emma, Killian was inclined to share her sense of urgency.

Several hours and several furtive phone calls later finds them gathered at the docks. Although it's still dark and Killian only managed a short nap, he's wide awake.

Ian, however, is not.

He holds sleepily to Killian's hook with both hands as they walk along one of the piers towards the cluster of boats moored at the end, and when they reach their destination and he's finally permitted to stumble to a halt, he rests his head against Killian's arm and closes his eyes.

Killian smiles to himself. Even as a boy he never had trouble functioning on half a night's slumber, but it seems that Ian takes after Emma, who's wearing a rather dull, disgruntled expression on a face that's still puffy from sleep.

"Hey," she says, stifling a yawn with one hand while she nudges Ian's shoulder with the other. "You can't go back to sleep yet. Wait until you're on the boat."

Ian whimpers wordlessly in response and turns his face further into Killian's jacket sleeve.

Emma lifts her head and frowns at the sailboats to either side. "Do you think maybe we can get him on board so he can sit down?" she asks.

"Aye, love," Killian agrees.

He looks first to the left, and then to the right. The boats all have a bit of a sleek, modern look that's foreign to Killian, but he knows luxury when he sees it—the problem is, they're all practically identical, with little to differentiate one from another save for the names inscribed along the side.

"Do you, erm, happen to know which vessel is Whale's?" he asks.

"Shit," Emma mutters. "I have no idea."

Killian scans the monikers, each standing out starkly in the dark against the brilliant white of the hulls, but none strike him as being pompous enough to have been thought up by Whale.
The weight on the end of Killian's hook increases as Ian slumps into him, and Killian is about to simply lift the boy into his arms and let him fall asleep there when several shadows emerge from one of the boats to their right.

Killian shifts, turning his body so that he's in between Ian and the three figures filing onto the pier. His hand jumps to his hip, fingers curling around the grip of his cutlass, but the figures step closer, and he recognizes David, Dr. Whale, and the Apprentice.

"Just us," David says in a low voice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Killian sees Emma ease her own hand out from beneath her jacket; he knows she has her pistol holstered at the small of her back.

"Where's Leroy?" Emma whispers.

"He and a few other guys went out to the harbor mouth to test the perimeter," David answers.

Killian glances between Emma and David. "Other guys?" he asks. He was under the impression that the idea was to keep the group small in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. It's the reason they made Henry remain behind with Snow and say his goodbyes to Ian at the hospital.

"A few of Leroy's fishermen buddies," David says. "He said it would be faster."

Killian looks out at the harbor. The sky over their heads is a deep, velvety indigo, and the sea is a flat sheet of black beneath it, but to the east, there's a bluish glow along the horizon, signaling the approach of dawn.

Killian wasn't anxious before, but the delay—however small it may end up being—has him suddenly uneasy.

"When did they leave?" he asks David.

"A few minutes ago."

Emma lets out a frustrated huff.

"I know. I'm sorry-" David starts.

"It's fine," Emma says evenly. "We can't exactly do anything about it now. Let's just get Ian settled while we're waiting. C'mon, kid."

She leans down, plucks Ian from Killian's side, and hefts him onto her hip. Ian doesn't protest, but instead snuggles his face gratefully into her hair. Without another word Emma sweeps past David and mounts the gangplank, wobbling only a little as she makes her way across it and onto the deck of the Knot on Call.

Killian follows, keeping his expression neutral and his eyes averted. He's mostly to blame for the deterioration of the relationship between Leroy and Emma's parents; apparently Leroy was not pleased by David's refusal to arrest Killian after Killian threatened, assaulted, and robbed his pickaxe from him nearly a month ago. From what Killian understands, asking that he sacrifice his free time in order to mine fairy dust only exacerbated the rift.

Killian both hears and feels footsteps on his heels as he boards; he assumes it's David, but as he makes to cross the cockpit to the companionway Emma and Ian just disappeared down, a hand touches his arm and turns him around, and Killian sees that it's Whale.
"Perhaps you and I could do over a few things?" Whale says. "About my boat?" His tone is polite, but his smile is forced, a mere bearing of teeth.

Killian waits until David strides past and descends into the cabin to join Emma before he roughly shrugs Whale's hand off. "I know how to sail-" he growls.

"I understand that, Captain, but my boat is not like what you're used to in the Enchanted Forest."

Killian doubts it, but he shoves his irritation down nonetheless. Although David's official version of events has Whale volunteering his vessel, Killian imagines the truth is closer to David having royally commandeered it. Killian's not precisely on the doctor's good side to begin with, and while he doesn't truly care, the alternative mode of transportation to Boston is Leroy's smaller, much shabbier vessel, so Killian decides it's best not to test how much more insult Whale can tolerate before he chooses to defy David's orders and deny Killian access to his boat.

"Fine," he says, mimicking Whale's false smile. He turns, and gestures expansively at the spacious cockpit they're standing in. "After you."

As Killian suspected, although the packaging is far fancier, the mechanics are the same. Anger itches beneath his skin and crawls along his scalp, but he holds it in and allows Whale to walk him through the basics of operating a sailboat in the same manner one might use with an infant.

Whale doesn't say "Try not to scratch anything with your hook," aloud, but Killian sees the slight widening of his eyes every time the curved, pointed bit of metal strays too near any polished surface, and makes certain to brandish it in an extra careless manner, and often—it keeps the anger at bay.

The excitement building in his chest helps as well—it's been over a month since he last sailed, and this time he has the opportunity to do it with Ian.

He doesn't believe the boy's ever sailed before. Which means today will be his first time, and Killian will be his first teacher. A warm feeling envelops him as he visualizes himself and Ian at the helm, the wind whipping their hair-

"Are you listening?" Whale says sharply, snapping Killian out of his fantasy before it truly had a chance to take shape.

"Aye," he returns, just as sharply. "That rope you're holding is the sheet and it's used to trim the sail. Would you like me to demonstrate, or are we done here?"

Whale's smile vanishes. "You'll bring her back undamaged, or you'll pay. Understand?"

Killian usually doesn't take kindly to being threatened, but the fact that Dr. Whale actually possesses the balls to do so amuses him more than anything. He grins, and, as pleasantly as possible, says, "Thank you for allowing us the use of your boat. I'll take proper care of her, and make sure no harm befalls her whilst she's in my custody."

Whale frowns, eyes narrowing, likely searching for an indication that he's being mocked. Finding none, he relaxes.

"You're welcome," he says, awkwardly. "And, thank you." He stands for a long moment, one hand jiggling restlessly at his side, before he turns on his heel and walks carefully along the deck back to the gangplank.

Killian watches Whale's retreating back until the man's on the pier beside the Apprentice, and then he lifts his eyes to gaze past the forest of masts to the dark shape of the Jolly Roger, just beyond. He
wishes they could take her instead, but it's impractical.

As he stares, a jagged line of grief tears through him. He wonders how many of his crew survived when Blackbeard claimed the Jolly Roger. Killian knows the rules: join up, or die. Some of the men now lying dead on the cliff they rescued Ian from were his.

He didn't see Smee, however, and his grief deepens as he imagines the man dead because of his loyalty.

"Killian?"

It's Emma's voice, muffled, calling to him from the cabin, guiding him from the darkness of his thoughts.

"Coming, love," he says, just loudly enough for her to hear him. He shakes the heavy mood pressing down on his shoulders, and directs his thoughts instead to how, when he returns, he's going to introduce Ian to the Jolly Roger properly, and vice versa.

He descends the companionway into the brightly lit cabin, and, when his eyes adjust, is only a little surprised to find that it's a miniature apartment, complete with all the amenities of Emma's parents' kitchen, an L-shaped couch next to a collapsible table, and a bed in a separate compartment at the head. He assumes that, somewhere, there's also a fully functioning restroom.

Ian's lying on the thickly padded couch beneath a blanket Killian recognizes from Snow's collection. The hood of his sweatshirt is up, covering his ears and the crown of his head, and he has Roger the crab nestled beneath his chin. His eyes are closed, and his deep, soft breaths tell Killian he's either asleep again or very close. Emma is sitting beside Ian's pillow, her fingers beneath his hood, stroking his hair.

"Did Whale finish giving you the tour?" David asks dryly. He's leaning against the countertop with his arms folded over his chest. At his elbow is a cardboard box filled with several of Snow's packed lunches, fresh fruit, and enough snacks to last them a week.

"Aye, he did," Killian says. "We're all set."

Emma looks up, brow creased worriedly. "Do you think you'll be okay? Should we try a different boat?"

Killian knows it's not doubt that inspired the question, it's concern for Ian.

He smiles calmly, and says, "Everything will be fine, love. This vessel's no different than countless I've sailed before her—save that she's far cleaner. And there's a microwave."

Emma nods, lips pressing together in an attempt to smile. Worry lingers in her eyes, but she turns away from Killian, hiding her face from him. She bends close to Ian, fingers caressing his cheek.

"Be good for your dad, okay?" she whispers.

"Okay," Ian mumbles, without opening his eyes.

"Make sure he doesn't get into any trouble."

Another, less distinct mumble in response.

Emma presses a kiss to his temple, runs her hand one final time through his hair, then readjusts his
hood and the blanket over his shoulders, and stands.

"Why not put Ian on the bed?" Killian asks, pointing with his hook towards the private cabin.

Emma grimaces. "That's Whale's room, and I don't really know what he gets up to on this thing."

"And we don't want to know," David adds.

"I'm just hoping the couch is clean," Emma mutters.

She steps around Ian's backpack and a navy blue duffel bag that must belong to Killian, and goes to the counter beside David, where there's an electrical socket on the wall beside the microwave. She holds out her hand, takes a deep breath, and frowns hard. Two heartbeats later, a nightlight appears in her palm.

"Is that?" David says.

"Yea, it's the one from your bathroom, sorry," Emma says, plugging the nightlight into the socket and flipping the switch. "I'll buy you a new one."

"No, it's okay. You just should of told me. I would have packed it."

Emma shrugs. "I didn't think of it 'til now."

"Is there anything else you can think of that we might need?" Killian asks. "Now's the time-"

"Don't worry," David says, holding up a hand in a halting gesture. "I packed all of your underwear."

Killian's mouth falls open and his entire face flushes. "That's not-"

"And your diary," David continues, lips quirking. "Ian said I should."

Killian snaps his jaw shut. Emma clears her throat pointedly, and Killian drags his eyes away from David's merrily-twinkling blue ones to look at her.

"We found it when we searched your room," she explains.

"You searched my room?" he asks. He's not angry, he's merely confused.

"Yea, when Ne-" She pauses, glances at Ian. "When the Shadow kidnapped you. Ian thought looking for clues in your room might help us find you."

He nods, cheeks burning hotter. "Did you read it?"

"Only a few sentences—until I realized what it was."

He takes a shuddering breath, slowing the rapid beating of his heart. "It's just an old habit, Swan," he says. "From a century of keeping a Captain's Log. There's nothing—it's not meant to...You can read the entire thing, if you wish—"

"That's okay," she says, cutting off his rambling. "And you don't have to explain. I get it."

Killian nods again. He believes her. She's told him before that she keeps photo albums of both Ian and Henry, to keep track of their growth and of all the moments she doesn't want to forget. Killian's journal is his way of doing the same thing, of preserving his memories of Ian, so he doesn't lose a single minute.
"Did Ian read it?" he asks.

"He can't read cursive yet," Emma says. Then, smiling, "You have really nice handwriting, by the way. I'm sort of jealous."

Killian grins. "Perhaps when I return, I could help you with your form-"

"I'm still here," David says gruffly.

"I only meant-" Killian starts, but Emma puts a hand on his arm and shushes him urgently. He freezes, and listens.

There are voices outside the cabin.

Killian recognizes the agreeable tones of the Apprentice, but there are two he doesn't recognize. He slides his arm from Emma's grasp and creeps towards the companionway. The lights in the cabin are on, but it's still dark outside, making it difficult for Killian to see out, but easy for anyone outside to see in, so he stays low, ears straining—until he hears Leroy's unmistakable grumbling.

"Yea, well, tell them we said it's all clear."

The tension eases in Killian's gut. He turns back. David's just behind him, gun drawn; Emma's standing between Ian and the companionway, her pistol held firmly in both hands but pointed carefully at the floor.

"Leroy," Killian says, and she relaxes.

"Finally," David huffs. He tucks his gun back into the holster beneath his jacket, and crosses the cabin to the couch, where he bends and plants a kiss on Ian's forehead. "See ya, kiddo," he says, then stomps swiftly by Killian and up the stairs.

Emma puts her gun away more slowly, and then stands with her hands on her hips and her eyes fixed on the floor.

Killian gives her a moment, and then asks, "What's on your mind, love?"

She jerks her head up, and shakes it. "Nothing," she says, sucking in a breath. She takes the two steps it requires for her to stand right before him, and folds her arms beneath her breasts. "Make sure Ian wears a life jacket, okay? And sunscreen."

"Safety first, Swan," he says quietly.

It's time.

Time to depart.

She's close enough that he can smell, faintly, the floral shampoo she uses. He supposes he still smells like salt water, but she doesn't seem to mind. She steps closer, eyes a deep green in the cabin lighting.

"I'm going to call my neighbor Sarah—the old lady who I told you gave me the baby monitor and used to babysit Ian?—and ask her if she minds cleaning up my apartment a little bit for you guys."

"Mmhm," he says.

He doesn't know how long it will be before he sees her again, so he drinks her in, trying to fill himself up with her, trying to burn into his mind the image of her eyes, her golden hair, her pink lips,
the way her smile turns her cheeks into plump, round apples.

"If you need anything while you're there, knock on her door."

"Understood."

She lays her hands over the lapels of his jacket.

His own hand lifts to her face. His thumb brushes her chin, and his fingers trace along her jaw before curling behind her ear and into her hair. She raises onto her tiptoes at the same time he dips his head, and their lips crush together in a hungry rush.

His eyes drift close. Her mouth is warm, slick, and inviting; her tongue teases him, and he chases it deeper. Heat explodes in his center and fills his veins with fire. His fingers tangle in her hair. Her hands grip his jacket and tug him closer, and his hook arm flies to her waist, pulling her hips more tightly against his.

He holds her, wishing time would freeze, wishing he could stay wrapped up in her arms and her scent and her warmth forever.

But he has to go.

Killian promised Emma he'd take Ian to safety, and the more time they waste, the more they risk missing their opportunity to leave Storybrooke.

Gently, gradually, he breaks their kiss. Eyes still closed, he leans his forehead against hers.

"I'm gonna miss you," she whispers.

She sounds as out of breath as Killian is. He rubs the tip of his nose softly against hers, and he feels her smile.

"I'm going to miss you too, Emma."

Killian hears her take a breath, feels her body go rigid, feels the air tense between them as words begin to take shape on her tongue.

He goes still in response, anticipation fluttering in his chest.

"Killian, I..."

"Yes, love?"

It passes, the feeling fades, and her body sags.

Whatever she was considering saying, she decided not to say.

She sighs. "Take care of him."

"I will. You know I will."

"I know."

He tightens his arms around her briefly, and then steps back, hand trailing from her shoulder and down her arm until he catches her fingers.
"It's time, love," he says. "We have to set sail, before we lose the cover of darkness."

She nods, eyes downcast, hiding her face from him again, but she squeezes his fingers once before she pulls her hand from his grip and jogs up the companionway to the deck.

Killian turns the cabin lights off, leaving only the nightlight on, and follows.

Three words sit heavy on Emma's tongue. Three words that, at the very last possible second, she couldn't bring herself to say.

As she stands on the pier, watching the glow of the nightlight through the ship's cabin windows grow fainter and fainter as Killian sails farther and farther away, those three words choke her.

She should have said them—she should have said something, given Killian something. She doesn't know when she'll see him again; she knows they won't be separated forever, but she feels like she missed a vital opportunity.

She could at least have acknowledged that she heard what he whispered to her beneath the wharf.

A sturdy arm appears to wrap around her shoulders, and Emma leans gratefully into David.

"You'll see them soon."

"Yea," she says, half-heartedly, eyes still fixed on the tall white sail receding into the distance.

The boat is travelling fast, faster than it should naturally given that there's currently very little wind. The Apprentice put two spells on the boat: one that will help it go unnoticed by anyone who doesn't already know it's there, so that Killian can dock it anywhere without problem and without having to pay; and another spell that filled the sails with a gust powerful enough to propel the boat all the way to Boston.

Emma didn't see the spells, exactly—not like she sees her own magic—but she thinks she felt them well enough to be able to replicate them, if she tried.

That spell to go unnoticed is definitely useful, and definitely something she needs to make sure Ian never, ever learns.

Whenever he starts using magic, that is.

Which is hopefully still a very long way away. Emma's pretty sure Ian's magic went back into hibernation, but if it was woken up once, it can be woken up again. At least in Boston he won't be able to use it accidentally...

A wave of sadness crashes over her and then wells up inside of her, stuck, nowhere to go and nothing to do except maybe make her cry.

Right on cue, tears sting her eyes and spill down her cheeks. Her vision blurs. She holds her breath and clamps down on the sob rising in her throat, but the effort makes her tremble. David's other arm appears and wraps her up snugly in a firm hug. Her dad's chest is like a rock. A big, friendly rock. She presses her face into his shoulder.

"It'll be alright," David says. "They'll be okay. You did the right thing."

That's not the problem, she thinks.
The problem is that she's never been away from Ian before, and he's never been away from her, save for the odd sleepover or two. The problem is that she doesn't know how she'll get through the day without his smile and his voice and his squeaky little laugh.

"Don't worry about them," David continues. His hand is against the back of her head, cupping it gently. "Let's just focus on what we have to do here."

David's right.

The whole point of sending Ian and Killian to Boston is so that Emma knows they're safe so she can focus. She has to take care of Neal—lock him in a cage or get the Darkness out of him or kill him or whatev-

Excitement jolts through her, like an electric shock, and she shoves herself hastily away from David, so hard they both stumble.

"You're right," she says, blinking away the last remaining tears from her suddenly dry eyes.

David stares, apparently not comprehending why being right means Emma had to push him practically off the pier.

Emma feels awake, energized; she has a new lead, and she needs to pursue it now.

"Let's go wake up Blackbeard," she says.

"What?" David asks, incredulously. He looks at the Apprentice, and then back at Emma. "Why?"

"He crossed realms," Emma says. "I want to know how he did it, because we need to do it too."

She turns her head, just in time to see the sailboat pass out of the harbor mouth and into the open ocean. As it does, the sun crests the horizon, sending the first golden flash of daylight across the dark sky.

Emma smiles.

_They're safe._
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

I honestly can't thank you all enough for your wonderful comments last chapter. I had such a rough time writing it and I was feeling pretty low, and you all picked me back up, so thank you, thank you, thank you!!!!!!!!!!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Emma’s surprised to see that, up close, Blackbeard is actually just a withered old man. Without the big hat and the greatcoat, he looks small and weak, and a little like someone's grandpa who dresses up for Renaissance Faires on the weekends. His face is tanned, lined from age, and drawn with pain. His eyes are slits, but his gaze is unfocused, glazed.

"Is he...okay?" Emma asks, awkwardly.

She doesn't necessarily care, but there is a tiny shred of human decency in her somewhere that's squirming uncomfortably at the sight of an old guy on a hospital bed, looking like he's about to die because she put a bullet in his shoulder—and the knowledge that she was aiming for his heart but Killian sort of got in the way last minute only makes her guilt squirm harder.

"He had a rough night," says Whale, who's definitely not happy to be seeing her again so soon; he's been very busy with his clipboard since she entered the room. "It looks like he managed to remove his morphine drip sometime during the night."

There's a fresh bandage taped to one of Blackbeard's wiry arms, and a large, dried blood stain on the bed sheets beneath his elbow.

"Aren't there, like, sensors or something for that?" Emma asks. "You know...like, an alarm that goes off if someone pulls out their IV?"

"No," Whale says, as if she's stupid. He whips around, and Emma thinks he's about to go off on her, but instead he scowls at the two Merry Men standing near the door. "You're positive you didn't see anything?"

"Like I said," says one of the Merry Men, a young man only a little older than Henry with sandy hair and brown eyes, "we didn't see him pull out no tube."

Whale's gripping his clipboard so hard his knuckles are white, and he's definitely grinding his teeth. "Well, did you notice that one of the tubes was on the floor leaking fluid?" he spits. "Or that this man was bleeding?"

"Yea, we noticed," says the other guy, a bulky dude with a thick orange beard. Emma thinks he might be the young guy’s father, and she thinks the young guy has a wife and a newborn daughter—it's difficult for her to keep track; all the Merry Men sort of blur into an unsmiling, soft-spoken, hiking boot and cargo-pant wearing, dutiful mass.

"And neither of those things worried you?" Whale asks, expression moving quickly from frustration to incredulity.
"Nope," the first man answers, deadpan.

Whale makes a sound in his throat that's clearly a strangled, probably swear-filled exclamation, and turns away huffily.

The bearded guy's eyes slide carefully from Whale over to Emma before he and his sandy-haired son leave, picking up their bows and quivers on the way out.

Emma continues to stare at the door for several moments after they've gone. There was something significant in that last lingering look the bearded man gave her, something that's making her Spidey senses tingle but that she can't quite decipher.

She frowns and chews her lip while she thinks.

Did they just want her to know that they saw what happened and purposely did nothing? That was pretty obvious from the beginning. Did the Merry Men pull out Blackbeard's IV?

The answer strikes her as suddenly and shockingly as that lightning bolt Ian summoned struck the cliff.

Killian, Emma realizes.

She woke up last night when Killian left the room. She assumed it was to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water or just to stretch his legs, so she fell asleep again. When she woke up, he was back and there was a pile of vending machine snacks on Ian's bed.

The only vending machine on this floor is the one ten steps down the hallway from Blackbeard's room, meaning Killian passed by.

It could just be a coincidence, it could be that the two cans of soda and two bags of chips in the garbage can in the corner wee purchased by the Merry Men and not by Killian, but Emma sort of thinks that probably isn't the case.

There's no way Killian didn't see Blackbeard, and there's no way that, when he did, he continued on his way peacefully.

So why did the guy want to tell Emma that Killian was here? Does he disapprove? Or did he just realize Emma didn't know, and thought she should?

Crossing her arms over her chest, she turns back to Blackbeard.

Despite how pathetic he looks, she still can't bring herself to feel sorry for him. Ian's terrified face as Caesar dangled him over the edge of the cliff is too vivid in her mind, and his screams still ring loudly in her ears.

Thinking about it, Emma grows angry all over again. Fury boils in her stomach and sends a hot flush through her entire body.

What would she have done in Killian's place, if she came across Blackbeard helpless in the middle of the night, with no one to witness her but two Merry Men who she's pretty sure would turn a blind eye?

Would she have killed Blackbeard?

She tries to picture how she'd do it—morphine overdose? Suffocate him with his own pillow?—but
that only serves to immediately extinguish her wrath, like a flame doused with a bucket of cold water.

She knows she couldn't do it.

Shooting a guy on the battlefield isn't the same as murdering him in cold blood while he lies in a hospital bed looking like a sad, shriveled rag doll. He's defeated, and all that matters now is that he can't hurt anyone anymore.

Another realization hits Emma.

Is that what stopped Killian?

He's no stranger to killing. Emma knows a pirate's life isn't all cupcakes and rainbows—it's pillage and plunder and bloodshed and getting your leg eaten off by a shark.

The Captain Hook Emma first met eight years ago would have murdered Blackbeard without hesitation.

The Killian she knows now resisted.

He's changed.

Something quivers to life in her chest, something that's part wonder, part hope, and part-

Part that word you can't bring yourself to say, or to tell him, she thinks, swallowing hard, trying to stifle the quiver.

"Is there a reason you're still here?"

Emma jerks to attention. Whale's eyeing her with a raised eyebrow and a dry expression.

"Oh, um...I need to ask him some questions," she says, and then, just to be polite because Whale did lend Killian his boat, she adds, "If that's alright."

"It's not alright. He's too weak," Whale says. "He needs rest."

Emma considers doing what she would usually do in this situation, which is to ignore his statement, override his authority, and then insult him, but if Killian can change, then Emma can too.

"Listen," Emma says, sharply, forcing Whale to look away from his clipboard and meet her eyes. "He kidnapped my 5-year-old son and tried to throw him off a cliff while I watched. I don't really have any sympathy for him."

She stops and studies Whale. He hasn't interrupted, and he hasn't tried to argue; he's listening.

"I know it's your job to protect your patients," she continues, "but I have a job too. I have to protect this whole damn town. You know what's going on, right? You know about Gold's son being the Dark One?"

Whale nods, almost imperceptibly.

"Blackbeard has some information that's gonna help me keep this town and everyone in it safe from the Dark One. I need to talk to him."

Whale's silent for several moments, and then he says, "Okay," and tucks his clipboard under his arm.
"I'll be back in fifteen minutes. Is that enough, or will you need more time?"

"That's fine," Emma says.

Whale turns on his heel and walks from the room, quiet footsteps fading rapidly down the hallway.

Alone, Emma takes a deep breath. A wave of nerves flutters through her. If she gets the answers she needs, they'll be close to obtaining a weapon that will defeat the Darkness without harming Neal. Storybrooke will be safe, Henry will have his dad back (even if it's on a probationary basis), and Emma will be free to get on with her life and pursue...things.

She tucks her hair behind her ears, and steps closer to the bed. Blackbeard doesn't react, but the stuttered beeping from the heart monitor gives him away.

"I know you can hear me," she says.

He blinks.

She rests her hands on the edge of the mattress and leans in. "I need to know how you found Storybrooke."

Blackbeard doesn't answer right away, and Emma takes another deep, steadying breath. She had David take Henry to get something to eat—well, she convinced Henry to convince David to take him to the cafeteria. Emma knows her dad, and she doesn't think he's as prepared to torture Blackbeard as she is right now.

"I know you just got your morphine back," she says. "How would you like to lose it again?"

He rolls his head to look in her direction, slowly.

"How did you find Storybrooke?" she repeats.


"A friend?"

"A Shadow," he says. He clears his throat, and wets his lips. His voice is stronger as he continues, "It found me in the Enchanted Forest. Flew right into my cabin aboard the Jolly Roger. Told me Hook was here, and assured me safe passage into this realm."

Emma's anger returns, burning dully in her belly. Her fingertips curl into the mattress, an attempt to form fists.

"How long ago?" she asks.

"A week."


Emma almost doesn't want to know how Blackbeard crossed realms. She almost wants an excuse not to go after the object that will banish the Darkness; she sort of wants an excuse for this to have to end with Neal's death.

"What did the Shadow offer you in return?" she asks.
"It didn't ask for anything, actually," Blackbeard says. "Just that I do my worst."

Emma rocks backwards onto her heels and spins. She folds her arms tightly over her stomach, hugging herself. Her heart's beating so violently that the blood pounding in her ears is drowning out Blackbeard's monitors.

In her mind, she's on the cliff, watching Ian disappear over the edge, watching Killian dive after him. She screamed, but the noise was lost in the chaos of the battle raging all around her. She thought they were both gone; she thought she lost them.

Unbidden, her magic rises within her, overflowing its boundaries, spilling out. It swells, radiating from her core, vibrating in her veins. The air around her shimmers, as if with intense heat, and the lights overhead flicker.

The power blazing inside of her is a rush. She feels as if she could shake the entire universe, if she so wished. Could she defeat Neal, if she went toe to toe with him right now? Her magic is supposedly strong, but she's never put it to the test against the Dark One's magic—she's never really put it to the test at all, save for when she tried to drill a hole through Neal's wall with it, and that didn't precisely end super well.

Still, Neal's almost as new to magic as she is. Maybe Emma will have an advantage though because her magic is a part of her, not a foreign entity living in her body.

Maybe she doesn't need the object from the Enchanted Forest. Maybe Emma can just rip the Darkness out of Neal with her own two hands...

Only, she doesn't know where Neal ends and the Dark One begins. She could end up doing more harm than good.

Her resolve fades.

It's too complicated. This whole fucking thing is too complicated.

Emma begins reeling her magic back in. It retreats gently, and leaves a pleasant hum beneath her skin.

The best option is to stick to the Apprentice's plan: retrieve the object from the Enchanted Forest that will strip Neal of the Darkness without harming him. At least then Neal won't have magic anymore, and they can deal with him like any other normal bad guy.

It'll be okay. She can do this. She just has to focus and be patient.

When she's got herself under control again, she turns back to Blackbeard.

He's watching her, eyes wide open and round, horrified.

"What the bloody hell are you, woman?" he asks hoarsely.

*Your worst nightmare.*

She wants to say it—it's on the tip of her tongue—but Henry's eyes would roll right out of his head if he heard her utter something so cliché, so she bites it back. Instead, she puts her Sheriff Swan game face on, and says, "How did you cross realms?"

His nostrils flare. "What are you going to do with me?"
"I haven't decided yet."

"What about my men? The ones that survived? What will happen to them?"

"There were no survivors," she answers grimly. "You have no men."

Blackbeard frowns, and Emma sees the calculations taking place behind his narrowed eyes.

"If you're thinking about trying to contact your "friend" the Shadow, it's dead. I killed it," she says, matter-of-factly, as if she's killed multiple times before and has no problem doing it again.

What little fire there was in Blackbeard visibly drains away, and Emma realizes he had no clue the Shadow had a master.

"You're stuck here," she says. "How you live out the rest of your days depends on whether or not you cooperate. Now, tell me how you travelled to this realm."

He takes a deep breath, and it's as if he ages ten years right in front of her. "If you really wish to know, the answer's on my ship," he says.

"She's not your ship," Emma says coldly, before she can stop herself. "The Jolly Roger belongs to Killian."

He smirks at her as if she's naive, and Emma's hand acts of its own accord, darting to Blackbeard's forearm and yanking out the morphine line.

She leaves before Blackbeard can stop hissing in pain and start swearing, and when she runs into the two identical, dark-haired Merry Men scheduled to be Blackbeard's new guards chatting with Henry and David in the cafeteria, she informs them that the nurses are changing Blackbeard's bedpan and giving him a sponge bath, and recommends they take their time finding their way to his room.

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When they get to the docks, Emma tries not to look at the harbor mouth, or the gap a few piers over where Whale's boat used to be, and she tries not to think about the grin Ian would be wearing if he was there right now; she keeps her eyes fixed on the Jolly Roger, outlined boldly against the cerulean backdrop, as she, David, and Henry make their way towards it.

A few hours ago, the docks were dark and empty, hushed. Now, they're practically bustling in comparison. It's an idyllic summer day, warm, sunny, and bright, with a clear blue sky above, and a calm, navy sea below. There are fishermen all over, returning from their morning on the water, and although it's still early, there are already families wandering around, and the harbor is dotted with small sailboats out for a joyride.

Killian's ship is all alone on its own pier, either by design or because everyone else cleared out. It's far larger than Emma remembers, and the sight of it stirs a strange feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Her and Killian's first time was on that ship.

Ian was conceived on that ship.

She expects a wave of nostalgia or something similar to engulf her when she steps off the gangplank and drops onto the deck, but instead all she feels is a prickle of unease.

Something's not right.
Emma freezes, and listens.

The only sounds are the sigh of the wind, the sloshing of the waves, the creaking of the thick ropes securing the ship to the pier, and the deep groan emanating from the ship itself. Nothing's moving, nothing appears out of place; outwardly, the Jolly Roger seems empty, but Emma can't shake the sense that it's really not.

Her face scrunches as she tries to pinpoint whatever's giving her goosebumps and making all her insides do a nervous little dance.

"Emma, what is it?"

David's voice startles her. She turns, sees David and Henry still standing on the gangplank, and realizes she's blocking traffic; she sidesteps quickly, but David doesn't move—except to swell somehow and make himself even more of an obstacle to Henry, who frowns the frown of a boy contemplating the repercussions of giving his grandfather a solid shove in the back.

"Emma?" David asks, brow crinkled, eyes already scanning everything within sight for trouble.

"I don't know," she says. She shakes her head, trying to dismiss the unease she feels, but she can't help her hand inching beneath her jacket, to her gun. The cold touch of the metal against her fingers is familiar and comforting. "I have a feeling that we're kinda maybe not alone."

David's expression instantly grows more serious. He draws his gun, and steps cautiously onto the deck beside her.

"Blackbeard could still have men aboard," he says. "This could be a trap."

Emma hadn't considered that before, but now that David suggested it, it seems more possible than not possible. Did Blackbeard give up his ship a little too quick? Is he a better actor than she thought?

"Fuck," she mutters, easing her gun out of its holster. Her magic is bubbling insistently, begging her to touch it, activate it, but she resists; as thrilling as using her magic is, and as comfortable as she's beginning to become using it, she doesn't want to rely on it. She's made it this far on skill and instinct alone, and they haven't let her down yet.

Except, maybe Blackbeard just lied to her and she didn't catch it?

No, she tells herself firmly. *He wasn't lying. Whatever he used to travel here is on this ship.*

Emma was maybe just an idiot for not asking what else was on his ship, but that's a different matter entirely.

David creeps ahead, crouching slightly with his gun at the ready, moving towards the trapdoor beside the cargo hatch. Henry eagerly dismounts the gangplank and makes to follow, but Emma snags his t-shirt sleeve and stops him.

"Get behind me, and stay close," she says. "If we run into any pirates, you hightail it back to the truck and call for backup."

Henry scowls. "Mom-"

"Henry, not now. Either do what I say, or go guard the car."

It comes out harsher than she intended, but the memory of the grisly scene in front of Granny's is still
fresh, as are the bruise adorning Henry's chin and his split lip.

Emma knows Neal won't hurt Henry on purpose, but that doesn't mean Henry can't get hurt accidentally. If Neal hadn't magically intervened, and if Will Scarlet hadn't fought his ass off, Henry would have been right up there on that cliff with Ian—or worse, he could have been one of the dead bodies decorating Granny's patio.

Sitting patiently beneath her fear for her five-year-old's life was her fear for her seventeen-year-old's life, just waiting for the first issue to resolve so it could present itself fully, and now all at once Emma feels it, like acid in her veins, eating away at her from the inside out.

"I'm not a little kid anymore," Henry says, teeth clenched in an effort not to raise his voice. "You don't have to protect me."

"Yes, I do," she replies stonily. "I'm your mother. I always have to protect you. That's my job."

It doesn't matter that Henry's taller and broader than her and could probably pick her up easily and toss her overboard, he's still her little boy, and he always will be.

Henry's scowl deepens, but Emma gives him her brick wall stare—as in, her "better to argue with a brick wall than with me right now" stare. Henry, thoroughly familiar with that particular expression, turns to David, who shrugs.

"I'm the last person you should be looking to for help overriding your mother. In this case, I agree with her, but even if I didn't I'd still back her up because standing on a ship potentially filled with a horde of armed pirates really isn't the time to be having an argument," he says, speaking quickly and in a low voice. "Now, make a decision. We can't stand here all day."

Henry voices a note of obstinacy, deep in his throat.

David raises his eyebrows, and Emma sees both the king and the father in him about to rear their twin heads, so she intervenes with a soft smile and a light hand on Henry's arm.

"Kid, you almost just got killed by pirates yesterday. Can we please go at least a week before you almost get killed by pirates again?" she asks gently.

Henry stares at her with hard eyes for a moment, and then his gaze rolls skyward. "Fine," he grumbles.


The three of them tiptoe across the deck to the trapdoor, which David nudges open with his foot. When pirates don't come streaming out, Emma and David lean carefully gun-first over the opening and peer down the ladder to the deck below.

Beyond the square of sunlight cast by the trapdoor opening is impenetrable darkness; whoever descends the ladder first will be leaving themselves completely open to an attack from anything hiding in the shadows.

Emma wishes they had a smoke bomb or a flash grenade or-

Magic, she reminds herself. You have magic.

"I'll go first-" David starts.
"No, wait," Emma says quickly. "I have an idea."

She transfers her gun to her right hand, crouches, and lays her left hand flat on the deck. She closes her eyes; behind her eyelids, her magic shines brightly, a sparkling, sunlit mountain spring, fed by a small but robust waterfall.

Emma dips her hands into her magic. It flows through her, and then Emma unleashes it, letting it pour out, over the deck, into the ship.

"What are you doing?" David asks.

Emma squeezes her eyes shut, concentrating, and mutters, "I don't really know how to describe it...hold on, gimme a sec..."

In her mind, she sees the entire ship. There are strong traces of Killian everywhere—they jump to her attention first, glowing with the most intensity. Blackbeard she can sense as well, but where Killian's essence feels like a cool breeze, sea-salt scented, somehow invigorating and soothing at the same time, Blackbeard feels repulsive, like fuzzy, greyish-green mold.

A ripple of nausea passes through her, and she pushes her focus further, past it. Gradually, she becomes aware of other things, other people.

There.

Far below them are three people—actual people. They're too distant for Emma to discern anything specific about them, other than the fact that they're alive but not moving.

She opens her eyes, and releases her magic. Her awareness of the ship vanishes, but she holds onto the feeling of Killian in her mind, holds onto the scent of the sea and the caress of the wind along her skin, before she packs it away and tucks it into a little pocket of her brain, to be taken out and examined (enjoyed) later.

Still crouching, she rotates at the hips to look up at David and Henry, staring curiously back.

"There are three people down in the-" What's the word Killian uses? "The brig."

"Do you mean the 'hold'?" Henry asks, brow furrowed.

"What?"

"The brig is jail. The hold is where they store cargo."

"Whichever one's the basement."

"The hold," Henry says, and grins.

"Alright, Mr. AP European History," Emma says dryly. "There are three people in the hold. Happy?"

"Very."

"Then let's go."

David insists on descending the ladder first, just in case there actually are a bunch of pirates hiding just below, waiting to kill them. Emma follows, for the same reason, and Henry brings up the rear.
They search the first level silently, passing through the sleeping quarters, chambers for supplies, and the galley. Emma glances into the room she and Killian has sex in, blushing slightly as she does, but David's setting a fast pace and she doesn't have a chance to dwell on it.

"How did you do that?" Henry whispers from behind her as they head down a narrow passage towards another trapdoor at the very end.

"Hm?"

"How did you know there are people in the hold?"

Emma shrugs. "Magic—I mean, literally my magic," Emma says quietly over her shoulder. "There's this thing I can sort of do where I use it to, uh, sense my surroundings."

"Cool," Henry says, and Emma can hear the grin in his voice. "How does it work?"

Emma shrugs again. "It just...does?"

"Is it like Detective Mode in Batman?"

"I don't know what that is. Can we maybe talk about this later?"

David's ahead of them, standing beside the open trapdoor with his finger pressed to his lips in a plea for silence.

"Okay, okay," Henry says, hurriedly. "But I have, like, a lot of questions."

Emma smiles to herself. Of course you do, she thinks.

David goes down the ladder first again, with Emma and Henry following close behind. When they reach the bottom, they stand in a cluster and survey their surroundings.

The air in the hold is surprisingly dry, but not musty. The walls here are curved near the bottom, which Emma guesses means they're at least partly below water level. There are huge casks all around, some standing on their ends, others lying on their sides in stacks. Lanterns sit here and there on top of the barrels, though only a few are lit, just enough to cast light over a small clear space a few feet ahead, revealing an area strewn with straw and two people huddled together amongst a pile of white burlap sacks.

Emma and David step warily closer.

One of the figures sitting on the floor is a plump man with a scraggly brown beard and a sagging red beanie—Killian's man, Smee. He raises his head at their approach, blinking tired, dull eyes at them. His arms move, closing protectively around the other figure, lying prone at his side, and Emma's eyes widen when she gets a closer look.

It's a mermaid, with a teal and turquoise tail and long, brilliantly red hair. Emma's shock fades and horror sets in when she sees the mermaid's graying skin, parched and cracked like old, dried leather.

"Ariel?" David says, breathless. He takes several small, hesitant steps forward. Emma wants to recoil, but she forces herself after David, until a realization makes her halt in her tracks.

"Wait," Emma says. "That's only two. Where's the other-"

David spins, but his eyes leap immediately from Emma to somewhere just behind Emma, and he shouts, "Behind you!"
Emma whirs around, hand darting to the small of her back to whip out her gun, but it's too late—rather, it's too late for the pirate that was hiding behind the ladder and thought he could sneak up on them.

A guy with one eye and a wicked scar where the other eye used to be materializes out of the shadows, brandishing a knife. He slashes at Henry, but Henry smoothly dodges the blade, and in three neatly-executed moves disarms, drops, and pins the pirate to the ground.

Emma stares at her kid in astonishment—although, she thinks her surprise is probably nothing compared to the surprise of the guy currently lying face-first on the ground with his arm restrained and a teenager's knee in his back.

"Wow," Emma says, voicing the first and only thing that comes to mind. "What exactly have Killian and your grandpa been teaching you?"

Henry grins. "Maybe you should come with us sometime and find out."

Emma's considering it when a croaking voice draws her back around.

"Please," Smee says hoarsely. His arms tighten around Ariel, pulling her limp body closer. "I think she's dying."

Chapter End Notes

I intended to have the last half pick up with Killian and Ian sailing to Boston, but the way I ended Emma's bit just made it feel...not right. So, next chapter!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

It's finally done! I apologize for the long wait; I feel like we're crawling through this section of the story and that wasn't my intention. Emma and Killian will be separated for a bit longer, a time frame that will FEEL longer just because I've been dicing up the chapters to make them easier for me to write. I promise you they'll be reunited soon!!! In the meantime, please enjoy all the Killian and Ian fluff :D

As Killian sails out of the harbor, he tenses, holding his breath, waiting for some invisible barrier to repel the ship, but they pass into the open ocean unimpeded. The spell that the Apprentice placed on the sails holds, propelling the boat through the water faster even than the Jolly Roger could manage, and within minutes Storybrooke is out of sight.

Killian glances back—he can't see Emma, but he knows she's there. He says a final farewell to her in his head before turning to face the horizon.

Ian sleeps through the first half of the journey. Killian watches the sun rise alone, watches the spectrum of the sky shift from deep blues to pale gold, from pale gold to coral and tangerine as the sun crests the ocean, and then gradually back to a crystalline blue. He guesses that it's close to noon when the cabin doors creak open, and a tousled blonde head appears in the gap.

"Dad?"

"Over here, lad," Killian calls from the helm.

Ian's eyes find Killian, seated on the padded bench behind the massive wheel, then he blinks and looks around.

His jaw drops. "We're on a boat!" he screeches.

Killian grins—apparently, Ian was far more out of it that morning than he suspected.

Ian scrambles out of the hatch and trots over, head on a swivel, trying to absorb everything at once. Predictably, two steps away from the helm his socked feet slip on the deck and he stumbles. Killian extends an arm and hooks the boy against his side to steady him.

"Whoa!" Ian says, eyes wide, smile wider. He holds to Killian as he continues to gaze around, taking in the taut white sails, the coastline passing in a green and brown blur to their right, and the waves crashing and spraying to either side.

"Like it?" Killian asks, speaking just loudly enough to be heard over the roar of the wind.

"It's awesome!"

"Have you ever been sailing before?"

Ian shakes his head. "No, I've only been on the ferry, but that's not as cool as this." He looks at the wheel, and then Killian's hand resting lightly on one of the handles. "Can you teach me how to
Killian's heart swells at the request, and he clutches Ian a tad closer. "I'll teach you everything you need to know," he says. "But before I can teach you how to steer, you must learn the most important rule of sailing."

"What is it?" Ian asks, leaning in eagerly.

"Safety first."

Killian reaches down beside his feet and produces the child-sized lifejacket Emma very purposefully left hanging from the wheel. It's red with yellow straps, and Ian's face falls when he sees it.

"No," he says.

"Yes," Killian counters.

"You're not wearing one," Ian points out.

"I'm 191 years old, lad. When you're 191 years old, I'll let you decide whether or not you want to wear a lifejacket, but until then, you're wearing one."

Ian scowls.

"You can either wear this lifejacket and stay with me on deck, or you can spend the rest of the journey in the cabin."

Ian holds out for another handful of seconds—just, Killian thinks, to emphasize his unwillingness—and then he straightens and steps back so Killian can get the lifejacket on him.

"I know how to swim," he says sullenly, as Killian gives the lifejacket a few firm tugs to settle it in place and then begins tightening the straps.

"I understand that, but this isn't like the pool. We must respect the sea and her dangers."

Ian drops his glower in favor of a quizzical frown. "Wait, the ocean's a girl?" he asks.

"Sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Aye. The sea has many faces."

*Pontus, Oceanus, Poseidon,* he thinks. *Thalassa, Amphitrite, Thetis and the Nereids, Oceanids...* All names he learned either aboard Captain Silver's ship or in the Royal Navy, but even as a child he understood the dual nature of the sea, its ability to both nurture and destroy. However, for reasons he doesn't truly care to examine, Killian's always favored interpretations that emphasize the more motherly aspects of the sea.

Ian's staring at him, eyes the same hue as the sky and just as bright, but Killian shakes his head. "What do you say to some lunch?" he says. Killian's stomach cramps in anticipation at the thought of food—he hasn't eaten anything since he ate one S'mores PopTart nearly twelve hours prior. "I'll tell you more about the sea afterwards."

"And then you'll teach me how to steer?"
"Aye." Killian tightens the final yellow strap, and drops his hand atop Ian's head to ruffle his hair. "Now, go pick out what you'd like to eat. Your grandmother packed some food for us; it's next to the microwave in a cardboard box."

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The remainder of the journey seems to pass more quickly. After they finish lunch, Ian climbs into Killian's lap, and Killian teaches him port, starboard, and how to turn the wheel by notches; Killian even allows him to man the helm on his own several times when he leaves to use the restroom or to make small adjustments to the sails.

They pass many ships both large and small along the way. Luckily, the second spell the Apprentice placed on the sailboat keeps them from being noticed, otherwise their speed would have been suspicious to anyone observing.

When Ian attempts to wave to the passengers aboard a vessel nearly identical to their own, Killian stops him and explains about the spell.

"We're invisible?" Ian asks.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Killian responds. "However, we'll only remain so as long as we don't draw attention to ourselves."

Ian nods smartly, the coverture of it clearly heightening his enjoyment of the journey.

The sun drifts slowly across the sky, baking the tops of their heads and their shoulders, but the wind cools the sweat on their brows. The sea air is crisp and clean and Killian breathes it in; it expands inside of him, filling his lungs, flowing through his veins. Only now does he realize how much he missed it. His pleasure is cut short only when, several hours later, he notices the pink flush to Ian's cheek, and realizes he made a grave error.

"Alright, lad," he says, covertly eyeing the deck, mapping out every possible escape route and placing himself strategically in a position to nab Ian if he tries to utilize any of them. "It's time I teach you the second most important rule of sailing."

"What is it?" Ian asks, beaming unsuspectingly.

"Sunscreen," Killian says grimly.

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They arrive at Charlestown marina near sunset. The Apprentice's wind spell begins fading as soon as Killian spots the cluster of moored boats, and the sails of Whale's ship are completely slack and lifeless by the time they reach an empty spot on the pier and glide into it.

The Apprentice promised the "invisibility" spell would remain until the Apprentice himself removed it, but Killian's taking no chances—he gathers his and Ian's bags, tucks the box of food beneath his arm, removes his hook and hides it in his jacket pocket, and leads Ian off the boat and away from the docks as fast as possible.

They plunge into a neighborhood of tall trees and huddled brick buildings. The whole area is busier, dirtier, and more confined than Storybrooke. Killian follows the navigational instructions Henry wrote down for him until they reach a small storefront Ian recognizes and he takes over, pulling Killian by the hand in the direction of home.
The block of apartments they end up on looks very much just like all the others they walked down, and Killian thinks it's a miracle Ian's able to locate his front door amongst a row of at least twenty identical ones. Inside the entrance, Ian points out the apartment directly to the left of the main door as being that of his babysitter's.

"That's where Ms. Sarah lives," he says. "She always gives me snacks and lets me drink soda and she's Sienna's grandma."

Sienna.

The name rings a bell. An image of a girl Killian's never met but once had described to him floats to the surface, a girl with skin like hot chocolate and hair like a bunch of black snakes...

"Ah," he says, "is she the one Henry said is your girlf—erm, your friend?"

Ian catches the slip and blushes, the already pink tinge to his cheeks flaring deep red.

"Yes," he mumbles, glaring.

Killian tugs at his ear, embarrassed for having embarrassed Ian. "Well, I'd be, er, delighted to meet her," Killian says. "Perhaps while we're here you can introduce me to her."

Ian brightens. "She's really cool," he says. He turns to the stairs, and as he starts up them he says over his shoulder, "She's in Kindergarten too, but she's older than me. Her birthday's in September. She lives down the street."

He races up the steps to the top, turns, and disappears around the corner, still talking about Sienna. Killian follows more slowly, struggling beneath his burden—after walking what must have been at least a mile, his arms and shoulders ache from the weight of his and Ian's bags and the cardboard box.

On the second floor, Ian waits for him in front of a door with a brass number 8 on it, bouncing slightly on his toes.

"This is it," he says, as if Killian couldn't have guessed from the excited grin on his face. He crowds Killian while Killian unlocks the door, as if his physical presence can make Killian move faster. When the door swings open, he bolts inside, yelling, "MR. JIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIM!"

Killian takes a deep breath, and steps into the apartment more reverently, keenly aware that he's entering Emma's home, where she spent seven years raising their son by herself, living a life with no memories of him or even of her own true identity. He sets the bags and the cardboard box carefully on the floor just inside the door, next to a tumbled pile of shoes on a thick felt rug, then closes the door and takes his first look around.

There are several windows along the wall to his right, catching the last rays of the evening sunshine and filling the apartment with a deep golden light. He's standing in the kitchen, which also apparently functions as a dining area, judging by the table and chairs clustered at one end of the room. To his left is the living room, a carpeted rectangle with a sofa, a television, and a toy chest overflowing with playthings.

It's smaller than he imagined, though the vibe is more cozy than cramped. The furniture is simple, the colors and patterns are vivid and cheerful and charmingly mismatched. Every surface holds its own array of sentimental objects—Killian absorbs it all: framed photographs, artwork, schoolwork, certificates congratulating Henry Swan on academic achievement, a Kindergarten diploma addressed to Killian David Swan, and a multitude of crafts emblazoned with Mom, some professionally made,
some clearly constructed by a 5-year-old.

There are plants, which Killian didn't expect, along with several small pots of herbs along the windowsill above the sink, and a vase of freshly-cut flowers on the kitchen table.

He walks forward unhurriedly, inhaling the lemon and lavender fragrance of cleaning products, and, beneath that, what must be the natural scent of the home, a scent that's indefinable, both many things and nothing simultaneously, a scent that's warm and comforting and Emma.

A pressure lifts from his shoulders, and tension leaks from his bones.

They made it.

Ahead is a hallway filled with doors, leading to what Killian assumes are bedrooms and the bathroom. Ian darts out of that hallway, a red octopus dangling wildly from one hand. Halfway across the kitchen he drops to his knees and slides across the floor in a move he's obviously practiced and mastered. He skids to a halt at Killian's feet, rips open his backpack, and pulls Roger out by one orange claw. With a roar, he smashes Roger and One-Eyed Jim together in a flurry of stuffed limbs and googly eyes.

"I thought they were friends?" Killian asks in bewilderment.

"They are," Ian says. "They're just saying hi." He stands and tucks Roger beneath one arm, and One-Eyed Jim beneath the other. "Hey, who do you think would win in a fight: a giant octopus or a giant crab?"

"The crab," Killian answers, without hesitation.

He expects a rebuttal, but Ian's mind has already moved on.

"Wanna see my room?"

"I'd love to," he says, a broad smile tugging at his lips.

Ian trots away, but Killian keeps up this time, his eagerness driving him forward, keeping him on Ian's heels.

Ian takes him to the hallway he just ran out of. Henry's room is to the right, at the end. Through the open door, Killian glimpses a desk, two tall, packed bookshelves, and a poster of a group of men and women in very colorful, form-fitting costumes. Emma's room is in the middle, but Killian's eyes shy away from it, catching sight only of a yellow and white floral comforter and pale walls that seem to glow before they pass it.

The bathroom is next, a white-tiled room with turquoise rugs and towels and a shower curtain patterned with tropical fish, and then they're in Ian's room.

Ian plops down on his bed, and spreads his arms. "Ta-da!" he says.

It's tiny, and Killian guesses the original intention of the space was not for use as a bedroom; it just barely fits a bed, a nightstand, and a child-sized table with two small chairs. Despite this, it has the same snug but homely mood as the rest of the apartment, and a distinctly Ian flare to the decor.

Killian grins, at the pile of picture books on the floor next to his bed, at the chest of Legos not quite fully hiding beneath the bed, at the markers and crayons and drawing pads on the small table, at the dinosaur-patterned curtains, and the baseball-cap-patterned bedspread.
He sits next to Ian. "I think your room is fantastic. Did you miss it?"

Ian drops his arms. His shoulders sag, and suddenly he frowns, lower lip jutting out slightly, tremulously.

Entirely caught off guard, Killian freezes.

"Ian, what's wrong?"

Ian ducks his head and leans into Killian's arm. "When are we going back to Storybrooke?" he murmurs.

"Aren't you happy to be home?"

Ian shrugs.

"I miss mom."

Killian eases his hook arm over Ian's head and around his shoulders. Ian presses his face into Killian's ribs, and Killian cups the back of his head, holding it gently against his side, gliding his fingertips gently back and forth through the boy's hair.

"I miss her too," he says. "We won't be here for long, I promise. This is just until your mother says it's safe for you to return. We'll be home before you know it."

*Home.*

It slipped out of him, but Ian doesn't seem to notice.

"How come Henry didn't come?"

Killian filters through several possible responses before finally landing on, "He stayed to help his dad."

"Help him not be a bad guy anymore?"

"Yes."

Ian's silent. Killian waits, wondering what's going on in his mind. Ian's only had one face-to-face encounter with Neal, and Neal made a rather poor impression. Since then, Emma's done her best to keep Ian oblivious to the situation, but Killian knows even if Ian isn't aware of the details he's still aware of everyone's moods, of the tension that lines the faces of his brother, parents, and grandparents, of the worried frowns they try to hide and their anxious, whispered conversations when he's on the other side of the room.

"Is Henry's dad gonna hurt him?"

"No, Ian," Killian says, wrapping his arm more firmly around Ian's shoulders. "Henry's dad would never hurt him, just as I'd never hurt you."

"What about mom? Is Henry's dad gonna hurt mom?"

"No. I promised you he wouldn't-"

"But you're here."
"I'm here to keep you safe-"

"Who's keeping mom safe?"

Fear quivers in Ian's voice, triggering an answering tremble of panic inside of Killian—but he shoves it down. Ian's relying on him to be strong, so that's what Killian must be.

"Have I ever told you who the toughest person I know is?" he asks.

"You?"

Killian chuckles. "No, not by far. The toughest person I know is your mother."

Ian lifts his head and his eyes find Killian's.

"Really?" he asks, eyebrows twitching in surprise.

"Aye," he says with a confidence not difficult to pull off as he pictures Emma's determined frown. "Nothing can stop your mother when she puts her mind to it. She fought her way through an army of pirates yesterday to rescue you, and she didn't hesitate for a second."

Ian's nose crinkles in a smile. "She's Batman," he says.

"Mmhm," Killian hums in agreement. He still hasn't been formally acquainted with the character, but from the way Henry and Ian go on about the man, Killian gathers that he's the pinnacle of strength and resilience. Inspiration strikes, and he adds, "Robin and Nightwing are there helping as well."

He's feeling rather proud of himself for recalling the names of Batman's sidekicks from a conversation between Henry and Ian that he only vaguely overheard two weeks prior—until Ian says, patiently, "I'm Robin. Henry's Nightwing."

"Oh, well, erm...I only meant that your grandparents are there."

Ian's smile widens. "They're pretty tough too, right? Like mom?"

"I'd say so," Killian says. His jaw and his throat haven't forgotten the imprint David's hand left, and while he's never, as of yet, been physically assaulted by Snow, he knows her story—and he's seen what she can do with a bow and a couple of arrows.

Ian leans forward and sets his chin on Killian's chest. "Dad?"

"Yes, lad?"

"Can we have pizza for dinner?"

A knot loosens in his gut. Crisis avoided—for now, at least. Emma has been Ian's sole parent his whole life, his main source of comfort and safety in the world. Killian knows spending the following days without her will take a toll on Ian; he's mature in some ways, and yet still very much a little boy in others.

Killian brought the boy to Boston, to safety, and now what remains is to ensure his wellbeing by whatever means necessary, including, but not limited to, distraction.

"Dinner?" Killian grunts incredulously. "I thought I already fed you today."

"That was lunch and that was forever ago!"
"A few hours-"

"Forever."

Killian grins. "I suppose we can have pizza," he says in mock resignation. "Let's go unpack first, and then we can have dinner and relax."

He stands up from the bed. Ian follows his lead and trails him out of the bedroom and into the hallway. They walk all the way back to the front door, where Killian left their luggage. Killian picks up the cardboard box, carries it to the counter, and sets it down. Snow packed them a week's supply of food, and he has no intention of letting it spoil or go to waste.

"Can we watch a movie tonight, too?" Ian asks, taking the box of PopTarts Killian hands him.

"Of course."

Ian climbs onto the counter and stands on his tiptoes to place the PopTarts on the top shelf of one of the cabinets. "That's where mom usually hides them," he explains. He closes the cabinet, hops off the counter, and returns to Killian's side. "Can I pick a movie from Henry's room?"

"I thought Henry told you that you aren't allowed in his room?"

"But he has all the good ones!" Ian whines. "He has Spiderman!"

"Why don't we watch Batman, instead?" Killian suggests, giving Ian a package of Goldfish crackers and a box of fruit snacks to find a place for.

"Batman's in Henry's room too. And we can't watch it, anyway. Mom won't let me. She says it's too scary."

"Are you certain Spiderman's not too scary?"

"Spiderman's not scary!" Ian says scathingly, only to plead in the next instant, "Please can we watch Spiderman?"

"I don't know," Killian sighs. He pauses sorting through the plastic baggies of carrot sticks, grapes, and halved strawberries to raise an eyebrow at Ian. "Henry said you're not to go into his room and touch his things."

"You can go in his room," Ian says slyly, an impish grin on his face and his eyes glinting wickedly. "You can touch his stuff."

Killian can't actually deny the truth of that statement, but he can practically hear Henry's howls of protest in the distance.

He stares at Ian impassively for a moment, thinking that perhaps the boy is actually too mature in some ways, and then says, "Go put your bag in your room. I'll text Henry and ask if it's okay if we watch Spiderman."

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Ian picks out a frozen pizza from the freezer, and Killian manages to cook it in the oven without burning it or the apartment to the ground. They eat at the kitchen table, and Ian alternates between taking bites of his dinner and explaining the significance of the various photos visible from their chairs.
"That's Henry and his track team," Ian says, pointing to a large photograph of a group of boys standing shoulder-to-shoulder wearing identical black shorts and sleeveless red tops. Ian then points to another one right beside it, a picture of Henry wearing a long red robe with wide sleeves, and a strange red hat with a golden tassel. "And that's him at graduation."

"How about the one next to it?" Killian asks, indicating the loose photograph propped against the framed photo of Henry in the red gown. It shows Ian dressed in crisp, dark grey pants and vest, a light blue checked shirt, and a tie.

"That's me at my graduation," Ian says. "Mom picked my outfit out."

"It's very nice," Killian compliments.

"Mom combed my hair, too."

"I can tell."

"She said I looked like James Bond."

"I don't know who that is, but he must be devilishly handsome," Killian says with a smirk, and Ian grins back proudly.

After dinner Killian holds the Spiderman DVD hostage until Ian takes a bath. He sits on the fuzzy turquoise toilet seat cover, elbow resting on his knee and his chin in his hand, while Ian splashes around in the tub, and when Ian's finished pretending to use soap, Killian informs him that it's time to do it again, and for real.

"Can you do it?" Ian asks. A ploy, Killian knows, though he's clueless as to why exactly Ian believes this particular tactic will get him out of shampooing his hair.

"Ian," Killian replies dryly. "I only have one hand."

Before he can clarify that having one hand doesn't mean that he can't do it at all, it only means that it's far less efficient than Ian's two hands, Ian says, "I bet I can do it with one hand."

"I have a golden doubloon in my pocket that says you can't," Killian says, which is both how he gets Ian to properly wash himself, and how he finds out where the cigar box Ian hides his "treasures" in is hidden (underneath his nightstand).

Killian's surprised that Ian stays awake for the whole movie, but he's not surprised that, afterwards, Ian asks him to read more of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory to him.

"Can I sleep in mom's bed?" he asks. He has that overtired look about him Killian's beginning to recognize—he's either two seconds away from passing out, or having a meltdown.

"Sure," Killian says.

"Will you sleep with me?"

"I'm going to sleep on the couch, but Roger and Mr. Jim will be right by your side all night, alright?"

"Okay."

They go to Emma's room, Ian stumbling along sleepily with his two stuffed animals gathered in his arms and tucked beneath his chin. He goes directly to Emma's bed, flops onto it, and doesn't move.
Killian hovers in the doorway. "Ian, do you want your pillow?" he asks.

"No," Ian mumbles into One-Eyed Jim.

"How about your blanket?"

Ian shakes his head, so Killian fetches the book from Ian's backpack, and then joins Ian on Emma's bed. Ian scoots across the mattress as soon as Killian's settled, presses himself to Killian's side with Roger and Mr. Jim jammed in between, and throws an arm across his knees.

"I miss mom."

Killian rather expected it. "I know, lad. I know," he says soothingly, running his fingers through Ian's hair. Emma constantly laments how long it's grown and how badly he needs a haircut, but Killian's quite fond of the slight wave it's acquired.

He traces his fingers along Ian's brow, smoothing out the frown lines. Gradually, Ian's face relaxes, his breathing slows. The only thing Killian moves is his hand, until he's certain Ian's asleep.

He stays by Ian's side for a time, back against the headboard, idly examining Emma's room. It's rather plain compared to the rest of the apartment, with simple, yet elegant white furniture, a large mirror over a long, rectangular dresser, clean laundry stacked atop the other, taller dresser, more laundry folded inside of a basket on the floor, and picture frames standing on every available surface.

One photograph catches his eye. It's in front of the mirror, beside a small bag of cosmetics, and it shows all three of them: Emma, Henry, and Ian—only Henry's shorter than Emma in the picture, and Ian's a baby.

It's the first photograph of Ian as a baby that Killian's ever seen. He recognizes the grin, though in the photo it's all gums and no teeth, and he recognizes the round, vivid blue eyes and the sweep of thick blonde hair. Ian's eyebrows are so pale they're almost nonexistent, and he's clutching a long lock of Emma's golden hair in one chubby fist attached to an equally chubby arm.

Killian tries to calculate where he was in the Enchanted Forest at the time that photograph was taken—and then he realizes that it doesn't matter. All that matters is that he wasn't here, with them.

Abruptly his eyes are stinging and his throat feels clogged. His anguish spikes, washes over him in a boiling wave; it recedes swiftly, but it leaves him feeling hollow inside.

All those moments are gone. Killian missed every milestone. He's trying to make up for it now, but is it enough?

He looks down at Ian, and suddenly he's angry with himself.

Stop wallowing, he scolds. He meant for this to be an opportunity, a chance to witness the progression of Ian's life and try to gain a better understanding of how he, Emma, and Henry lived for the past seven years, to grow closer to them.

And here he is, being a fool, letting self-pity take hold.

With a quiet growl, he extricates himself from the arm across his lap and the leg that somehow hooked itself around his shin without him noticing, leaves the unread book on the dresser, turns out the light, and goes to the living room.

Emma told him where her photo albums are, and Killian made a point of locating them while he and
Ian were setting up to watch Spiderman earlier. On the bottom shelf of a bookcase that mostly holds DVD and video game cases are four large books with blue cloth covers. Killian pulls out the first one and carries it to the couch.

He sits, and lays the book upon his knees. There's a placard on the cover that reads *Ian's First Year* in Emma's handwriting. Killian brushes his fingers over it, underlines the title with a fingertip, then takes a deep breath, and opens the book.

Pasted to the first page is a photo of Emma in a hospital bed, face pale, eyes tired, sweaty hair gathered loosely at the nape of her neck. In her arms is a tiny, blue-wrapped bundle with a scrunched up face beneath a tuft of fuzzy golden hair. Below that photo is a second photo, a close-up of infant Ian lying in what looks to be a bassinet with clear plastic sides.

Fierce joy hits Killian with the force of a cannon ball to the chest, so overwhelming he nearly slams the book shut, but he forces himself to keep looking, to absorb everything he sees even as his eyes fill with tears.

On the next page he finds more photos of Ian as an infant, this time at home, in a carrier or in his crib, being fed by Henry, asleep on Emma's chest. Killian keeps flipping through photos of nap time and bath time, Ian lying on the floor with Henry hovering over him, making goofy faces.

As he turns the pages he watches Ian grow, watches his scrappy limbs, initially curled tight to his body, unfurl and plumpen up, he watches the eyes open wider and change from stormy grey to the blue of a clear afternoon sky, watches the head full of baby duckling hair he was born with disappear and then gradually regrow.

Killian looks away for a moment and closes his eyes, letting the images settle.

Ian resembled him from the moment he was born, from the strange curve to his ears that makes them look almost pointed to the shape and color of his eyes to the shape of his mouth.

Killian grins to himself. Emma didn't know it, but she was carrying a piece of Killian around with her the whole time, in their son.

He opens his eyes and turns back to the book, slipping to the next page. There's a photo of Ian sleeping in his crib on his back, arms and legs splayed out like a starfish. He's wearing dark blue pajamas patterned with lime green stars, and-

Killian suddenly remembers something.

He jumps to his feet, rounds the couch, and walks quickly and quietly down the hallway to Ian's room. He stops in the doorway, props the photo album on the forearm of his blunted arm, and looks back and forth between the photo of Ian in his crib and Ian's room.

Ian's room is a rectangle. His bed is currently against the long wall opposite the door, but his crib was on the short wall beneath the window. There used to be a changing table where Ian's bed is now, and it was on that table that Emma used to place the baby monitor at night.

Killian tries to picture Ian lying in that crib at night, the room dark save for the light from the little machine shaped like a fishbowl attached to the bars of his bed; in Killian's imagination Ian wakes up and cries out for Emma, for her warmth and her voice, only the small spark of magic inside of him calls out to Killian instead, summoning his voice over the baby monitor.

Was Killian always singing when Ian heard him? Or was he talking sometimes—to himself, or to Smee?
Killian imagines Emma in there as well, called to the room by Ian's whimpers and greeted by Killian's voice, going over to the crib, leaning over it, finding her baby calm and content, rubbing his belly while he drifted back to sleep, listening to Killian singing until it faded out.

He closes the photo album then and goes to Emma's room. Ian's still asleep, curled up around Roger and One-Eyed Jim, breathing evenly, peacefully. Killian braces his hand on the mattress and bends until his face is pressed to Ian's. The boy smells like a bubble bath and Roger smells like the sea and Mr. Jim smells like the house. Killian breathes it in, and says, "I love you, lad."

As much as he could have been, Killian was here. He should stop worrying about what he missed and just be grateful he's not missing more. He can't change the past, he can only embrace the future.

He kisses Ian's cheek, and then goes to find some rum and his own bed.

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Killian falls asleep on the couch with a photo album open on his chest and an empty glass held loosely in his hand. He chose the couch partly because it doesn't feel appropriate to stay in Emma's bed, and partly in case anyone or anything decides to come through the door in the middle of the night. He's awoken from a dream in which he was holding a baby in his cabin aboard the Jolly Roger and singing to it by a hurried patter of bare feet on wooden floorboards.

Killian's wide awake immediately, and he transfers the photo album and the empty glass from his chest to the floor just in time for Ian to sprint into the living room and dive on top of him.

Killian's grunts as the air's driven from his lungs, and choke's out, "Ian, what's wrong?"

Ian doesn't answer right away; he snuggles himself into Killian and waits for Killian to wrap his arm around him before he says, "I had a dream I was falling and then drowning."

A chill passes through Killian. He grips Ian tighter, and lays his hand protectively over Ian's head. "You're safe, lad. I'm here."

Ian nods, closes his eyes, and turns his face further into Killian's shirt. He falls asleep again almost immediately, and Killian closes his eyes, listens to Ian's breathing, and slips into slumber.

Emma's lying awake, staring at the ceiling of the loft. She's tired, an exhaustion she feels down to her bones, but she can't sleep. It was a long day, and after making sure Ariel and Smee got safely to the hospital and then tracking down the remainder of Blackbeard's men—men he apparently left behind on the Jolly Roger in case he needed to make a hasty exit from Storybrooke—Emma's just...done.

She rolls onto her side, and presses her face into Ian's pillow.

She misses him. She misses his excessive body heat and the way his feet are always in her way and the random, existential questions he asks her sometimes about life and the universe and dinosaurs right before he falls asleep.

Emma reaches out in the dark for her phone, fingers fumbling along the mattress until she finds it, then she brings it to her face and opens Killian's text chain.

He's been sending her messages all day—updates, mostly, informing her that they arrived in Boston and made it to her apartment and that Ian took an actual bath with actual soap. He's sent pictures, too, some from the boat, and some from around the house. Ian snuck a few in there too, photos snapped from a low angle of Killian frowning quizzically at the instructions on a frozen pizza box,
brandishing the pizza cutter that someone (Ian) stuck into his brace in place of his hook, and a couple of selfies of the two of them taken on Whale's boat.

Emma thinks her absolute favorite is of Ian sitting at the helm all alone with his hands on the steering wheel, grinning broadly with a streak of sunscreen on his cheek. He clearly enjoyed sailing, and Emma couldn't be more excited for him—for them, really. It's something Ian and Killian can bond over, something Emma knows is going to make Killian extremely happy.

The sight of Ian and Killian's smiling faces soothe her. She holds the image in her mind, closes her eyes, and tucks her phone beneath her pillow.

Henry's snoring softly from his corner of the loft. It's a sound she's used to hearing through the wall of her bedroom, and she listens to it now and lets it lull her gently to sleep.
Ugh, another short chapter. I've been kind of cooped up in the house, and it's made me restless and unable to concentrate, so I'm going to post the bit I have, take a day to breathe, and then go back in to tackle the rest. At this point I can say, with confidence, that we have one more chapter of Killian and Ian in Boston, one chapter of Emma and Storybrooke, and then they'll all be together in the same place again!!!

The next morning dawns grey and rainy. Killian and Ian wake late, and stumble around the dim apartment lethargically, made slow both by tiredness and the gloomy weather.

Thunder rumbles in the distance all through breakfast. A massive bank of black clouds crowds the horizon, visible through the kitchen windows, hanging ominously over the rooftops of the apartments across the street, and by the time Killian's finished washing out his and Ian's cereal bowls in the sink, the storm breaks.

Rain pounds the windows, drums against the roof. Outside, twin rivers flood down the gutters and pool in the intersection at the end of the street, forming a small lake. Lightning flashes overhead, thunder crackles and booms, sending reverberations through Killian's bones. It's a thrill he's rarely able to enjoy. Storms at sea are a sailor's worst nightmare, but safe within the four walls of Emma's apartment—and with Ian by his side—it's an entirely different experience.

Ian runs constantly to the window to peer outside. Sometimes he lingers, elbows resting on the sill, cheeks in his hands, nose nearly pressed to the glass. He rears back only a little each time the lightning flashes, but he grins, clearly relishing the same little thrill Killian also feels.

They play board games, watch movies, and eat snacks straight out of the Emma Swan cookbook for hours. Killian attempts to teach Ian how to play chess, but when it's clear that Ian's sole interest is in moving the knight around because it's horse-shaped, they switch to checkers.

Ian trounces him three games in a row. Killian assumed the boy won the first time because Killian was taking it rather easy on him, but when Ian wins the second and third rounds it's clear to Killian that he needs to reevaluate his son's abilities. They carry on playing, until Ian beats him so many times he actually grows bored of it and suggests they play Monopoly instead—Killian agrees, shamefully fast.

The afternoon passes easily. They share a late lunch of popcorn smothered in melted Milk Duds, and two large glasses of whole milk. He tries to tell himself that the treat is solely for Ian's benefit, but he knows it's a lie—the revelation that he possesses a ravenous sweet tooth has been nothing but a curse.

How is Killian supposed to set a proper example for forming healthy habits if he can't keep his own hand out of the cookie jar, so to speak? Killian should be teaching the boy about restraint and moderation. Isn't indulging in one vice a gateway to indulging in other, far more harmful vices?

He thinks all this, but it does nothing to deter him from reaching into the popcorn bowl for another gooey handful.
Ian eats with one hand, and sorts through the heap of Legos he dumped onto the kitchen table with the other. Killian watches, attempting to discern Ian's seemingly random organizational criteria. One pile is clearly for pieces that are extraneous to their task, but he can't for the life of him guess what the theme of the other twelve piles are.

Ian's been quiet for some time, concentration shifting between the Legos and fitting as much popcorn into his mouth as possible, when, cheeks full, he asks, "Is Poseidon a real person?"

Killian almost chokes on his milk.
"Pardon?"
"Is Poseidon real?"
"Ah, it's question time now, is it?" Killian hedges.

Ian nods absently, chewing, brow furrowed at the Lego piece pinned to the table beneath his finger. Killian clears his throat and wipes the milk from his upper lip, inwardly attempting to relocate the sense of calm that fled him the moment Ian invoked the name of Killian's least favorite sea god.
"I thought we were building a pirate ship?" he says, stalling further.
"We are."
"What made you think of Poseidon?"

Ian shrugs. "I was thinking about pirates and then I was thinking about Pirates of the Caribbean and in the last movie they're looking for the Trident of Poseidon so it made me think of Poseidon." He pushes the Lego into one of the piles, then lifts his head and fixes Killian with his big blue eyes. "So, is he?"
"Is he what?"
"Is he real?"

Ian extracts a single, dripping piece of popcorn from the bowl and offers it to Killian, holding it between thumb and forefinger and wiggling it tantalizingly, like a worm on the end of a fishhook.

Killian takes the bait. "Aye, he's real," he says, taking the popcorn carefully from Ian's fingers with his teeth.
"Have you ever met him?"

Ian holds up another piece of popcorn, and Killian eats that one as well before answering.
"Once."
"Is he nice?" Ian asks. He was perched on his knees with his heels propping up his rear, but now he shifts so he's sitting normally. He picks up his glass of milk with both hands and takes a sip while he waits for Killian to answer. It's a gesture Killian didn't know he thought was adorable until he saw it for the first time. There's something innocent about it—and something innocent in Ian's questions in general.

Ian has no way of knowing he's asking Killian to pry the lid off the jar of his dark deeds, a jar Killian's been trying to keep buried since he first met his son a month ago. In Ian's eyes there's both
genuine curiosity and complete trust, and it's the trust that decides Killian, along with his memory of Emma telling him to be honest.

"He just wants to figure you out," she said. "He wants to know who his dad is."

"Dad?" Ian prompts. His feet swing back and forth idly, heels drumming the chair legs, lightly and rhythmically.

Killian takes a deep breath, counts himself lucky that it's been quite a long while since Ian went into interrogation mode on him, and says, "Poseidon's actually rather grumpy."

Ian grins. "Really?"

"Really," Killian says, and smiles back, though in his mind he's picturing the thunderous expression of the sea god. "When the sea is angry, every sailor knows it's Poseidon you should pray to."

"Who do you pray to when the sea's happy?"

"Probably Poseidon's wife," Killian mutters. It slipped from his lips, an old sailor's habit. Ian raises his eyebrows quizzically, but Killian, deciding he's risked Poseidon's wrath enough for one evening —and hoping they're too far from the sea for Poseidon to have heard—purposefully picks up a Lego from the "unsorted" pile, and says, "Where does this one go?"

By the evening the storm has moved on. The apartment seems hushed in its wake, though the wind remains to shake the trees, and rain still drips steadily from the gutter. Killian's used to spending weeks out at sea cooped up on the Jolly Roger, so a day indoors is an easy feat. He's been relaxed all day, and he only feels more tranquil as the day winds down.

Ian, however, grows restless as the light fades, and by sunset he's practically vibrating with pent up energy.

"Come on, lad," Killian says, after having watched Ian walk five zig-zagging laps around the apartment like a drunken bumblebee and then flop listlessly onto the couch, "let's go for a walk."

His announcement breathes new life into Ian. He pops up from the couch and races to the front door, where he drops to his knees beside the felt mat and sifts through the pile of shoes. After a few seconds of rummaging, he pulls out a pair of ridiculous red rubber clogs with perforated toes and a heel strap, jams his bare feet into them, and jumps upright.

Killian, bent double trying to wrestle one of his boots on, stares. "What are those?"

"What?"

"On your feet. What are those?"

"They're my Crocs," Ian says cheerfully. He lifts one foot up to his waist level so Killian can get a closer look. There's a small logo with a cartoon picture of a crocodile, and a white and black stripe running all the way around the sole.

"They're shoes?"

"Yea," Ian says, hopping, still balanced on one leg.

"Shoes that your mother lets you wear outside?"

"Yea," Ian says, beginning to sound a bit defensive. He puts his foot down, loudly. "Why?"
They look absolutely absurd, but Killian decides to keep his fashion opinions to himself—he comes from a land where men once thought it stylish to wear lace, after all.

Within two minutes of being outside, their worth is proven. Ian leaps gleefully into the giant puddle at the corner, and Killian's too slow to avoid the resulting tidal wave. Water sluices over his boots and splashes up his legs, soaking his socks and his jeans all the way up to his knees.

"Sorry," Ian says, eyes wide and apologetic. He's speckled with splash marks from the hem of his shorts to the collar of his t-shirt, and there's a large droplet dangling from his chin.

Killian sighs. "It's alright," he says. "Perhaps I should have worn Crocs." He tiptoes carefully to the shallow edge of the puddle, and leads Ian across the street to the opposite corner. His boots squelch uncomfortably with every step, but he has no choice but to carry on and try to ignore the water bubbling around his toes.

Ian jogs alongside him, and snatches his hand up. "Do you have Crocs?"

"No. Do you think I should purchase a pair?"

"Yea! They have black ones."

"Why black?"

"Because everything you wear is black."

"Oh," Killian says, amused. "Should I wear different colors?"

"No, I think it's okay. You look like a pirate." Ian's teeth flash up at him in a grin before he drops his gaze back to the sidewalk.

Searching for more puddles to assault me with, Killian thinks. After a moment, he asks, "Do you think your mother would like it if I dressed less like a pirate and more like...everyone else?"

He tries to imagine what he might look like wearing some of the outfits he saw other men in Storybrooke wearing—blue jeans, thin t-shirts, plaid, khaki, shorts—but his imagination fails him.

"I think if she didn't like your clothes then she would hide them and buy you new ones," Ian says matter-of-factly. "That's what she does to me and Henry."

"Mm," Killian replies. Sound logic.

Emma helped him pick out the modern clothes he currently owns, but he recalls being rather prone to glaring that day, so perhaps she was rather...delicate in her choices. Would she prefer to see him in something else? He enjoyed the flush that rose to her cheeks when she saw him in the faux leather pants for the first time; would she blush if she saw him in blue jeans? Or a t-shirt with one of those v-necks?

Still holding to Killian's hand, Ian makes a short hop forward to land one-footed in another puddle. It's shallow and it hardly splashes, but Ian smiles in satisfaction nonetheless. "Once mom gave away Henry's favorite t-shirt because she said it was too small and Henry was mad at her for a week."

"Has she ever given away your favorite t-shirt?" Killian asks. He savors these stories, the tiny details that comprise the vibrant fabric of Emma, Henry, and Ian's daily lives in Boston.

"I don't have a favorite t-shirt," Ian says. "She loses my socks in the dryer all the time though."
"Oh?"

"She says they escape and run away."

"Perhaps they think your feet are too smelly."

Ian giggles. "Maybe that's why all Henry's underwear gets lost in the dryer too."

"Because his feet are smelly?"

"Because his butt's smelly."

Killian wonders if he and Liam were as entertained by the word butt as Ian is when they were his age. He truly has very few pleasant memories of his childhood, and those he does have are from before his mother died. Afterwards...

"Are mermaids real?"

Killian gives himself a shake, wrenching his thoughts out of the past and into the present.

"Hm?" he says. He looks down at Ian, but for a moment he sees a different boy, a boy with the same eyes but dark hair, and boy who had forgotten how to smile.

"Are mermaids real?" Ian asks.

"Aye," Killian answers. He has a vague memory of Emma asking him specifically to deny their existence, but he can't remember the reason for her request.

"Have you ever met one of those?"

"A few," he says.

"Are they nice?"

"Well, the loreleis of Neverland are highly unpleasant creatures, but the mermaids I've met in other lands are nice enough."

_Though I didn't exactly return the favor_, he thinks. Ursula and Ariel's faces are amongst those that haunt him the most. They were innocent, and he betrayed them. Guilt writhes in his gut, and suddenly his sins seem to weigh more heavily upon his shoulders. His thoughts turn inward. He's no longer in Boston, he's aboard the Jolly Roger. In his mind he hears Ursula's cry of dismay wither into a silent scream as her singing voice is sucked into the magical seashell; he hears Ariel spitting the word coward in his face.

"Dad?"

Killian startles. Again, Ian's voice pulls him from the darkness. He's not on the Jolly Roger, he's walking along a puddle-strewn sidewalk with Ian's hand clasped in his. Killian tightens his grip, giving Ian's fingers a gentle squeeze and running his thumb lightly over his knuckles.

"Yes, lad?"

Ian wrinkles his nose, a gesture that never fails to remind Killian of Emma. "What's a lorelei?" he asks.

"A lorelei is a type of mermaid," Killian says with a smile.
"The bad type?"

"The *mean* type."

"Why are they mean?"

"I suppose because no one ever taught them to be *nice*."

Ian scrunches his nose even further. "Don't they have moms?"

Killian, who never thought of it before quite like that, chuckles. "No, I guess they don't."

It's nearly full dark. They walk a few more blocks, Ian darting from puddle to puddle, and then Killian turns left at a corner and begins looping them back towards Emma's apartment.

The air is warm and heavy with humidity. Killian's shirt grows damp from sweat and clings to his chest and arms, and even Ian begins to look a bit withered—Killian takes it as a sign of exhaustion when they pass by a park and Ian doesn't ask if they can go.

Emma's street is pitch black by the time they return, save for the pools of soft golden light made by the streetlamps. Killian and Ian are marching up the steps to the front door of the apartment building when Killian pauses, a familiar feeling creeping up his spine.

Someone's watching them.

The hair on his arms and the back of his neck raises. He turns, eyes raking the darkness for the source, but there's no one in sight. Nothing moves, nothing seems out of place. Even the wind has gone still.

Ian's already inside, calling for him from the second floor, and after one more piercing look around, Killian turns and follows.

Upstairs, while Killian's fumbling Emma's keys from his pocket, Ian asks, "Can we have ice cream for dinner?"

Unease still sits heavy in his stomach, and Killian finds he's lost his appetite. "You can have some ice cream for dessert," he says, "but we're having vegetables for dinner."

Ian puts his hands on his hips and regards Killian with a serious expression. "How many vegetables?"

"So many vegetables."

Ian makes a face.

"No vegetables, no ice cream," Killian says simply, and shrugs.

"What if we don't *have* any vegetables?"

"We do. I saw them. In the freezer. Right next to the ice cream." Killian raises an eyebrow pointedly. "The ice cream you won't be having tonight unless you eat at least three different types of vegetables for dinner."

Defeated, Ian huffs and pushes his way through the door and into the apartment.

While Killian cooks dinner—a package of frozen vegetables and something called chicken kiev from
the freezer—he finds himself looking out of the kitchen windows at the darkened street every chance he gets. Still, nothing moves.

Yet, he can't shake the feeling that someone is—or at least was—watching them.

Ian falls asleep that night much faster than Killian imagined. Killian tucks him into Emma's bed beneath the blankets with Roger and Mr. Jim, and turns the air conditioning unit (which he knows how to operate thanks to Granny) on full blast. He goes around the apartment, checking every door and window and ensuring they're firmly closed and locked, then goes to the couch.

He lays down, and thinks about the day.

Despite the unease that lingers in the back of his mind, his heart feels very full. This is as close to experiencing Emma, Henry, and Ian's real lives as he's ever been, and maybe as close as he ever will be. He only wishes Henry and Emma were here to share it.

He folds his blunted arm behind his head, pulls a photo album from the floor beside the couch, props the bottom edge on his stomach, and lets it fall open.

It's the same album from yesterday. Killian flips directly to the back, to the photos from Ian's 1st birthday. Emma and Henry celebrated it in the kitchen. They decorated Ian's highchair with balloons and a banner that said ONE. Ian, clad only in a diaper, ate a gigantic piece of chocolate cake with his hands and got blue frosting smeared all over his face, his arms, and his bare chest.

The final page has two photos. In one, Emma is leaning in to give Ian's frosting-smeared cheek a big kiss; Ian's laughing, and he has one gooey blue hand tangled in the long golden strands of her hair. The other photo shows Ian, all cleaned up and in Henry's arms, clutching One-Eyed Jim (brand new, plump and bright red) and grinning up at his big brother.

Killian stares at the photo. Ian's 6th birthday is ten days from now. He'll have to get Ian a gift. Killian's first birthday gift to his son.

It will have to be something special, something that signifies the bond between them. As he wracks his brains, searching every interaction they've ever had for some shining clue that points the way to the perfect gift, his thoughts turn to Ian's questions.

His heart feels suddenly heavy, and he gets a sinking feeling inside of him. The anticipation, the joy he felt a moment ago vanishes.

How many more times throughout Killian's life will Ian ask him an innocent question that dredges up some dark deed from his past, a bad memory?

Emma's words echo back to him once more: *He just wants to figure you out. He wants to know who his dad is.*

There's a lot Ian doesn't know about him, much he's too young to understand, and much Killian wishes he could keep hidden from him forever. He was able to avoid going into the details of his encounters with Poseidon and mermaids without lying today, but will that always be the case? Killian would prefer not to lie to Ian about who he is, only to have the boy find out the truth later. He doesn't think he could bear Ian's inevitable look of disappointment.

Killian closes the photo album and scrubs his hand over his face.

Ian's a second chance, a reason to be better. He wants to be better for his son, and for Emma. He wants to be a part of their lives—of *this*, of everything he sees around him now, everything he
witnessed back in Storybrooke.

Killian can't change who he was before, he can't erase the mistakes he made, but that man and those mistakes will always be there, waiting for him, waiting for Ian.

One day, Ian will find out exactly who Killian used to be.

He throws himself off the couch, knocking the photo album to the floor, and goes into the kitchen. The tiles are cool against his bare feet. He pulls the bottle of rum and a glass from the cabinet, and pours.

He needs Emma. He needs her arms around him, her voice, he needs her to tell him what to do, how to handle this. He doesn't want to screw this up.

Killian lets out a shaky breath and he lifts the glass to his lips. As he takes a sip, he lets his gaze slide sideways, towards the window. The kitchen is dark, and he has a clear view of the street outside.

One of the cars that was parked across the street is missing. It could be nothing, but Killian feels that same feeling from before crawl up his spine.

Someone knows they're here.
Chapter 34

The next morning the apartment is blazing hot.

Killian awakes to discover that, sometime during the night, Ian joined him on the couch. They slept late again, as well. The sun is already high in the sky and baking the small kitchen and living room—the suffocating heat is compounded by the warm body sprawled over Killian's.

Ian doesn't seem to mind. In fact, he appears quite cozy half wedged into the cushions, half draped across Killian, with one orange crab and one red octopus smashed in between. Killian enjoys the closeness, but he can barely breathe. He gently removes the arm from his chest, the cheek from his shoulder, and eases himself sideways off the couch.

It's about as graceful a maneuver as an eel attempting ballet, and Killian ends up on his arse on the carpet, but he manages to extricate himself without waking the boy, and mentally congratulates himself for it.

After a quick, blessedly cold shower, he returns to find Ian sitting at the kitchen table in just his underwear. He's propped on his knees again with his feet folded beneath his stripe-clad rear. On the table, two Lego pirate ships—one captained by a skeleton—face off prow-to-prow.

"You know," Killian says. "Ships usually fought with their sides facing. That's where all the cannons are."

"They're gonna joust," Ian says, and looks over. He takes in Killian's hair, wet and slicked back, and then he looks down, at Killian's chest.

His eyes pop. "Whoa! Where did you get all those scars?"

Killian follows Ian's gaze to his torso. He's shirtless, wearing only the soft sweatpants David packed for him, and the scars that riddle his bare skin are on full display.

Ian slides off his chair and trots over. "What happened?" he asks, peering at a puckered, roundish one beneath Killian's ribs.

Killian touches the scar lightly with his fingertips. "I was shot."

Ian's eyes widen.

"What about that one?" he says, and points to another similar-looking but much more faded scar near Killian's collarbone.

"Shot again."

"This one?"
A horizontal slash two inches long near his belly button.

"Stabbed."

"This one?"

A sunken, jagged one along his shoulder.

"Shot," Killian says. That scar's particular horrific appearance is due to the ineptitude of the moron who dug the bullet out—Killian. He ignored Smee's advice to wait for the ship's surgeon and applied the knife to his shoulder himself.

"Huh," Ian declares, frowning thoughtfully.

"What?" Killian asks.

"How come you got shot so many times?"

*Because some fool fell asleep on his watch and the Lost Boys got into my cargo hold.*

It took three months for the Lost Boys to run out of bullets. It's a memory that still makes Killian shudder.

Nevertheless, he puts on a pleasant smile, and says, "I guess I'm just not very good at dodging bullets."

Which is not *entirely* true. He is rather good at it, just not in the jungle, where you can't see who's shooting at you. Still, better a bullet than a poison arrow.

"Now," he says, turning Ian gently by the shoulder and steering him towards the refrigerator. "What would you like for breakfast?"

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The relief Killian gained from the shower fades quickly. There are two air conditioning units in the apartment, one in Emma's room and one in Henry's, but Killian knows they can't spend the day sequestered in a bedroom—especially since one of those bedrooms is technically off limits—so around noon he decides to try their luck outside, where at least there's the possibility of a breeze.

Ian, who noticed a group of older boys he recognizes playing some sort of game with nets, sticks, and a ball in the street down the block, is dressed in an instant and waiting by the door. Killian dresses more slowly. The heat that envelops him as he pulls on pants and shirt and vest is not welcome. Perhaps shorts were worth a try. Or, at the very least, short sleeves.

Ian bounces impatiently while he waits, red Crocs tapping the kitchen floor in an erratic little dance.

"Dad, c'mon," he whines, after a full minute of watching Killian button his various buttons.

Killian smiles to himself. That used to be him, vibrating with impatience while he waited for Liam, who was always far less eager to go places than Killian.

*How the tables have turned,* he thinks. If only Liam could see him now.

Killian opens the front door, and Ian bolts out of it as if fired from a cannon. He races down the stairs, trips at the bottom and sprawls to the carpet, but picks himself back up. He waits for Killian by the door, and Killian realizes it must be a rule of Emma's that he can't leave the apartment without
supervision.

Outside, they run headlong into a group of people on the landing, but before Killian can make his apologies and untangle himself from what appears to be two small humans, Ian screeches, "SIENNA!" and the stoop is plunged into chaos.

Killian's confusion turns quickly to amusement. Ian's crushed together with two children, a girl and a boy, one taller than him, and the other shorter than him, and they're all grinning with their arms around each other.

Killian recognizes Sienna from Ian's description, and assumes from their shared resemblance that the other boy is her brother. They both have skin the color of the heavily cream-and-sugar laden coffee Henry drinks, and thick curls—though Sienna's hair is black while the boy's is a softer shade of dark brown.

Killian looks up, and meets the eyes of a woman with the same head of tightly curled black hair as Sienna, but chocolate brown skin. She smiles at him.

"Hi," she says, extending her hand over the heads of the three children that stand between her and Killian. "I'm Tiana. I'm Sienna and Cole's mom."

Killian returns the smile, takes her offered hand, and shakes it. "Killian Jones," he says. "I'm Ian's father."

The announcement clearly surprises her. She freezes. Her mouth forms an 'o' of astonishment at the word father, and her eyebrows climb up her forehead—but as quickly as her shock appears, it disappears.

"It's very nice to meet you," she says warmly, beaming, squeezing Killian's hand firmly and shaking it with renewed energy.

There's something both vibrant and sincere about her that makes Killian drop his guard. He stands still and lets her shake his whole arm while her eyes flick over him back and forth, up and down, likely taking in everything from the scar on his cheek to his empty wrist to his very clear resemblance to Ian.

She's still shaking his hand when the door opens again, and she doesn't let go even as they're shuffled sideways to make room for the person that steps from the apartment and joins them on the landing.

"I thought I heard your voices-" says the new addition.

"Mom!" Tiana says brightly. "This is Ian's dad."

The woman Killian guesses is Ian's "Ms. Sarah" turns her glacier blue eyes from her grandchildren to Killian, and the smile slips from her face. Where Tiana's regard was warm, Ms. Sarah's makes Killian shiver.

She's pale, with sharp cheekbones, arched brows, and silver hair gathered in a clip at the back of her head. Though she's an inch or two shorter than Killian, she carries herself like a queen, and seems to tower over him. She offers her hand, and Killian slowly removes his own from Tiana's friendly grip and transfers it into Ms. Sarah's cold one. It's like shaking hands with a marble statue.

"Sarah Fisher," she says coolly.
"Killian Jones."

Her gaze sweeps over him

"Emma told me you were coming."

"Aye." He inclines his head politely. "I understand that Ian and I have you to thank for the clean towels and the groceries."

The barest smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "You do. Are you watering the flowers I put on the kitchen table?"

"I am—well, Ian is."

He looks down. Ian's there, waiting patiently to be noticed.

"Hi," he says, grinning.

Sarah Fisher's cold demeanor thaws instantly. She reaches out and cups Ian's cheeks gently with both hands. "I missed you," she says tenderly, and pulls him into a hug.

"I missed you, too," he responds, arms tight around her waist.

Killian sees the way Ian leans into her, and suddenly Sarah's behavior makes sense: she's protective of Emma and Ian, because to her they're family, and all she knows about Killian is that he hasn't been around.

Killian smiles, grateful. There was someone here for Emma, watching her back, looking out for her, helping her with Henry and Ian—hopefully scaring away any men that even looked at Emma.

Sarah pulls her fingers once through Ian's hair, then steps back. "How's Henry?" she asks.

"He's got a girlfriend!" Ian gushes.

"Oh my gosh, really?"

"Yea! Her name's Ava and she owns an ice cream shop!"

"Well, she already sounds lovely."

"I want them to get married so I can have ice cream every day."

Tiana snorts, and rolls her eyes towards Killian. "This kid loves ice cream."

Killian chuckles. "I'm aware."

"Has he asked you to have ice cream for breakfast yet?"

"This very morning, in fact."

Tiana shakes her head. "Did he get his sweet tooth from you or from Emma?"

She seems to realize immediately that she might have asked something inappropriate, for the moment the question leaves her lips she clamps her mouth shut and looks quickly to her mother, who gazes sharply back.

"From me, actually," Killian says. Tiana and Sarah visibly relax. "When I was a boy I used to beg
my brother for candy all the time."

By "candy" he really means the cakes, cookies, tarts, and honeyed sweets they sold from carts in the
market places near the docks.

"Well," Tiana says. "I'm off tomorrow, so why don't I bring some pastries home from work, and we
can all have dinner together? You can tell us more about yourself."

Ian's face lights up, and he turns hopeful eyes to Killian.

"We'd be happy to," Killian says.

"You never bring pastries home for us," Sienna interjects, planting her fists on her hips. She tosses
her head and lifts her chin, and Killian thinks he understands why Ian has a little crush on her.

Tiana tuts. "Girl, I bring treats home for you and Cole every day. Now, I want you three to go get
your bikes from the basement. It's a beautiful day. You should play outside."

Ian, Sienna, and Cole squeeze past Sarah and scramble into the apartment. Killian watches them go,
wondering if he should accompany them to help or supervise or something, but Sarah closes the door
and she and Tiana turn to him simultaneously and expectantly.

He looks between them, waiting, and then he blinks suddenly in bewilderment.

"I'm adopted," Tiana says, noticing his expression.

"Oh," Killian falters. "I, erm—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"

"It's alright," Tiana assures him, lips curving into a grin. "We get it all the time."

"I used to run a foster home," Sarah explains.

"I was one of the lucky ones," Tiana says. She and Sarah share a smile, and then look at Killian
seriously once more.

"How's Emma?" Sarah asks.

"She's doing well," he says.

"Is she be coming back soon?"

"I'm not certain when exactly she'll be returning," Killian says. "She's still dealing with some family
issues in Maine."

Emma gave him a few vague lines to use in case anyone asked. She said she made several phone
calls a month ago, when she realized she would be staying in Storybrooke for a while and realized
there were some people who needed to know that, but since then she's had very little contact with
anyone from Boston.

Sarah and Tiana accept his answer with nods. Ian, Sienna, and Cole return then, shoving open the
door and wheeling three small bikes onto the porch and down the stairs.

"Alright," Tiana says, her voice cutting through the kids' chatter. "I'm leaving for work. Give me
hugs."

Sienna and Cole drop their bikes and dash to their mother. They hug her from either side, their voices
a clamor, cheerfully chirping that they love her and they'll miss her. Tiana gives Ian a kiss on the cheek before she leaves, and then it's just Killian and Sarah on the front porch.

"Would you like something to drink?" Sarah asks. Her voice is not as warm as it was when she spoke to Ian, but it's not frosty, either.

"No, thank you, I'm fine," Killian replies.

"I suggest we sit down then," she says. "They'll be at it for a while."

Together they sit side-by-side on the porch steps and watch Ian, Sienna, and Cole race their bikes up and down the sidewalk from corner to corner. It seems to be a thing that they do.

"Does Ian have any friends there?" Sarah asks. "In Maine?"

Killian glances sideways. She's seated comfortably with her elbow on her knee and her chin in her hand, eyes on the children who have stopped their bikes two houses down the block to examine something on the sidewalk.

"He does," Killian says. "There's an older boy named Roland he's quite good friends with, and another little girl named Rowan."

Sarah smiles to herself, and nods. Killian can't help but notice that her smile is a bit sad. After another moment of silence, she asks, "Does he like it there?"

Killian hesitates. Emma warned him to be vague and not to reveal too much, but he wants to give this woman something, something to be comforted by.

"Yes," he says. "He was a little apprehensive at first, because it's a small town and there's no aquarium." Her smile widens at that. "-but he's since grown rather fond of it. There's a beach. And a diner he really likes. The owner treats him like a grandson. There's also Ava and the previously mentioned ice cream shop."

"How about Emma's family? Does Ian like them?"

"It's just Emma's parents, and he does—the feeling's mutual, I assure you. His grandparents are rather smitten with him and Henry."

Sarah looks at him. "Can I ask how you and Emma found each other?"

"Henry and Ian found me, actually," Killian says, and holds his breath. His story won't stand up to an interrogation. If pressed, he'll have to lie.

"I see," she says, and raises one perfect eyebrow. "And they found you at the same time Emma's birth parents magically reappeared?"

"Erm, yes."

"That's quite the coincidence."

"Aye, it is."

She stares at him, piercingly, then looks away. Killian lets out the breath he was holding, and follows her gaze.

The older boys Ian spotted earlier are still in the street playing a game with nets, sticks, and an orange
ball. Ian's standing on the grass beside the curb, watching them, while Sienna calls to him from the
sidewalk. Even at a distance, Killian can see the stars in Ian's eyes. He'll have to ask him later what
the game is.

"I came here looking for a family," Sarah says, abruptly.

Killian blinks. "Pardon?"

"Boston," Sarah clarifies. "I came to Boston looking for a family."

"Oh?" Killian asks politely, not really certain where her story's going, or even why she's telling it to
him in the first place.

"It's why I started fostering kids."

Killian nods, bidding her to continue.

"A lot of kids passed through my house. Some went on to better places, some-" She frowns, shakes
her head. "When Tiana came into my home, I knew." She turns to Killian. "How about you? Any
family?"

There's something in her eyes that tells Killian she's not asking about Liam.

"Just Ian," he says. "He's the only family I've got."

Her expression changes, minutely. Killian glimpses something like sympathy and then satisfaction
before her face is impassive once more.

"And Emma?" she asks, voice impossibly quiet.

Killian's heart starts beating frantically in his chest. His face flushes, his mouth goes dry. He feels a
sudden urge to confess, to reveal himself, to tell her that missing the whole of Ian's life so far is his
biggest regret, that for nearly seven years he went to bed every night full of grief, longing for Emma.

"If she'll have me," he says.

Somehow, Killian thinks he's told her what she wanted to hear, what she needed to know in order to
come to some sort of decision about him. Afterwards, the conversation turns to lighter topics, and
she's nearly as warm as Tiana, though Killian realizes she's a much more reserved woman than her
daughter.

They eat lunch outside. Sarah disappears into her apartment for half an hour, then returns with paper
plates of hot dogs and potato chips. She gives Killian a beer, apologizes for it being warm, and
passes juice boxes out to the three kids.

Ian, Sienna, and Cole gobble down their hot dogs, and then spend an hour drawing with colored
chalk on the front walkway. Sienna decorates the sidewalk with rainbows, cupcakes, butterflies, and
a self-portrait. Ian adds an octopus, a pirate ship, several fish with gigantic, razor-sharp teeth, an slice
of pizza. Cole draws exactly what Ian does, copying it with enthusiasm but a far less skilled hand.

They draw something called "hopscotch" and Ian drags Killian off the porch to play. Luckily, it's a
game that doesn't involve having the use of two hands.

Killian sees Sienna look at his stump critically for a moment, before dismissing it, but Cole frowns
uncertainly at it, so Killian tries to keep his blunted wrist out of sight as much as possible.
As the sun begins to slide towards the horizon, Sarah apologizes and tells him she has to get the kids inside and start getting dinner ready. Killian helps her wheel the bikes inside the apartment and gather the various toys the kids have scattered across the lawn. They say their goodbyes, and Sienna and Cole troop inside with their grandmother.

Ian leans into Killian and loops an arm around his leg. Killian drops his hand onto Ian's head, and pushes the sweaty bangs from his brow.

"Your friends seem very nice," he says.

"Yea."

"So does Ms. Sarah."

Ian nods.

"Ready to go inside?"

"Okay," Ian sighs.

Killian shuffles him to the door, but pauses with his hand on the knob. He turns his head, looking over his shoulder. Across the street is a parked car he didn't notice before; it must have arrived while he was busy collecting chalk bits from the grass.

The feeling from the night before, the feeling that crawled up his spine like an army of spiders, returns.

Someone's sitting in the car. The sun's low, so Killian can only see their silhouette. It's a man, slight of build and with shaggy hair, and judging from the profile, they're looking right at him.

Killian opens the door and then briskly shoves Ian inside. "Stay there," he growls. He lets the door fall closed, then turns on his heel and begins stalking down the sidewalk towards the street.

The car starts. Killian walks faster.

Before he can reach the curb the car pulls away and streaks down the street. Killian gets a glimpse of the man's face, and burns it into his memory as he watches the car disappear around a corner.

The man in the car wasn't Neal, but Killian can't rule out the possibility that it was an associate of Neal. He'll have to keep a better eye out for when the man returns.

Killian turns back to face the apartment. Ian's staring at him through the window set in the door, his eyes just visible above the bottom edge. Killian forces himself to smile, forces his shoulders to relax and his fist to unclench. He has to maintain an outward appearance of total calm, lest Ian catch his mood.

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The next night—their fourth night in Boston—Ian's miserable.

The day started out pleasantly enough; Ian and Killian played games inside all morning, Ian ran around outside with Sienna and Cole all afternoon, and then they had dinner in Sarah's apartment with her, Tiana, and the kids.

After they returned to the apartment, however, Ian quickly deflated, and not even ice cream or the container of extra beignets Tiana sent them upstairs with could sway his mood.
It's now 10 o'clock, and they're lying in Emma's bed. Killian's reading *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, praying that Ian will fall asleep, but after an hour of Ian's restless fidgeting, he knows it's hopeless. Killian puts the book down, and tugs his fingers through Ian's hair.

"What's on your mind, lad?"

Ian shakes his head, brows drawn down, eyes averted, lower lip jutting out. Killian knows that expression. Killian knows what happens if Ian's left to simmer while wearing that expression. The boy's meltdown at Granny's is not a memory Killian will soon forget.

"You miss your mother?" Killian says gently.

Ian inhales sharply through his nose. His brow crinkles. He presses his lips together, holding in a sob.

Three days. They made it three full days in Boston before Emma's absence finally wore Ian down. Killian thinks that's more than enough to ask of a six-year-old who's never been separated from his mother for more than one night.

"Would it make you feel better if you called her and said goodnight?" he asks, still working his fingers through Ian's mess of tangled blonde waves.

Ian doesn't answer, but he tilts his face up and fixes Killian with eyes that glitter with unshed tears. Killian takes his hand from Ian's head to wrestle his phone from his pocket. When he has it out, he dials Emma's number, and presses the phone to his ear.

Emma answers after two rings.

"Hello?"

"Hey, love, it's me."

"Hey," Emma says. "I thought we said we weren't going to-"

"I know, love. We did," Killian says. They promised they wouldn't make phone calls, just in case someone was listening in. "But the lad misses you."

"Put him on."

Killian passes the phone into Ian's waiting hand.

"Mom?" he asks.

Killian can just barely make out her response. "Hey, kid," she says.

"I miss you."

"I know. I miss you too."

There's a pause. Ian's closes his eyes and tucks his forehead against Killian's chest.

"Are you getting ready for bed?"

"Yea. I'm in your bed."
"Are you gonna sleep there?"
"Yea."
"Is Mr. Jim with you?"
"Yea."
"Did he meet Roger?"
"Yea. They're best friends now."
"Good."

Another pause. Killian resumes passing his fingers through Ian's hair.

"What are you guys going to do tomorrow?"

Ian shrugs, then says, "I don't know."

"You should go to the aquarium."

"Can we?"

"Yea, why not? You have to show your dad the octopus and the electric eel and the giant ocean tank —ooh, you have to show him the stingrays, too. I bet he's never touched a stingray before."

Ian opens his eyes, looks up at Killian. His eyes are no longer teary. "Have you ever touched a stingray before?" he asks.

"No, I haven't," Killian answers quietly.

Ian closes his eyes again. "He said he's never touched a stingray before."

"You should go then. It's your job to show him around and show him all the cool stuff, okay?"

"Okay."

"Alright, kid. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Goodnight."

"G'night."

"Can you put your dad back on?"

Killian takes the phone from Ian and puts it to his ear. "It's me."

Ian wraps an arm around Killian's ribs and throws his leg over Killian's leg.

"How's he doing?" Emma asks.

"He misses you, Swan."

"I know."
"I miss you."

Her response doesn't come immediately. He hears her breathing, and closes his eyes, focusing on the sound.

"I miss you too, Killian."

He clutches the phone tighter, presses it hard against his cheek, as if he can somehow get closer to her that way. "Can I call you again tomorrow night?" he asks.

"Yea."

He wants to stay on the phone longer, he wants to hear her voice and hear her talk about the weather and what she had for breakfast and how Henry's doing, but he made her a promise.

"Goodnight, love."

"Goodnight."

He waits for her to hang up the phone, waits for the silence that signals she's gone. He lays the phone on the bed beside the book, and folds his stump arm behind his head. Ian's pressed to his side, asleep. Killian eases an arm around Ian's shoulders, then lays his head back on the pillows and closes his own eyes.

His thoughts are slow to settle. He spent dinner being politely interrogated over grilled chicken and mashed potatoes by Sarah Fisher and Tiana. Their questions and his responses swirl through his brain in anxious little flurries.

Did he say anything wrong? Did he say anything suspicious? Killian tried to be truthful without actually telling the truth.

He told them his mother died, and soon after his father abandoned him and his older brother; they were put in another man's care, and he was cruel; when they were of age, they joined the Navy together; Liam subsequently died on a mission, and Killian left the Navy.

They asked what Killian does for a living now, and he said he owns his own ship—he almost passed out from relief when they didn't ask him for further details. They asked how he met Emma, and he reiterated Emma's story: they met at a Halloween party.

He thinks it was the presence of Ian, Sienna, and Cole at the dinner table that truly saved him, and he resolves never to be around the two women without Ian by his side, in case they ask him something he truly can't come up with an answer for.

His thoughts shift, returning to the previous day.

_I came here looking for a family_, Sarah said.

It struck a chord in Killian, a chord buried deep, deep inside him.

_When Tiana came into my home, I knew._

Seven years ago, Killian Jones saw Emma Swan and her son Henry sitting in a booth together at Granny's, and it was then that he finally saw what had been hiding for centuries beneath his pain and his anger—he finally understood what it was that his heart had been longing for, and it wasn't revenge.
One month ago, he sat in a booth with Emma Swan and her son Henry and his son Ian, and Killian Jones felt that same trembling inside of him, and he knew.

Emma is Killian's home.

Ian is his home.

Wherever they are, whether it be Boston or Storybrooke or another planet in another galaxy, Killian will be there too.

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The next day, they go to the aquarium.

Henry texts Killian instructions, and Killian and Ian follow a series of buses and trains to Boston's harbor. Killian doesn't enjoy either mode of transportation. He receives several unfriendly stares on the bus for failing to comprehend the ticketing system and holding up the line, and even gets a small push in the back when he hesitates to pass through the gate at the turnstile.

He very nearly pulls a knife on the person who touched him and relieves them of the hand they touched him with, but Ian's there.

Ian leads him through it patiently, pulls him by the hand through a maze of crowded underground tunnels, prompts him when to pull the cord to signal their stop for the bus, and tells him when the train's reached the correct station.

When they step into the wide open square in front of the aquarium, Killian breathes an immense sigh of relief. It's crowded, but at least there's fresh air and sunlight and the scent of the sea.

They purchase tickets at the outdoor booth. Killian has to hastily snatch up a few doubloons that got caught in his wad of paper bills and plunked onto the counter when he tried to pay. The cashier looks curiously at the gold coins but doesn't comment. When they have their tickets, Ian grabs his arm and takes him to a tank tucked behind the booth. Inside are-

"Seals," Killian says, surprised.

Five large, spotted seals either lay on the rocks inside the tank, sunbathing, or swim in the water. Ian runs to the tank and presses his face to the glass. Killian stands behind him, amazed. He's seen seals before, but he's never seen them **underwater**. One seal floats vertically, bobbing up and down like a buoy. It's eyes are closed and it's clearly asleep. Another seal drifts below, in the dark blue depths of the tank, its body like a pale torpedo.

"Cool, huh?" Ian asks, grinning his nose-crinkling grin.

"Very cool," Killian says, and he means it.

"Let's go inside. You've gotta see the stingrays!"

Ian grabs his hand again, and begins marching him towards the hulking, angular building of the aquarium itself. As they walk, Killian glances to his right, attention pulled perhaps by the now-familiar sense of being watched, and sees in the distance a man watching them.

It's the same man Killian saw two days ago.

If not for Ian leading him, Killian would have ground to a halt. He keeps his legs moving, and keeps
his eyes on the man until they're inside the aquarium. They have to present their tickets for entry, and then they're shuffled through a photo booth, and when Killian looks around again, the man's disappeared.

Killian doesn't have time to dwell on it, because the next thing he knows, he's standing with his arm elbow-deep in a shallow pool of clear, warm water, watching what looks like a pancake with a bit of wire for a tail waft towards him. It's roughly 3 feet in diameter, spotted like a leopard, and distinctly unfriendly looking.

"Stay still," Ian warns from beside him.

Killian does, and the stingray passes directly below his hand, just grazing his fingertips. Ian grins at him, waiting for his reaction. Killian watches the creature continue on, completely unperturbed, then turns to Ian and grins back.

"That was amazing," he says.

If there had been a stingray touch tank when he was a child, he would have begged Liam to take him to it every day.

Ian's grin grows wider, then he gasps.

"Ooh ooh ooh, here comes the baby shark!" he says.

He sticks his arm in the water, and suddenly every stingray in the tank, most of them diamond-shaped and much smaller than the one Killian touched, swarms him. They dart from every corner and the shadows beneath every rock and dart towards him, climbing on top of each other for a chance to be touched.

Killian stares. The attendant, sitting on a rock shelf in the middle of the tank, stares. The people around them, all with their hands and arms in the water, waiting to pet a stingray or a baby shark, stare.

"Is this, erm, usual?" Killian asks Ian quietly.

Ian shrugs and gives him an I don't know face.

Similar things happen elsewhere. Fish in tanks seem to cluster wherever he stands, the anaconda lifts its head and stares, the Giant Pacific Octopus unfurls itself from the corner it was napping in and climbs slowly down the glass to Ian's eye level.

Magic, Killian thinks with amusement. It's his magic. Whatever power is inside the boy calls to the sea creatures.

It even has an effect at the Giant Ocean Tank, where Killian and Ian find themselves an empty niche and watch hundreds of colorful fish, two huge sea turtles, and a tiny hammerhead shark pass impossible close to the glass. Ian's silent, eyes wide, tracking the progress of every fish that passes. He smiles whenever the sea turtles appear.

The infinite circling of the creatures inside the cylindrical tank is mesmerizing, and Killian loses all sense of time. He never dreamed it was possible to view the ocean this way—unless you were a mermaid, perhaps. It's only after a loud, electrical voice rings through the aquarium and announces that closing time is imminent that Killian realizes they've been staring at the tank for over an hour.
"We should go, lad," Killian says.

Ian nods, and slowly slides from his perch and steps away from the shimmery, greenish-blue glow of the tank.

"Can we see the seals before we go?" he asks, slipping his hand into Killian's.

"You want to see the seals outside again?"

"No, there are other seals."

"Alright, then. We have to be quick though."

They walk down the ramp that circles the Giant Ocean Tank to the first floor. The aquarium is nearly deserted, just a few stragglers like himself and Ian lingering near the tanks or leaning over the railings to look at the penguins in the center exhibit.

Ian's leading Killian towards two tinted glass doors hidden in a dark alcove when suddenly he stops.

Killian takes two steps forward, then turns back. "Ian, what's wrong?"

"I have to pee," Ian says, biting his lip. "Now."

Killian blinks, mind racing, retracing his and Ian's path through the entire aquarium, searching his memory for a bathroom. There's one on the first floor in the opposite corner from where they are now.

They practically run to it.

It's empty, but Killian's dismayed to see the urinals are at adult height, but Ian just zips into a stall and closes the door.

"Will you alright in here?" he calls.

"Yea," Ian says.

"I'll be right outside the door," he says. "Come out when you're finished."

"Okay."

Killian exits the bathroom, and freezes. Twenty feet to his left is the man that's been following them. He's walking away with his back to Killian, hands in his pockets, looking around idly—he clearly has no idea Killian's right there.

Before Killian can think, he acts.

Killian strides quickly and silently up behind the man, checks around once to make sure that no one's nearby and no one's looking, then takes hold of the man by his shoulders and shoves him roughly against the wall between two tanks. He clamps his hand over the man's mouth and sets his forearm against his throat.

Beneath the man's map of shaggy brown hair are thick black eyebrows and a pair of frightened brown eyes.

"Who are you?" Killian growls.
He loosen his hand just enough for the man's response to be heard through his fingers.

"Walsh," he says.

"Walsh," Killian repeats, testing the name. He's never heard it before. "Did Neal send you?"

He can tell by the confusion and mounting terror in his eyes that he has no clue who Neal is.

Killian lets out a breath, allowing the knot in his chest to loosen, and then presses forward, applying his arm hard to the man's windpipe.

"Listen hear, Walsh. I don't know who you are or why you've been spying on me and my son, but if I see you again, I'll put a knife through your heart, understand?"

The guy goes pale, but he nods frantically.

Killian pushes his arm forward until Walsh's eyes narrow from the pain, then releases him and steps back. Walsh's knees buckle and he nearly falls, but he catches himself and stumbles away. Killian watches him until he's through the doors that lead outside, then returns to the bathroom to wait for Ian.

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Threatening the man turns out to have been a grave mistake.

Killian and Ian watch the seals cavorting in their swimming pool for a half hour, until an aquarium employee appears and ushers them towards the exit. As soon as Killian steps out of the front door, two police officers materialize from either side and take him by the arms.

On instinct Killian throws his weight backwards, resisting, and tries to wrench his arms free.

"HEY!" Ian shouted, and before Killian can tell him not to, he jumps forward and punches the officer on Killian's left between the legs. The officer wheezes and hunches over, but doesn't let go of Killian—not even when Ian kicks him hard in the shin.

"Ian, stop-"

A third officer appears and grabs hold of Ian, drags him backwards. Ian struggles, legs flailing.

"Don't hurt him!" Killian yells, and strains against the officers' hands.

There's two police cars parked across the square, lights flashing. Everyone in the vicinity has stopped to watch.

Walsh steps up, a smirk playing along his thin lips. "That's him," he says. "That's the man who assaulted me."

Rage floods through Killian. "Come a little closer and I'd be happy to do it again," he snarls.

Walsh's brows raise. "See? He even admits it."

The last thing Killian sees before he's dragged towards the waiting police cars is Walsh's triumphant grin.
With Ian and Killian gone, Emma's schedule is suddenly bursting with people eager to spend time with her, as if everyone in Storybrooke collectively decided to keep her busy and keep her mind off the two gaping holes in her life.

Ok, everyone in Storybrooke might be a bit of an overstatement. Really, the only people Emma's been spending time with the last four days are Henry, her parents, Ruby and Belle, Robin and Will Scarlet, and the Apprentice—but she's been with them constantly.

The only time she seems to be alone is when she's on the toilet, and she's been hiding in there so often, rereading Killian's texts and looking at the photos he's sent, that her mom actually asked her if she had a stomach bug.

Her dad seems to understand though. She loves both her parents, but they get her in different ways, and right now, it's David who gets her.

Instead of organizing brunches and ladies' nights—which Emma's not actually complaining about, by the way—David drags her out of bed at dawn every morning for a sparring session with him and Henry. It's beyond satisfying. She's never really had any training with a sword, but she apparently has a bit of a natural talent for it.

David practically glows with pride as they trade blows with the wooden practice swords in the warehouse by the docks. Emma knows he's going easy on her, sticking to defense, keeping pace rather than pressing her. It's fine. Emma's not exactly there to improve her skills, nor does she have any delusions about the actual extent of her skills—but on Sunday, when she finally sees an opportunity to surge past David's guard and knock him on his ass, she takes it.

The look of surprise on his face is worth the scrap of guilt Emma feels. David recovers from his shock quickly, and grins up at her from the packed dirt floor of the warehouse, ignoring the blunted tip of the wooden sword hovering just below his chin.

"I wasn't expecting that," he says.

"That was sort of the point," Emma responds. She lowers her blade and offers her hand. David accepts her help, though it's more of a gesture than actual help, as David's easily twice her weight.

While David brushes dirt and gravel off his jeans, Emma turns to Henry. He's sitting on a dock piling, bent double over his phone, practice sword lying at his feet.

"Wanna go, kid?" she asks. She tips her sword up to rest its edge jauntily against her shoulder, and
plants one fist on her hip. It feels like a Killian pose.

Henry pulls his head up, and throws her an incredulous look and a lopsided smile before returning his attention to his phone.

"No way," he says flatly.

"Why not? Tired?"

"No."

David and Henry sparred first that morning. Their session was far from the polite clash of swords that Emma and David engaged in; David was much harder on Henry, delivering jarring blows that rang like thunder whenever they met wood, and likely left bruises whenever they met flesh.

Emma suspects Killian doesn't go much easier on Henry—which is probably why Henry's able to keep up with David for as long as he does.

"Are you afraid I'm gonna beat you?" Emma taunts, reaching out and nudging Henry's foot with the toe of her gym shoe.

"No." Henry glances up from what, at a distance, looks like an epic love poem he's composing via text. "I'm afraid I'm gonna beat you and you're going to ground me."

"C'mon," she wheedles. "How about if I lose, I'll get us donuts for breakfast every day for a week."

Henry's thumbs stutter to a halt. Snow's even more strict about eating healthy than Emma is, and she's been packing Henry wholesome lunches and post-workout snacks for weeks.

"A whole week?" Henry asks, one eyebrow raised.

"A whole week."

Henry jumps to his feet, depositing his phone atop the dock piling and snatching up his sword.

Emma snorts. "Don't you even wanna know what happens if I win?"

"Doesn't matter," Henry says. "Whatever it is, a week of donuts is worth the risk."

Emma thinks he'd change his mind if she told him a week of washing Ian's dirty socks and underwear was on the table, but that just reminds her that Ian's in Boston, so she clamps her lips shut and focuses on settling her feet and balancing her weight between them the way David showed her.

Henry's just raised his sword to meet hers when David interrupts.

"Actually," he says, brandishing his phone, "we should get going. It's almost 8."

Reluctantly, Emma nods. They've fallen into a routine: spar at the warehouse from dawn until 8, then scarf down the breakfasts Snow packed for them while they walk to their respective workplaces.

Emma would prefer to stay and go another few rounds with the practice swords (or even hand-to-hand), but she's trying to be responsible in order to set a good example for Henry. The kid's going to college in the fall, and Emma doesn't want him to start thinking it's okay to be late for class or even track practice.

Also, as Sheriff, she guesses it's sort of her duty to show up to work on time.
She and Henry stow the practice swords, then they gather their things and head out of the warehouse and into the early morning sunshine. They walk in silence for a time, each catching their breath, each lost in their own thoughts.

Inevitably, Emma's thoughts return to Ian.

It's the fourth day he's been gone, the fourth day not having fallen asleep with his hair tickling her nose and waking up with his heels lodged in the small of her back.

Emma had forgotten what life was like before him. She forgot that it was quieter, calmer, that she had more time to herself—in Boston, there were long days when she prayed for ten minutes of peace without Ian doing something that required an entire roll of paper towels to mop up, or a trip to the emergency room, or paying a stranger's dry cleaning bill, like that one time he got nauseous on the commuter rail and threw up all down the back of some guy's suit.

But Emma actually misses all that. She feels empty without Ian around.

Her stomach twists as they leave the docks behind and step onto Main Street.

She has no idea how long it will be before it's safe for Ian and Killian to return to Storybrooke. Initially, she was thinking Ian would be gone for two weeks max, but it could end up being much longer than that—it all depends on Ariel.

Ariel's their best chance right now. David and Snow are confident that she'll agree to travel back to the Enchanted Forest and fetch the object the Apprentice says can rid Neal of the Darkness.

Of course, they have to wait for Ariel to wake up first. She's still lying comatose in a bathtub full of saltwater at the hospital. Whale says it's only a matter of time before she recovers, that she's severely dehydrated and that the strain from the amount of magic she used to transport the Jolly Roger across realms almost killed her, but that she'll live.

Smee hasn't left her side, and although Emma doesn't totally distrust the guy, she still has one of the Merry Men watching him at all times.

They pass by Granny's, which is loud and bustling, filled to the rafters with Sunday breakfasters. The patio, site of a murderous attack on Emma's children less than a week ago, is once more blood and body-part free and open to the public. The stretch of paving stones that Will Scarlet almost died on now has some little girl's chalk drawing of a rainbow on it.

The library is closed, so Emma and David part ways with Henry at Ava's ice cream shop.

"We still on for dinner tonight, kid?" Emma asks.

Henry hesitates, hand on the door handle. "Do we have to?"

"Well, Ava's officially your girlfriend, so now I officially have a reason to get to know her better."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning yes, you and your girlfriend have to have dinner with me, your mother. Tonight. At Granny's."

"Then I guess we'll be there," Henry sighs.

Emma smiles. "See you around 6."
She's been trying not to cling too hard to Henry in Ian's absence, but it's been difficult—at least Ava's being a good sport about it, and going along with all the "family dinners" and "family movie nights" Emma's made Henry drag her to.

Henry enters the shop, and Emma waves at Ava through the shop window. Ava waves a hand clutching an ice cream cone eagerly back at her (while the little boy she's serving fearfully watches his scoop of cookies-and-cream wobble precariously in the scooper Ava's clutching in her other hand), then Emma and David turn and walk the remaining two blocks to the station.

The sight of her desk, piled high with paperwork, fills Emma with a sort of dread. Her only consolation is that the cells are empty, the fridge in the break room is full, and the station's air conditioned.

Emma washes up in the bathroom while David brews a fresh pot of coffee. The cold water is refreshing, and Emma lets it sit on her face and the back of her neck for a few minutes before snatching a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and drying off. When she returns to her desk she finds a steaming mug of cream-filled coffee and a powdered donut (from their secret stash in the fridge) sitting on a napkin.

She smiles briefly at the evidence of David's tender, nurturing side, then hunkers down and gets to work, alternating between sips of coffee and bites of donut while she flips through what she's certain is an actual endless stack of forms.

David works in the back office, the one reserved for the Sheriff. They've never officially discussed who's more Sheriff than the other, or if they're just both equally the Sheriff, but so far they've managed a symbiotic relationship where they're each comfortable deferring to the other when necessary.

David handles the bureaucratic side of things better than Emma does, and Emma enjoys the freedom that affords her to focus more on the day-to-day, nitty-gritty aspects of the job.

In any case, Emma prefers working in the bullpen.

Hours pass. They speak very little, only calling back and forth if they have questions. David's goal for the day is to secure a location to the northwest of town for another Sheriff's station, one that would be in charge of the sprawling residential neighborhoods and leave the current station to handle the town center and everything to the south, including the south woods.

Ideally, Emma wants to establish the Merry Men as a "park rangers" squad, with an emphasis on patrolling for danger rather than conservation. That's going to take some maneuvering, however, and first Emma needs to find capable deputies to fill the positions the Merry Men currently occupy—which is why she's been shuffling through applications for two days straight.

Emma glances at the clock every time she finishes reading an application. At nine she thinks, Killian and Ian are probably awake by now; at ten she notes that the New England Aquarium is open, and that Killian and Ian are likely already there or on their way; at eleven she decides that they're definitely at the aquarium, and wonders if Killian's touched a stingray yet.

David makes excuses to pass by her desk periodically to check that she has enough caffeine and sugar. Emma lets him do it, and even makes occasional requests for coffee refills or glasses of water that she's perfectly capable of getting on her own, but knows make David feel useful.

At noon they break for lunch. David leaves for the hospital to take Robin a meal and keep him company in Will Scarlet's room, and Emma gratefully escapes to Granny's. She feels a heavy weight
lift from her shoulders as she exits the station. The work she does is necessary, but it's tedious, and the remainder of her day holds far more appealing distractions.

Her steps along the sidewalk are light and quick, and she arrives at the diner in minutes.

Snow, Ruby, and Belle greet her cheerily from their shady table on the patio.

"Over here!" Ruby calls, as if Emma could have missed her bright red crop top.

Luckily, Emma muses as she slides into the seat between her mother and Belle, Ian's not there, because she's pretty sure Ruby's exposed midriff and her daisy dukes might reignite his crush and inspire some thoughts he's definitely too young to be having.

Though, he is Captain Hook's son, so who knows.

"How's Ian?" Ruby asks, pitching her voice low and leaning in across the table.

Mostly, everyone's been avoiding mentioning Ian and Killian out loud, just in case Neal's listening in, but Emma's happy for the excuse to talk about them, even if it's just to whisper, "They're going to the aquarium today."

Ruby smiles. "That's cute," she says, and leans back. Her arm slips along the back of the chair next to her, where Rowan is sitting with her legs drawn up and a copy of *Madeline* propped in her lap.

"She likes to read, huh?" Emma observes. Rowan's been joining them for lunch every day, and every day she has a different book.

"We can't get her to stop," Ruby says, grinning at Belle over Rowan's head. She runs one finger along Rowan's hairline, pulling a stray, tawny-colored curl off her face and tucking it behind her ear. "Why don't you say hi to your aunt Emma?"

Rowan startles, gray eyes darting from her book to Emma. "Hi," she says.


"I really like the pictures," Rowan says, and turns the book around so Emma can see the illustration.

"Mm, that's a good one," Emma says, nodding at the picture. "Have you read the *Curious George* books?"

Rowan shakes her head.

"Ian has a whole bunch of them in Boston. Do you want me to ask him if you can have them?"

"Yes, please," Rowan says, and offers Emma a shy smile before reburying her nose in *Madeline*.

A waitress appears, delivers waters and Pepsis and a chocolate milk and then takes their orders. Emma thinks about all the donuts she ate that morning and orders a plain salad, sans dressing. Snow orders the same, in solidarity, apparently. Ruby rolls her eyes at their orders and tacks on a side of onion rings that she'll probably force feed Emma and Snow if they don't agree to eat them of their own volition.

While they wait for their lunches, Snow regales them with tales of the candidates she interviewed that morning for the principal position at the second elementary school that's opening in the fall, and then proceeds to explain how she's going to divide up the districts evenly between the old elementary school, and the new one.
Emma nudges Ruby, whose eyes are a bit glazed over, and says, "Kindergarten, right? For Rowan?"

Ruby nods, and Belle adds, "She can already read and write, but age-wise that's where she fits. She'll be six in November."

"She won't be alone," Snow says. "There are a few other children from Misthaven House entering Kindergarten—plus, Ian will only be in 1st grade, and the Kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms are across the hallway from each other, so Ian and Rowan will probably see each other around school a lot. Right, Emma?"

"Yep," Emma says.

It's the gleam of triumph in Snow's eyes that makes Emma freeze. She realizes exactly what her agreement just implied, but she realizes it a heartbeat too late; before she can backtrack their orders arrive, and Emma's forced to divert all her attention to a brief but elaborate game of Tetris in which the four of them plus the waitress try to fit all their plates, cups, and silverware on the one small table.

When Emma can breathe again without fear of knocking something over, she looks at her plate, notices the strips of grilled chicken and shredded cheese laid artfully over the otherwise bare salad, then looks up.

Through the window of the diner, Granny stares back. She makes a V with her index and middle finger, points her fingers at her eyes, and then jabs the fingers in Emma's direction. *I'm watching you.*

Ruby snorts.

"I don't get it..." Emma mutters out of the corner of her mouth. Does Granny think she needs to eat more? Emma ate the yogurt and the banana Snow packed her for breakfast, plus three donuts at the station.

"You insulted her cooking by ordering a plain salad. Just smile and eat it," Ruby says.

Emma makes a show of eating a heaping forkful of chicken and lettuce and looking very happy about it. Satisfied, Granny turns to Rowan, expression softening immediately. Rowan smiles and waves. Granny waves back, then blows her granddaughter a kiss.

"It's been years since I've seen Granny in such high spirits," Snow says.

"She's been up my ass for weeks with all sorts of parenting advice," Ruby grumbles, stabbing at her meatballs with more force than strictly necessary.

"She just wants to help."

Ruby glares doubtfully. Snow lifts her chin in challenge.

"Um, how about, uh, grandpa?" Emma asks Belle, loudly. She can't remember Belle's dad's name.

"He's currently trying to breed a new species of lily to name after her," Belle says, eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Isn't rowan already a type of tree?"

"Try telling Moe that," Ruby says.

Conversation ceases for a while as they eat. Emma picks at her salad, appetite dwindling as her thoughts stray once more to Ian. Before the end of the summer, Emma's going to have to make a
decision: Storybrooke, or Boston.

There are benefits and drawbacks to both. Truthfully, she knows Ian will adjust either way, as long as Killian's there, and she knows if she chooses to return to Boston, Killian will go with.

Only, Emma has trouble picturing him actually living there. When she thinks of Killian she thinks of the docks and Heron Island and the Jolly Roger, she thinks of him and Ian eating ice cream at Ava's shop, and of having breakfast with him at Granny's while Granny fusses over him like a son.

Killian couldn't wear his hook in Boston, and he'd have to begin a new life with no legitimate proof of his identity and no credentials. He'd end up with a shit apartment and a shit job and a shit car, at least at first.

Emma would go back to struggling and essentially living hand-to-mouth. What she earns in Storybrooke as Sheriff is only marginally better than what she pulls as a bail-bondswoman, but the cost of living in Storybrooke is significantly less than in Boston. Her savings account would actually start to see some real action for the first time in nearly seven years; she could rent a place twice the size of their apartment in Charlestown; Ian could play hockey in the winter; she might be able to afford a better dorm room for Henry's sophomore year, or even rent him an apartment.

So wouldn't it be better to stay in Storybrooke?

It's not the first time she's thought it, nor the first time she's pictured what life would be like if she stayed, but something inside her still stubbornly resists the idea.

"Robin wants to teach her how to use a bow," Ruby says.

It takes Emma a moment to realize Ruby was talking to her.

"Hm?" she says, looking up from the piece of lettuce she's been meticulously shredding for at least three straight minutes.

"I said, Robin wants to teach Rowan how to shoot a bow."

"Oh?" Emma asks, eyebrows raised. She glances from Ruby to Belle, who shrugs.

Ruby returns Belle's shrug. "Roland was way younger than Rowan when he started learning," she says.

Belle frowns. "I understand that, but-"

"Storybrooke can be just as dangerous as the Enchanted Forest. Rowan should know how to defend herself. Just in case."

Rowan's listening, eyes visible over the top of her book, flicking back and forth between her two mothers.

"She's only five," Belle protests. Her voice has a hint of a plea in it.

"Ian is only five, and look what just happened to him," Ruby says, then, hastily, "Sorry, Emma. I only meant that-"

"It's fine. I get it," Emma says. She agrees with Ruby. The world outside of Storybrooke has its fair share of real dangers, and although Emma never taught Henry or Ian how to use a sword, she's always coached them in basic street smarts and trained them how to navigate their environment as
safely as possible.

She was hesitant to allow Killian to teach Ian and Henry hand-to-hand techniques, but recent events have proven just how necessary those skills are.

Still, it's none of Emma's business to chime in on what's clearly an ongoing argument between Belle and Ruby, so she changes the subject.

"How's Gideon?" she asks.

Belle seizes the lifeline Emma just threw her, and says, "He's good. We should have him home by Christmas."

Belle smiles at Ruby, and, after a moment, Ruby smiles back. "Nemo thinks we should focus first on helping Rowan adjust to school before taking on a baby," she says.

"In the meantime, we'll have some home visits and maybe a sleepover."

Ruby slips her arm over the back of Rowan's chair again, only this time her fingers find Belle's.

"Both their birthdays are in November," Ruby says. "So expect a month-long extravaganza."

Emma smiles. There's always going to be a little lost girl inside of her, longing for misses opportunities, longing for the family she never had growing up, but she's not about to let old wounds and envy sour her happiness for Ruby and Belle and Rowan.

They finish their lunches and say their goodbyes, and Emma heads out to complete the next part of what's become her schedule: three hours practicing magic with the Apprentice.

She meets him at his house, which is warded both against any sort of eavesdropping.

He drills her endlessly on what Henry would probably call telekinesis. For an entire hour she makes objects hover, spin, fly across the room, disappear and reappear in different locations, and halt in midair while already in motion (i.e. when the Apprentice throws them at her).

For another hours he runs her through exercises in which she has to manipulate water, air, or fire. Then he has her conjure light, which is easy, and call darkness, which is much harder—she can manipulate existing shadows fairly well, but summoning darkness or multiplying it is a struggle.

When the Apprentice is satisfied that she's totally exhausted, he has her practice hiding in plain sight—the trick he used to make Whale's sailboat "invisible". Emma requested that he teach her, because if Ariel can't—or won't—retrieve the object they need from the Enchanted Forest, Plan B is that Emma sneaks into Gold's manor and steals the Dark One's dagger right out from under Neal's nose.

Becoming invisible is a little bit bending the light and the air around her, turning it inside out almost, and a little bit willing the people around her not to notice her.

Slowly, she's getting better at it. The more she uses her magic, the stronger she feels her magic become. It's like building up a muscle. In her mind's eyes, the spring of her magic grows larger, deepens. It makes her wonder about Ian's magic, and what will happen to the enormous well of power inside him once he starts using it.

After her lesson with the Apprentice, Emma goes to the hospital.

She checks in on Ariel. The mermaid's in the same condition as every other time Emma's visited.
She's in a private room, floating in a bathtub that stands where a bed normally would. She's hooked up to several monitors, and an IV bag of fluids. Though she's far from a picture of perfect health, her skin has lost most of its dry, leathery look.

Smee's napping upright in the chair next to Ariel's tub, his red beanie lying crumpled in his lap. Emma decides not to disturb him, so she nods to the Merry Man standing watch outside the door, and crosses the ward to Will Scarlet's room.

Will's awake, which is rare. He's listening to the story Roland's telling about the deer he saw in the woods that morning.

Will looks over when Emma enters the room, and smiles wanly at her.

"How are you feeling?" Emma asks, stepping up to his bedside beside Robin and Roland.

"A bit like I've been stabbed eight times and then sewn back together," he says hoarsely.

Emma happened to walk in on the nurses once when they were changing Will's bandages—the scene beneath his hospital gown is not pretty. He has several slashes and puncture wounds on his chest and arms, and one long, deep gash across his belly, just above his navel. Emma doesn't know how the hell he's still alive.

"So, have you decided?" Will asks.

"Decided what?"

"Where you're going to put the statue you've commissioned in my honor?"

Emma stays with Will for over an hour. Robin and Roland leave for dinner, and then return with a piece of chocolate cake they smuggled out of the cafeteria. Emma pulls the curtains closed around Will's bed, and keeps an eye out for the nurses while Will slowly and painstakingly eats his contraband dessert.

When Emma departs, she drops a kiss on Will's forehead, making him blush. She hugs Roland tight, whispers in his ear that Ian says hi and that he misses him; when she tries to shake Robin's hand, he bows, which is still weird even though he and the Merry Men do it often.

Outside, it's still baking hot and sunny. Emma takes the long route back to town, and then parks at the loft so she can walk to Granny's. In an effort not to start thinking about Ian or Killian again, she thinks about Will.

The guy's only 23, just a few years older than Henry. He's known her and Killian and the boys for less than a month, but he still put himself in between her kids and a ruthless gang of pirates—and from what Granny said, Emma understands that he didn't slow down or stop fighting until he collapsed.

If Will Scarlet wants a fucking statue erected in his honor, Emma's going to make sure that happens, even if she has to build it with her own two hands.

She arrives at Granny's early, and secures their usual booth at the back, closest to the jukebox.

Two seconds later, Granny herself delivers three waters and three menus. "You're not going to order another bowl of grass for dinner, are you?" she asks, as she sets the glasses down with three jarring clinks.
"Uh, no?"

"Hmph," Granny sniffs. She slaps the menus onto the table, millimeters from Emma's fingertips, turns on her heel, and stalks back to the counter.

Emma makes a mental note to never, ever order a salad at Granny's again.

She checks her phone. It's six. The aquarium is closing. If Ian made Killian stay the entire time—which Emma's certain he did—then they're leaving now.

Her mind drifts back to their phone call the previous night, to Ian's sleepy voice, the slightly muffled quality of it that meant he had his face pressed against something. She remembers Killian's voice, low, soft.

He's going to call her again, and her stomach gives a little shiver of anticipation at the thought.

Maybe she'll go to the Jolly Roger after dinner, as she did two nights ago. She can sit on the deck again and watch the sun set over the rooftops of Storybrooke; she can open her magic up to the ship and sense Killian's presence, the bits of his soul that seeped into the ship itself, the sea-salt scent of him and that feeling like a cool breeze caressing her skin.

She misses him, almost as much as she misses Ian. It's an ache deep inside her, an ache that's tempered only by the knowledge that, when he returns, there's something Emma needs to tell him.

"I love you."

She hears those words whenever she closes her eyes, vibrant, as if uttered afresh in her ear.

The anticipation in her gut dissolves into anxiety.

The words Killian whispered to hear beneath the wharf opened a door, and the thing that Emma has to tell him...it's her first step through that door.

Henry and Ava arrive, jarring Emma from her thoughts. Henry's a little grumpy—he has been, ever since Ian and Killian left—but Ava's glowing with excitement. While they eat, Ava fills Emma in on her plan to introduce several new treats into her shop: custom cakes and cupcakes.

"She's been watching Cake Boss and Cupcake Wars," Henry says, smiling at his green beans.

"And The Great British Bake Off," Ava amends, grinning. "I want to try making ice cream sandwiches with different kinds of cookies, too. What do you think?"

Emma smiles. "I think you're going to make Ian very happy."

They're contemplating the dessert menu when Emma's phone starts vibrating. She pulls it from her pocket, and frowns at the screen. She doesn't recognize the number, but the area code is a Boston one.

"Who is it?" Henry asks.

"I don't know," Emma says, shaking her head slowly.

She hesitates, debating, and then answers.

"Hello?"
Killian's voice greets her. "Swan," he says, relieved.

"Killian?"

"Aye, love."

It's difficult to hear him, and her eyes pop as she realizes there are noises in the background that she recognizes—the metallic clang of a cell door closing, clamoring voices, the beep of a police walkie-talkie, the crackle of radio static.

She slides out of the booth, and strides quickly towards the hallway behind the jukebox, seeking both quiet and privacy.

"Killian, where are you?"

Silence.

Emma presses the phone hard against her ear.

"Killian!"

Emma hears him exhale. "I'm in jail, love," he says.

"Jail? What the hell happened?"

"It's...it's a bit of a story, Swan. I'm sorry, but...I think you need to come get Ian. They're saying they won't release me, and they're going to call something called social services to take Ian unless a parent or legal guardian shows up."

No.

A hot wave of fear washes over Emma from head to toe, and her hands begin to tremble.

"What happened?" she repeats, struggling to control the frantic beating of her heart.

Killian sighs. "Do you know a man named Walsh?"

Of their own accord, her feet start moving, carrying her out the side door and into the parking lot. Vaguely, behind her, she can hear scuffled footsteps on the asphalt, and Henry calling her name, but it's as if there's a barrier between her and reality.

"Emma?" Killian asks.

"I'm on my way." Emma says, and hangs up.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Just FYI, when I say "Shirley" I am 100% picturing Shirley Bennett from Community, so feel free to do the same (or not :D)

Emma takes the Bug, sort of on accident, but even though she knows the old yellow car has no magical properties, somehow it feels right.

She left Henry behind with instructions to tell David and Snow where she's going, and to keep them from following. Briefly, Emma considered taking Henry with. But she can't. If she tries to leave with Henry, Neal might think they're leaving for good and attempt to stop them—not that she really considers Neal an obstacle at the moment, because there's literally no obstacle that can keep her from getting to Ian.

While she drives, she makes several phone calls, thanking sweet baby Jesus for the abandoned forest roads and for Henry not being there to witness her doing exactly what she chides him not to do all the time.

Her first call is a redial, because she's an idiot and she forgot to ask Killian which station he's being held at. She almost laughs with relief when the officer who answers the phone gives her the address; it's the station downtown. *Her* station, the one that she collaborates with the most. She has a lot of contacts there, the most important of which right now is Shirley, a crime analyst and the recipient of Emma's second call.

Shirley is the mother of two boys only a little bit older than Ian, and she agrees to keep an eye on Ian and try to run some interference with social services until Emma can get there.

Emma's third call is to her neighbor, Sarah Fisher. She explains the situation, and asks Sarah if she can get to the station and essentially be the last line of defense between Ian and a night in a group home.

Her final call is to one of the detectives at the station, a guy named Barnes, and he gives her the scoop on Killian's charges.

*Assault.*

That definitely sounds like Killian, but Emma knows he wouldn't assault someone unprovoked—especially not with Ian there. So what exactly did Walsh do to get under Killian's skin? And how the *fuck* did they run into each other in the first place?

Emma asks Barnes to get her some more information—on the down low—and hangs up. She tosses her cell phone onto the empty passenger seat beside her, and returns her hand to the steering wheel. Her heart is still beating out of control, hammering her ribs like it wants to escape.

*Ian will be fine,* she tells herself. *You'll get there in time. Nothing's going to happen.*

She hopes she's right. If not, she'll have to raise holy hell, and she doesn't like to make a scene if she doesn't have to.
The wall rears up before her suddenly as she turns a corner and crests a low hill. It reaches all the way up to the treetops, blocking out the setting sun and casting an enormous shadow down the length of the road. For Emma, knowing who created the wall and why, it's no longer an intimidating structure—just an annoying one.

She parks the Bug about 30 feet short of the wall, and gets out. She approaches slowly, not afraid, just wary. The rock slide she accidentally caused is still there, as is the remains of the tunnel she created. Around her, the woods are quiet—not unnaturally silent, just hushed, awaiting the arrival of nighttime and all its creatures.

Emma picks her way around the tumble of boulders at the base of the wall. The stones are warm, still radiating the sun's heat. Something else oozes out of them and taints the air, something that Emma recognizes as Neal's magic, the same slick, oily magic Emma felt in the water the night they rescued Killian.

When she can, she reaches out and touches the wall, both with her fingers and with her magic. Before, she used her power like a drill and tried to bulldoze her way through, but this time she lets her magic seep inside, soaking past all the slimy particles of Neal's magic the way water soaks through sand. There's resistance, but only a little. Emma understands her magic now in a way she didn't one month ago, and she knows if she pushes hard enough she can burn Neal's magic away to nothing, disintegrate the wall from the inside out. It might exhaust her to her limits, but that's okay, she won't need her magic in Boston.

She takes a deep breath-

"Emma."

-and freezes.

Neal.

Emma can feel him—rather, the thing inside of him—at her back, a spot of wrongness, polluting the night air.

She turns to face him. She's not surprised; she expected him.

He's standing there, hands in his pockets, and when her eyes meet his he has the common sense to look away in shame.

It's the first time she's seen him since he almost killed Killian. It's the first time she's seen him since he let Ian get kidnapped by Blackbeard.

And she feels nothing.

There used to be a small thread between them, the thread that connected them because of their history, because of Henry. That thread vibrated with subtle emotion, an old attachment, a feeling of obligation, a desire, if a reluctant one, to help him.

That thread is gone. Obliterated.

Emma will still do whatever it's going to take to get the Darkness out of him without killing him—but only for Henry. Afterwards, they're going to figure out visitation, and Emma's going to set some pretty strict rules that involve her never having to lay eyes on him ever again.
"Emma, I'm sorry," he says, to his shoes.

"I don't care."

His head snaps up.

"You woke the Darkness back up, Neal," she says, frostily. "You let it in, and now you're letting it hurt the people I love."

"Emma, I didn't—I can't-"

"Did you really think I wouldn't figure out that you took Killian? Did you think I'd run back into your arms the moment he turned up dead?" she asks, anger building rapidly in her chest.

She sees his answer on his face, sees confirmation that that's exactly what he thought. Her anger turns to rage and it pulses through her, floods her veins with fire.

"Did you think about the little kid whose father you were taking away?" she demands. "Did you feel anything when you let a five-year-old get kidnapped by pirates?"

A flicker of what might be regret crosses Neal's face, but a flicker isn't enough. Emma shakes her head. Whatever. She doesn't need this, whatever it is.

"I can't forgive you for what you've done, Neal," she says, and starts to turn away. The fury inside her dims, leaving a bone-deep tiredness in its wake. It doesn't matter. Neal doesn't matter. Emma just wants to get to Boston and get Ian and Killian and-

"What happened to us, Em?"

His voice is so quiet Emma can't be sure she actually heard it. She pauses, one hand half-raised towards the wall.

"What?"

"What happened to us?" he repeats, shrugging. "We used to be good together. You used to love me."

Emma stares, dumbfounded. "Are you serious?"

He can't be serious, and he can't seriously be that fucking stupid.

Neal shrugs again. "I thought we had a chance. In Neverland—in the Echo Caves—you said you still loved me-

"I stopped loving you the moment you ran off and left me to go to jail," she says. Her words, razor sharp, slice the air, and Emma sees how deep they cut, she sees the way Neal flinches. For a moment, his eyes glint greenish-gold, and she tenses, waiting for the Darkness to take him over, waiting for some sort of retaliation...

But nothing happens. Neal closes his eyes, stills, and shrinks in on himself. Emma could pity him then, if she was still capable of it.

"I have to go," she says, turning away once more. "I have to get Ian and Killian."

"Boston?"
She nods without looking at him. She doesn't even care how he knows.

"Do you love him? Hook?"

Emma doesn't answer, because it's none of his business. She picks a rock and stares at it, hard.

Somewhere nearby, a cricket chirps. Another answers, sounding close enough this time for Emma to reach out and touch.

"Hey," Neal says, "how are you going to get out-

It's as if Emma was just waiting for an opening. She slams her palm against the wall, and pours her magic into it.

In her mind, it's like antibodies attacking a virus. Her magic shreds Neal's magic. The wall trembles. Neal hisses in a breath and gasps, the sound too high-pitched and tinny to be his own voice. Emma feels the stone change beneath her fingertips, soften, and then it implodes, bursting into a cloud of pale white ash that cascades to the ground like an avalanche.

Emma closes her eyes against the dust. It buffets her from all sides, stings her nostrils, muffles all sound. When she can smell fresh air again she opens her eyes cautiously.

The wall is gone, leaving no traces of its existence save for a few downed trees, some marks in the grass, and a few flakes of ash that drift in the air but vanish before they hit the asphalt. When Emma looks around, Neal's vanished too.

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Emma's sense of her magic changes as she drives over the town line and leaves Storybrooke. She can still feel it, but it's buried deep, beneath heavy layers, and Emma knows it would take an extraordinary effort to tap into it. As it is, she's shaky from destroying the wall, though she's not sure if it's from exertion, or from the sheer rush of the power that coursed through her.

She's just merged onto I-95 when her cell phones rings. It's Barnes, telling her that Killian's currently in holding—indefinitely, as they can't confirm his identity. Barnes also tells her that Killian's claiming Walsh stalked her apartment for several days before ultimately following Killian and Ian to the aquarium.

Her anger returns, kindling to life in her belly, and she has to fight the instinct to press down harder on the gas pedal.

Emma thanks Barnes for his help, and sets her phone aside. Her mind races, each thought passing in a blur, faster than the trees that race by to either side. She thinks if she can somehow prove that Killian's telling the truth, then she might be able to convince the police to drop the charges.

Barnes owes her a favor. Maybe he can help grease the wheels.

The only problem is, Emma doesn't know how the hell to prove that Killian's telling the truth.

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Sarah Fisher is waiting in the lobby of the police station, pacing back and forth in front of an empty row of chairs, her arms folded tightly over her chest. Across the room, the officer sitting at the main desk, a young, auburn-haired guy named Parrish, watches her, chin in his hand, clicking a pen idly.
They both look over when Emma plows through the front doors. Parrish's expression changes quickly from bored to alert before he recognizes Emma and relaxes. Sarah lets out a sigh of relief and rushes to Emma to hug her.

"I missed you," Sarah says. She's always understood that Emma's not a touchy-feely, hug kind of person, so she only squeezes Emma briefly around the shoulders before stepping back.

"I missed you, too," Emma says, and she means it.

Sarah treats Emma like a daughter, and Henry and Ian like grandsons. She's been there whenever Emma needed help, first with all the old things of Sienna's she dropped periodically on Emma's doorstep—Emma never really believed the "Sienna just grew out of it" story, not for toys or the baby monitor or the boxes of diapers, but Sarah never let her refuse—and then with babysitting, picking up or dropping off the boys when Emma couldn't, grocery shopping when Emma was overwhelmed with work and forgot, and, finally, lending a sympathetic ear; Emma and Sarah shared many a beer on the front porch after a particularly stressful day.

Sarah’s eyes crinkle in a smile as she looks Emma over. While the blue of Killian's eyes remind Emma of the sea or a clear summer sky, Sarah's remind Emma of ice. She has a cold, intimidating exterior that guards a kind, nurturing soul. Long ago, someone broke her. Emma can see it inside of her, the same shadow of old pain that Emma also carries, the same deep emotional scars. Maybe that's why Emma let Sarah into her life so easily.

That, and Ian's always loved her.

"You look good, Emma," Sarah says.

"Thanks. And thanks for coming."

"Of course."

Emma feels a twinge of guilt. Sarah's no stranger to Boston police stations. Tiana was the first kid she adopted, but two years later came the twins, Michael and Edward. They had a troubled past, and in middle school, Eddie started spiraling. When Mikey died in a car accident their senior year of high school, Eddie lost it completely; vandalism and shoplifting became drugs and car theft and armed robbery, and Eddie wound up in jail.

Sarah doesn't talk about it, but Tiana's told Emma the story. Six months into his sentence, Eddie committed suicide. Tiana and her kids are all Sarah has left.

Emma glances at the clock hanging on the wall behind the main desk. It's 10. If social services hasn't already tried to move Ian to a group home, then they will soon.

She looks at Sarah. "Have you seen Ian?"

"No, so he must still be here, unless they're in the habit of smuggling children out the back door," she says, and throws Parrish a significant look, as if he's personally responsible for the predicament Emma's currently in.

Parrish raises his eyebrows. Emma smiles apologetically and takes Sarah gently by the elbow. She turns Sarah and leads her away from the desk, out of earshot, and stops with their backs to Parrish and their shoulders pressed together.

"Can I ask you something? " Emma whispers. Sarah hums a quiet affirmative. "Did you see a car parked out in front of the apartment the last couple of days? An old brown Cadillac?"
Out of the corner of her eye, Emma sees Sarah shoot her a questioning look.

"Killian says Walsh was stalking them," Emma explains. "He's saying Walsh was parked in front of the apartment two nights in a row, and then he followed them to the aquarium."

"Walsh as in your ex?"

"Yea," Emma says. Sarah never met Walsh, but Emma told her about him.

Sarah hesitates, then says, slowly, "Yes, I saw him."

Emma doesn't even need her superpower to know Sarah's lying. "Sarah-" she starts.

"Emma," Sarah returns steadily, frowning. "I saw that man Walsh outside the apartment. He was in an old brown Cadillac and he was watching Ian. If someone asks me, that's what I'll say."

Emma knows that look on her face, it's the "I found this brand-new, unopened box of size 4 Pampers that I must have bought for Sienna a year ago and never used so you're taking them for Ian and you're not arguing about it" look. Emma saw that look at least three times a month until Ian was 2 and potty-trained.

"Thank you," Emma says.

The hard line of Sarah's mouth softens, and she smiles. She raises her hand to Emma's, still resting around her elbow, and gives Emma's knuckles a pat. "Go get Ian."

Emma leaves Sarah and walks up to the main desk.

"Hey, Parrish," she says.

"Hey, Emma," Parrish says.

"They change your shift?"

Parrish shrugs. "Just for two weeks. Jensen's out because his wife just had the baby, so they shuffled us around a bit to fill in the gaps."

"What did they have?"

"A girl."

"What did they name her?"

"Jane."

Emma wrinkles her nose. "Jane Jensen?"

"I know. Bad, right?"

"Whose idea was it?"

"I think Jensen's wife. She was dead set on Jane, apparently."

Emma shakes her head. She's not exactly one to talk, though; *Killian Swan* doesn't have much of a ring to it. Nor does *Ian Swan*, really. Ian Jones definitely sounds much better.

Emma freezes. *Where the fuck did that come from?* It's like all the thoughts she's been having about
finding a house in Storybrooke—they keep floating out of some concealed place in her mind, popping up inconveniently and whenever she has her guard down.

Parrish is watching her, waiting. She clears her throat.

"So, mind letting me in?"

Parrish's brown eyes shift past Emma. "Don't leave me with her."

"She doesn't bite," Emma says, grinning. "Not usually, at least."

Parrish grimaces, but he gives her a visitor's badge to hang around her neck and buzzes her through the set of glass doors that lead to the elevator.

Her journey through the building is a familiar one. The station is pretty quiet at this time of night. She passes a few familiar faces, exchanges nods and muttered greetings. No one seems to know that she's here for anything other than her usual business, which is a relief.

Emma takes the elevator to the fourth floor. Directly across from the elevator, on the other side of a bullpen that's four times the size of the Sheriff's station in Storybrooke, is the holding cell. It isn't an actual cell here, like it is in Storybrooke, but rather a large room with two benches, glass windows, and a glass door.

She sees Killian immediately. He's in the holding cell, in the corner all the way to the left, leaning against the frame of one of the windows with his arms folded over his chest.

Her heart does a weird, stuttering little dance. She feels heavy and light at the same time, like she might melt to the floor or float away or both.

Fuck she missed him. She missed the sharp edges of his appearance, the solid, stark black lines of his clothes, the piercing eyes. He looks at her then, and his face changes, like light breaking through rain clouds after a heavy thunderstorm.

He straightens, arms unfolding, and then jerks his head in the direction he was looking when Emma walked in.

Emma follows his gaze.

Ian.

He's sitting at one of the desks, eating Chinese takeout straight from the container with a plastic fork. There are packets of soy sauce, a box of egg rolls, several dinosaurs, and some Hot Wheels on the desk, and sitting in the rolling chair beside him is Shirley. She's laughing at something Ian's saying.

Emma's feet move of their own accord, carrying her towards Ian. She gets halfway across the bullpen before Shirley looks up. Ian looks up too, and spots her. He sets his box of chicken fried rice down, slides from the chair, and runs to her.

He crashes into her and Emma wraps her arms around his shoulders, clutching him tight. He doesn't say anything, he just presses his face into her stomach and fists his hands in her shirt. God, she missed this too. She lifts one hand to his hair, fingers dragging through soft golden locks that have started to go wavy, thinking, for the millionth time, that he really needs a haircut.

Shirley stands, and so do two people sitting at desks across the aisle that Emma didn't notice before, a man and a woman, dressed in bland tans and grays.
Social workers, she thinks, anxiety creeping in.

The woman approaches first.

"Are you Emma Swan?" she asks.

"Yes," Emma answers. She keeps her voice calm and even—the last thing she needs right now is to look like a crazy, unstable mom, especially since her kid's dad stands accused of assault.

"Killian's your son?"

"Ian," Emma corrects automatically. "And yes. I have my driver's license in my wallet, and if you want his birth certificate I can ask my neighbor to get it for me."

"That won't be necessary. Detective Barnes already ID'd Ian and vouched for you."

Barnes is a few desks away. He looks like a middle-aged Denzel Washington, and Emma actually had a bit of a crush on him the first few months she worked with him. He's pretending to read a file, but Emma knows he's listening.

The woman pauses, a small crease appearing between her brows. "Detective Barnes wasn't able to ID the father, however."

Emma looks past the woman, to Killian. It's annoying, having to explain herself, but she also understands what the situation must look like from the outside, and she does not want social services thinking they need to get involved in her life.

"We...lost touch before I found out I was pregnant," Emma says, eyes locked with Killian's. "I was only able to contact him again a month ago, when I reconnected with my parents."

"Okay," the woman nods, seemingly satisfied. She looks down at Ian, still clinging to Emma, then addresses her partner. "You ready to go?"

They take their leave with a polite handshake each. Emma waits until they're safely in the elevator before she turns to Shirley.

"Thank you, Shirley, I owe you big time-"

"Don't worry about it," Shirley says, with a dismissive wave of her hand and a wink. "Buy me lunch sometime. Now, I've got to get home to my boys. " She bends to scoop up the toys Emma assumes belong to her sons, but stops. "Ian, baby, you want any of these?"

Ian lifts his head away from Emma's stomach. "Can I have the red one?" he asks, shyly.

Shirley smiles, plucks the tiny red convertible off the desk, and offers it to Ian. Ian curls his hand around the car and tucks it to his chest.

"You sure?" Emma asks.

"Do you know how many Hot Wheels I have at home?" Shirley says. "These are just the ones I found in my purse. Trust me, the boys won't even notice it's missing."

Emma nudges Ian. "Say, thank you."

"Thank you," he mumbles.
"You're very welcome," Shirley replies.

"Say thank you for dinner, too," Emma prompts, wiggling her fingers against his neck, tickling him and making him hunch his shoulders. He's usually not this shy, but sometimes tiredness makes him timid. That, and probably the stress of seeing his dad get arrested.

"Thank you for dinner," Ian says.

"Any time, cutie. I'm glad I finally got a chance to meet you. Your mom talks about you all the time."

Emma can feel Ian's grin against her arm as he hides his face again.

She's about to thank Shirley a second time when a door in the corner opens, and out walks Walsh flanked by a uniformed officer and a detective Emma knows by face but not by name. They must have been taking Walsh's statement. Walsh looks over, and sees her. Emma stills.

This is like Ex-Boyfriends From Hell day.

The detective at Walsh's shoulder sees Emma too, and, either because of the look on Emma's face, or because of Ian stuck to her front, he halts Walsh with a quick hand.

"Hey, Shirley?" Emma says, keeping her eyes on Walsh.

"Hm?" Shirley hums as she sweeps the plastic dinosaurs and the toy cars back into her purse.

"Can you take Ian downstairs with you? My neighbor is in the lobby. She can watch Ian until I get down there."

Shirley glances in the direction Emma's looking, then back to Emma.

"You okay?" she asks.

"Yea, I'm good. There's just something I have to do." She gently prys Ian's arms from around her waist. "Ian, Shirley's going to take you downstairs to Ms. Sarah while I to talk to the detectives."

Ian resists, clinging to her shirt. "Is my dad going to jail?"

Emma recognizes the glint in his eyes, the stubborn frown.

"No, kid, he's not," she says. "I'm gonna get him out." She runs her thumb along his brow, smoothing out the angry lines there.

Barnes told her Ian roughed up the officers that restrained Killian at the aquarium. Emma's not really surprised. It's only been a week since they rescued Killian from beneath the wharf, a week since Ian thought he might lose his dad forever, the dad he only just found.

She thought sending Ian to Boston would not only keep him safe, but help him settle and feel safe. Maybe Emma was wrong. Maybe she should have kept him close.

"You trust me, right?" she murmurs.

Ian nods, eyelids fluttering as Emma continues to stroke his forehead.

"Go with Shirley," she says. "Your dad and I will be right down."
Ian lets go of her then, and allows Shirley to take his hand and start leading him away.

"Are you going to give that car a name?" Shirley asks, nodding at the red convertible Ian's still holding.

"A name?" Emma hears Ian ask.

"Yea, my boys give all their Hot Wheels names."

"Oh."

They pass through the doorway into the stairwell, and Emma doesn't hear the rest because she's going the other way, striding up the aisle between the rows of desks. Barnes gets out of his chair a little too fast and sends it toppling over. Emma passes the holding cells. Killian tracks her, following along with her on the other side of the windows until he's brought up short by the wall.

Walsh is right in front of her, standing with his hands in the pockets of his dress pants and regarding her with a bemused smile that sets her blood boiling.

"Emma, what happened? You disappeared. You didn't return my calls."

She slaps him. The sound rings out across the bullpen like gunfire. Several people look up, the detective and the officer startle and Barnes makes a sound from somewhere behind her, but nobody moves to restrain her.

"Wow," Walsh says, one hand pressed to his jaw, one corner of his mouth curling into a cruel smirk. "You know, I thought your kid got his violent streak from his dad, but apparently-"

"Shut up!" Emma hisses, clenching her hands to keep them from slapping him again. "You stalked my house. You stalked my kid."

"I was just worried about him-"

"Bullshit."

"C'mon, you know I care about you and Henry and Ian-"

Emma's hand snaps up and she slaps him again, on his other cheek.

"Ms. Swan..." says the detective.

"Emma," says Barnes.

Emma ignores them, and glares at Walsh.

He thought she was weak, easy prey, a mom with two sons from two different dads, desperate for a guy willing to look past that—and maybe Emma had been a little bit desperate. She didn't see the predator in time.

But this goes no further.

"I want him charged," she says.

Walsh snorts. "What I did isn't a crime."

"Actually," says Barnes, reasonably, "it is, if your actions caused a person to feel significant
emotional distress. Ms. Swan, do you feel distressed?"

"Very," Emma says.

Walsh's eyes widen a fraction, his face pales. "But you weren't even there!" he argues. "It was the
guy-"

"You mean the man you caused to be so concerned about the safety of his child that he felt
compelled to assault you?" asks Barnes.

The detective holding loosely to Walsh’s arm tightens his grip, and Walsh gulps.

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Emma doesn’t relax until the two uniformed officers escorting Walsh out of the building return and
inform her and Barnes that Walsh is in his car. Barnes thanks them, and then picks up the phone on
his desk, and orders a squad car assigned to her apartment for the night.

"Thanks," Emma says.

"No problem," Barnes replies. "You can file a restraining order tomorrow. I'll get you the paperwork
to take home."

"Okay," Emma says, but she knows she won’t do it—what she saw of Walsh tonight is the last she’ll
ever see of him; tomorrow morning, she, Killian, and Ian are going back to Storybrooke.

Charges dropped, Killian's free to go. Barnes lets him out, and hands him a plastic bag of all the
personal items they confiscated when they booked him. They wait until Killian's tucks everything
into his pockets, taking the time only to reinsert the ruby stud into his ear, and then Barnes walks
them to the elevator.

Emma shakes his hand and says goodbye—it's probably the last she'll ever see of him, as well—and
then she follows Killian into the elevator.

They don't speak at first, as the elevator shudders into motion and carries them down to the first floor.
Emma’s hand finds his wrist and slides down until their fingers are entwined. He tilts his head
towards her, eyes downcast, hidden by his long, black lashes.

"Are you mad at me, love?" he asks.

"What for?"

"For what I just made Ian go through. For making you come here. I was foolish. I lost my temper. I
shouldn't have-"

"Hey," Emma says, and he lifts his eyes to hers then. "I'm not mad. I just want to get Ian and get out
of here."

He nods, fingers tightening on hers.

They reach the lobby, and Emma hands the visitor's badge back over to Parrish. Sarah's sitting in one
of the chairs across from the main desk, Ian asleep in her lap with his head on her shoulder. He jerks
awake when Emma touches his arm, and looks first at her, and then wildly around for Killian.

"Hey, lad," Killian says.
Ian smiles, but his eyelids are already drooping. Emma lifts him out of Sarah's arms and into her
own, wondering how much many more times she'll be able to do it before he's just too heavy. Killian
presses close, arm sliding around her waist as he leans in to press a kiss to Ian's brow. His heat
envelops her. She wants to turn into his arms, but not yet, not here.

They walk outside, Killian still right beside her, hand brushing her back, her arm.

She takes a deep breath of cool night air, not minding the little shiver that passes through her at the
chill. Her head clears, all the knots inside of her loosen, the tension that gripped her for the past few
hours eases.

It's nearly midnight. The street is deserted, quiet. Ian's warm against her chest, his soft, sleepy breaths
a soothing melody.

Emma's arms tighten around Ian's shoulders and waist. Hugging him or Henry has always made
Emma feel as if everything's alright, as if, no matter what happens, she'll be okay, because she has
her boys, and they're what matters.

She stops, and Killian stops too. He raises a curious eyebrow at her. Her hand slides up the front of
his jacket and fists itself in his lapel.

Emma sees his eyes widen in surprise right before she tugs, bringing his mouth down hard against
hers. Their lips crush together. The breath whooshes out of him, and he steps closer, body melding to
her and Ian, who's getting crushed but not complaining.

Emma pulls back, pulling her lips from his just enough to whisper, "I love you," into the space
between them.

Killian gasps, hitching in a startled breath, eyes flying open, but Emma keeps a firm grip on his
jacket, holding him close. She's been thinking those words over and over since Killian said the same
ones out loud to her beneath the wharf. I love you has been ringing in her mind, burning in her chest,
sitting on her tongue, stuck to it. Sometimes the words are Killian's, sometimes they're her own.

Killian's eyes search hers. Emma feels a quiver inside her, that fear of rejection, that fear of opening
up and baring her heart to him and being vulnerable and-

He smiles, a soft smile, a nervous one, and says, "I love you, Emma."

The quiver inside of her stills, and warmth spreads from the her center of her being outwards, rises
up inside of her until she feels as if she's glowing. Killian leans in again, lips finding hers. His kiss is
chaste and yet heated, his hand gripping her hip a promise for later.

They part, and Emma remembers Ian. He's asleep, completely oblivious, and Emma almost laughs.
Sarah is ahead, politely turned away, examining the side of the building with her hands clasped
behind her back, but Emma sees her smile.

Killian's hand is still on her hip, his thumb beneath her shirt and touching her bare skin.

"Shall we go?" he asks, voice low and rough.

Emma nods, not trusting her own voice. She slips out from the circle of his arms, but catches his
hand and holds to it as they walk to her car.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

Here, have some fluff. (Also, I'm back to my summer job next week, so it'll probably be over a week until my next update).

I love you.

The words thrum in the air between Emma and Killian the entire drive back to her apartment.

Emma finds herself reaching out often to touch Killian's arm, curl her hand around his blunted wrist because it's all she can reach of him. The skin has a different texture there, and Emma worries at first that it's sensitive in a bad way, but his eyelids droop with every brush of her fingers, so she keeps her hand there, thumb stroking back and forth over his scars.

Ian's asleep in the backseat, slumped against the door with his head at that awkward angle only kids seem able to safely accomplish. When they get to Emma's street and park, Killian lifts him out carefully with such ease and grace that it's difficult to believe he only became a father one month ago. Ian remains sleeping, but instinctively clutches Killian tighter.

Sarah parks behind them. They walk to the front door together, and when they get inside, she asks, "Do you want me to take Ian for the night? I have two spare beds."

"Uh, no, that's alright," Emma says, fighting the urge both to blush and to say, "My bedroom door locks."

Sarah smiles, as if she knows what Emma's thinking, and says, "See you tomorrow then. You'll come say goodbye before you leave?"

"Of course. Thanks again."

Sarah goes into her apartment, and Emma and Killian go upstairs, to hers. She opens the door and lets Killian through, taking a deep breath before she follows.

Emma expected to feel something when she returned—she expected to feel relief or comfort or familiarity, she expected it to feel like home, but when Killian flicks the kitchen light on and Emma looks around, it's like walking into someone else's apartment. She feels strangely detached from it all.

Killian turns back. "What is it love?"

Emma realizes she's still standing in the doorway. She forces herself forward a few steps and closes the door behind her.

As she kicks her shoes off, she says, "It smells nice in here."

Killian's cleaner than she is, apparently. There are no dirty dishes in the sink, no half-full glasses of milk or orange juice on the counters; her little pots of herbs on the windowsill are flourishing, and there's a vase of fresh flowers on the table beside several Lego pirate ships.
"You seem surprised," Killian says, lifting an eyebrow.

"I've lived with two boys for six years, Killian. I know what happens when men are left alone."

Killian grins. "Ah, so it wasn't a jab about me being a stinky pirate?"

"No; from what I can tell, you actually bathe pretty frequently."

"I do, love. Thank you for noticing."

Killian carries Ian to his bedroom.

"How do you take a bath on a pirate ship, anyway?" Emma asks.

"You don't, really—not a full one, at least."

"So how do you stay clean?"

"You wash the necessary areas: face, hands, armpits, undercarriage—"

Emma snorts at undercarriage, and Killian flashes a grin at her over Ian's head.

"As long as you wash and keep your shirt and your drawers fresh, you can keep any foul body odors at bay."

"Drawers as in?"

"Underwear, Swan."

Ian wakes up just enough to glare at them while they strip him out of his dirty clothes and stuff him into clean underwear and clean pajamas. Emma puts the little red car Shirley gave Ian on his nightstand; Killian fetches Roger and One-Eyed Jim and tucks them in with Ian, their eyeballs and one red tentacle peeking out over the top of the covers beside Ian's wild mop of blonde hair.

"Goodnight, kid," Emma says, dropping a kiss on his forehead.

Ian grunts something in response, already asleep again. Emma ushers Killian from the room, turning off the overhead light and clicking on the nightlight as she slips out the door and shuts it behind her.

Killian's hand is on her waist instantly. His blunted arm tugs her hips tight against his and their bodies meld, lips joining in a hot rush. They stumble down the hallway, careening off the walls, the edge of doorways, and various doorknobs until they reach her bedroom and fall inside.

They fumble her door closed and lock it and then Killian pushes her against it. Emma presses into him. She can feel his hard length against her thigh, and when she drops one hand between their bodies to grip him he grinds into her palm.

"Emma," he groans, as she strokes him through his jeans, applying her nails gently to the fabric.

His mouth leaves hers and trails down her neck to her collarbone. The soft brush of his lips and the warmth of his breath sends a pleasant shiver through her. Her skin aches for him. Heat, heavy and spreading, pools low in her belly, between her legs.

They leave their clothes in a tangled pile by the door. Emma pulls him to the bed and drags him down on top of her, welcoming his weight and guiding his hips to hers with her legs wrapped around his waist. He enters her slowly, sliding deep, stretching her, but Emma savors it.
His eyes are dark, heavy-lidded; his cheeks are flushed, his lips are parted, breaths already short and ragged. He looks gorgeous when he's wrecked. She tugs his lips to hers once more, tasting him, and he starts moving.

It's hard and fast, a desperate reunion of bodies, their edges bleeding and blending together. They whisper each other's names, swear, utter encouragements, praises. He comes with his face pressed to her neck, gasping against her skin, fingers gripping her hip hard enough to leave bruises.

His hips slowly stutter to a halt. He takes a deep breath, then braces himself with his blunted forearm along the mattress, and slips his hand down to where they're still joined, caressing her until she's shaking and panting and gripping his shoulders as hard as he gripped her hip.

Killian's eyes don't leave hers the entire time. Emma thought she knew all of his looks, but this one, the one he's regarding her with as he settles beside her and fits his body to her side, is new.

It's not afterglow, though she knows the same satisfaction that's humming in her blood and warming her skin is coursing through him as well.

It's something different, something tender and awe-filled and complete.

His fingers skim along her skin, tickling her ribs. He puts his head on her shoulder, tilting his chin up to kiss her cheek, nose brushing her ear.

"I love you," he whispers, into her hair. His hand stills, fingers spreading and pressing, holding her closer.

Emma turns her head, laying her cheek over his brow. She closes her eyes.

"I love you, too."

This—being in Killian's arms—this feels like coming home.

---

They wake together the next morning. At some point during the night they cleaned up and put pajamas on and unlocked her door. She sort of expected to find Ian wedged in between them, but he's not there.

"Good morning, love," Killian says. He's lying on his side, facing her. His fingers are tracing patterns over the bare patch of skin on her hip where her t-shirt got scrunched up while she slept.

Emma catches his hand, laces her fingers through his. "Have you been awake for a while?" she asks.

"Not long," he says, and then he smiles, because they both know it's a lie. Emma knows he usually wakes with the dawn, and judging by the brightness of the sunlight filling her bedroom, it's around 9.

"I'm gonna check on Ian." She starts to slide from bed, but Killian stops her.

"I already did, Swan," he says. "He's still sleeping."

Emma shouldn't be surprised he snuck out of and then back into her bed without her waking up. She suspects he's as stealthy as the Merry Men, when he wants to be—as long as there are no trees or bushes or rocks to trip over.

She settles back down. His hand returns to her hip, his gaze soft as it wanders over her face. Emma gazes back, taking in the details—the black hair, one stray lock carving a dark slice out of the
paleness of his forehead, the reddish tint to the neatly trimmed beard, the long lashes, the sensitive lips, disguised by the scruff on his chin. He has some freckles, too, so maybe Ian didn't get his only from her.

Killian's fingers trail up her side and over her arm. He swipes his thumb along her jaw, along her cheek.

"You're beautiful, Emma," he murmurs.

She feels a heat rise to her face that has nothing to do with the warmth of the room.

"Funny," she says, "I was just thinking the same thing."

He quirks an eyebrow. "You were thinking about how beautiful you are?"

"No, I meant I was thinking about you-"

"You think I'm beautiful?"

Emma rolls her eyes and swat him lightly on the chest. "You know what I mean."

He grins at her. The ruby stud in his ear flashes, and Emma finds herself reaching out to touch it.

"Why red?" she asks.

"Hm?"

"Your earring used to be black. Why'd you get a red one?"

"It's Ian's birthstone." His cheeks flush pink.

He's embarrassed, Emma realizes. He must assume Emma will think the earring is silly, or overly sentimental.

It's endearing, is what it is.

She rolls the stud gently between her fingertips, and then drops her hand to rest against his neck.

"I always wanted to get a tattoo that represented Henry and Ian," she says.

"Oh?"

Emma shrugs. "I never got around to it. I couldn't decide what I wanted, and it's money I could never really justify spending, not when groceries are so expensive—plus, all of Henry's friends' parents were already convinced that I was some sort of whore, so..."

Working bake sales or at the concession stand during Henry's track and cross country meets was always a nightmare. The other moms were the kinds of moms that were overly involved in their kids' schools purely for the ability to brag about it. They looked down on Emma, and they didn't bother hiding it. She remembers their stares, the whispers behind her back.

The tattoo on her wrist didn't help. It wasn't that she had a tattoo, it was the suspicion her one visible tattoo created that she had more—possibly in places only tramps have tattoos.

Emma shifts uncomfortably at the memories, her stomach twisting with the echo of anger and shame she'd felt. She'd wanted to punch the sneers off their stupid faces—but that would have only made
things worse, for her and for the boys, so she pretended she didn't know they hated her and carried on volunteering at every school fundraiser she could.

Killian lifts her hand off his neck, and examines the buttercup tattoo on the inside of her wrist. Emma holds her breath, but he only presses his lips to it.

The simple gesture shouldn't be so comforting, but it is. Her stomach stops twisting.

She'll never have to deal with that again. She's not the mom with two kids from two different dads who aren't around anymore. She's not the mom busting her ass to make ends meet.

She has Killian, and she knows that, no matter where this whole I love you thing leads, he'll always be there—for her, for Ian, and for Henry.

Killian replaces her hand on his neck, and she buries her fingers in the hair along his nape.

"What tattoo would you have gotten?" he asks softly.

Emma smiles. She considered the boys' names or their birthdates, but the idea she liked the most was their zodiac signs—a lion for Henry, and for Ian, a-

"Oh!" Emma gasps. "Hey, did you know Ian's zodiac sign is a crab?"

Killian's brows raise, another grin tugging at his lips. "Roger," he says. "I never made the connection. Perhaps I should get another tattoo."

"Of a crab?"

"Aye. Or the constellation Cancer."

"No way," Emma says quickly. "I call dibs."

"On the constellation or the crab? Or both?"

"The constellation." Thanks to Henry and Ian's newfound interest in stargazing, Emma knows what the Cancer and Leo constellations look like, and she can already picture the tattoos—on her side, over her ribs, maybe? Right where Killian's hand is currently resting. "You can do a crab."

"Where should I get it?"

"On your butt."

Killian clicks his tongue at her.

"I'm serious, love. I think I'd like to do it."

Emma thought sailors were supposed to have a ton of tattoos. It was a shock to discover that Killian was relatively free of ink. No anchors or compasses, no nautical stars or swallows or even a shark; just a dagger through a heart and a woman's name on his forearm.

Killian seems to read her thoughts. His eyes flick down to his tattoo.

"Has Ian asked you about it yet?" Emma says.

"No. He's currently occupied with my scars and how I got them all."
"That could take some time."

"Aye."

"He'll ask eventually."

"I know," Killian says, and looks away, into the mattress as though he wishes he could sink into it and disappear.

"Hey, it's okay," she says, hand moving to his cheek, trying to draw him back. "You can tell him about Milah."

"It's not that, love—although I doubt telling him that I loved a woman before I loved his mother will be as easy as you think."

"What is it, then?"

He glances at her and then away again. "It's my past, Swan," he says. "I've done many a dark deed. I wasn't a good person. I'm still not."

Emma sees a dark pit opening up inside of him, sees his deepest fear exposed.

She scoots closer, nudging her knee in between his and fitting their bodies together from hips to shoulders. His arm tightens around her. She doesn't say anything for a moment, she just holds him, her face tucked beneath his chin, nose against his collarbone.

"We'll figure it out," she says. He makes a sound that's half disagreement. "You've changed, Killian. I see it. Ian will see it too. I promise."

_I love you._

Emma said those words, and she meant them. She doesn't know what happens next, she doesn't know what their future holds, but she knows she's going to fight for it, both for her own sake and for Ian's.

Killian lets out a deep breath, ruffling her hair. His shoulders relax. Emma smiles, and snuggles closer. She can hear his heartbeat, a steady pounding through his chest. It lulls her. Her thoughts drift, piecing together the events of the past 12 hours.

"Hey," she says, suddenly. "When you called me, how did you know I'd be able to get out of Storybrooke?"

Killian chuckles. "I didn't, actually. I honestly didn't even pause to wonder how you'd get out. I just...I knew you'd get to Ian. Nothing stops you when it comes to your sons."

He kisses the top of her head, and she smiles into his t-shirt.

Killian's silent a moment. "About that man Walsh—"

"I'm sorry about him," Emma says.

"Walsh isn't your fault, love. I just wanted to apologize again, for losing my temper."

"You don't have to apologize. I honestly would have done the same thing."

_Actually, Emma probably would have done much worse._
"I'm sorry you were in jail," she says.

"That's not your fault either, love—although I would like an explanation for bologna."

"What?"

"Bologna. Barnes force fed it to me while I was handcuffed to his desk, awaiting that blasted jail cell."

"Barnes made you eat it?"

"Well, no. But I was starving, so I had no choice."

"Barnes loves bologna," she says. "His wife makes him two bologna sandwiches for dinner every night."

"Ah. I suppose I should be grateful that he shared, then."

"Mmm."

Emma closes her eyes and nuzzles her face back beneath Killian's chin.

The morning's been a complete contrast to the last time they woke up in the same bed together. There's no urgency. It feels like forever ago that they were able to just relax and talk about goofy things, about piercing and tattoos and not about villains and evil magic.

Just as she's drifting back into that lulled state, the morning calm is shattered by the shrill creak of a door opening down the hallway.

"Ian's up," she says.

Killian grunts in response.

Ian's footsteps patter along the carpeted hallway into the bathroom, and by the loudness of the sounds that follow, Emma knows he didn't bother to close the bathroom door.

"I believe an interruption is imminent, love," Killian says, as the toilet flushes. "Is there anything else you'd like to say—or perhaps do—before we're joined by our son?"

"I shouldn't have made you leave Storybrooke," Emma says.

Killian freezes. He leans back, just enough to look her in the eyes. "You did what you thought was best," he says.

She sighs. "It was a bad idea. I want you both to come back with me."

In Storybrooke, Boston tugged at her. She didn't miss Boston, exactly. She longed for her, Henry, and Ian's quiet little lives together. She wanted Boston's lack of magic and its lack of Neal fucking Cassidy. But she didn't miss it.

Emma always believed that home is a place you don't have until you miss it. Right now, she misses Storybrooke. She misses her, Henry, and Ian's lives there. She misses her and Killian's life there.

"Are you certain?" Killian asks.

Emma nods.
"I'm glad." He captures her chin between his fingers, tilts her lips up to his, and kisses her.

Ian's footsteps thunder down the hallway. He barges in, throwing open the door. Emma and Killian jolt apart as if electrocuted. Ian pauses, staring at the two of them, then he says, "Me too," and dives in.

They don't leave until the afternoon. They eat breakfast together, and then while Emma gathers all the things she wants to take back to Storybrooke with them, Killian and Ian repack their bags.

The Bug is much more heavily loaded down than Whale's boat was. Killian has to slam the hood of the car closed four times before the lock catches. As he's wrestling with the metal contraption (while Emma and Ian watch), Killian spies Emma's photo albums amongst the extra items stuffed in the trunk, and he grins to himself.

Killian gives Emma and Ian space to say their goodbyes to Sarah Fisher, who came out of the building to see them off, and when it's Killian's turn, Sarah draws him away, and says something that surprises him.

"Take care of them, Captain."

Killian startles.

Captain.

A strange, cold feeling steals through him, and it has nothing to do with the icy blue of her eyes.

He glances over to where Emma is buckling Ian into the backseat of the Bug and Ian's complaining audibly about "missing the fireworks", and then turns back to Sarah and growls, "Who are you?"

His reaction actually seems to please her.

"I'm from the same world you are," she says. "There, my name was Ingrid."


Sarah dips her chin, a small nod of acknowledgement.

Ingrid of Arendelle.

Sarah Fisher is Ingrid of Arendelle, the Lost Princess.

The stories say she was born with powerful magic in a land that feared it. One day, she accidentally killed a man, some duke. All the stories agree that it was self-defense, but they disagree on whether Ingrid was cast out by her sister, or fled of her own volition.

Ingrid's story stops there. She never returned to Arendelle, and no one knows what became of her. Apparently, she found her way into the Land Without Magic.

"Does Emma know?" Killian asks, though he already knows the answer.

"No," Sarah says. "And she's not ready to know."

"Have you known this whole time who she is?" he asks, anger flaring, the heat of it overpowering the chill of Sarah's revelation.
Her smile is a little sad. "I suspected there was something special about her, but I didn't start putting the pieces together until she disappeared a month ago, right after I felt a very large concentration of magic return to this world."

"Storybrooke."

"Yes."

"You know of it?"

"I've heard the rumors--"

"How?"

"I'm not the only refugee whose made their way to this world from a different one. Even in a land without magic, like calls to like. I know Emma's story. I know of Snow White and Prince Charming, and the Dark Curse that separated them from their child. I only wish I had known 35 years ago. Then, perhaps, I could have saved her from the life she had to endure."

While Killian's still reeling, Sarah steps forward and places a kiss lightly on his cheek.

"If Emma ever needs help, call me."

She leaves him then, without another word. Head exploding with questions, Killian turns and stumbles down the sidewalk to the car.

Emma's standing in the street, arms folded on the roof of the Bug, waiting. "Everything okay?" she asks.

With a mighty afford, Killian drags himself from the maelstrom of his thoughts and forces a smile.

"Everything's fine, love," he says. "Are we ready to go."

"Yep," Emma says, while, at the same time, Ian says, "NO!" very loudly.

Eyebrows raised, Killian slides into the car, and twists so he can peer into the backseat. Ian's pouting, arms crossed over his chest, face scrunched tight in the meanest look Killian's ever seen him pull.

"What's wrong, lad?" Killian asks, trying not to laugh, thinking he should probably be stern in a situation like this.

"We're gonna miss the fireworks," Ian replies sullenly.

Killian looks to Emma for an explanation.

She sighs. "Tomorrow's the 4th of July. It's...it's a big deal. We always watch the fireworks from our roof." She pauses, chewing her lip, thinking. "How about if we get a bunch of fireworks on the way back to Storybrooke? We can blow them off on the beach tomorrow night."

Ian shrugs.

"Yes or no, kid."

"Yes," Ian says, grudgingly, and turns his glare very pointedly towards the window.

"Good enough," Emma mutters.
She starts the car and pulls away. Killian notices that she doesn't once look back as she drives down the street and then turns the corner, taking them out of sight of her apartment. He wonders what she's thinking, but knows better than to ask.

"I love you."

She said those words to him last night and his heart soared, yet Killian knows that it's just the beginning. The thing between them is still delicate, still newly formed and fragile. What will become of them remains to be seen. It's going to take patience and understanding and trust and hard work, and very likely a whole slew of other things. But Killian's not afraid. He's never backed down from a challenge, and he won't back down from Emma Swan, no matter what.

Her hand appears and wraps around his blunted wrist. It's a strange feeling, having fingers caressing a part of him that for centuries he kept hidden and covered. Her soft skin against his wrist is soothing, but it goes deeper than that. Emma touching him there feels like a form of acceptance, of that scar and his many others, of the life he lived that earned him those marks.

"You've changed, Killian. I see it."

Something that feels suspiciously like happiness lodges deep in his chest and stays there.

They chat while Emma drives. Killian wants to know what he missed while they were apart, but he's loathe to break the peacefulness they have in the car—Emma must feel the same way, for she keeps their topics of conversation light.

Killian very purposely keeps his thoughts from straying to Sarah—or Ingrid, or whatever her name is—though he keeps in mind what she said about calling if they need help.

They're only on the road for an hour before Ian gets carsick the first time. Emma pulls over to the side of the highway, gets out, runs around the car to the other side, and opens the door just in time for Ian to puke onto the ground instead of all over himself.

Emma sits in the backseat with him a while, rubbing his back until he nods that he feels better. He pukes again 20 minutes later, and third time, another hour after that, just before they're about to cross the New Hampshire border into Maine.

Emma parks the car at a gas station and goes inside. Killian moves to the backseat, motioning for Ian to scoot aside. They roll the windows down, and Ian slumps against him, pale and sweaty, while they wait for Emma.

"How do you feel?" Killian asks.

Ian shrugs, the barest movement of his shoulders. Killian presses the backs of his fingers to Ian's brow; the boy's a tad warm.

Emma returns with bottles of water and something called ginger ale, a box of crackers, a banana, and a very large, black plastic bag.

"Fireworks," Emma says, when she sees him eyeing it. "I raided the entire store."

That brings a smile to Ian's face. The ginger ale and crackers also seem to revive him, and within 15 minutes he's asleep, using Roger as a pillow while One-Eyed Jim rests in his lap.

It's another two hours until they reach the town line. The "Welcome to Storybrooke" sign looms
abruptly, sprouting from amongst the dense trees as if summoned by magic. The wall is gone, but Killian still holds his breath as they pass over the spot it previously stood.

Nothing happens, of course.

Beside him, Killian hears Emma let out a breath she was also holding.

"And we're back," she says. She almost sounds regretful.

"Already missing Boston?" Killian asks.

"No. Sort of the opposite actually," she says, lips twisting into a lopsided frown.

"What do you mean, love?"

She shrugs, dismissively. "I don't know. There're some things I have to think about." She looks over, smiles at him reassuringly. "Let's talk about it later."

Killian gazes through the window as they travel through the woods and towards town, and is stunned to realize he actually missed the sight of those trees. He's never been so thrilled to see so much green before in his life. It's shades of blue that usually set his pulse raising—indeed, when he catches sight of the harbor, a wave of contentment crashes over him, that sense of peace and belonging that the sea brings to every sailor.

As they drive nearer to the center of town, Killian sees the masts of the Jolly Roger, rising above all the other little boats bobbing alongside their piers. He almost forgot he had her back. He supposes he can finally move out of Granny's, and onto his ship.

The idea fills him with a mix of emotions. Excitement and relief to have his ship back, a small spike of sadness at leaving behind granny and her fussy but motherly ways. Who will wash his clothes now? He'll have to go back to the old methods, soaking everything he owns in barrels of soapy water whilst he stands around on deck in nothing but his skivvies.

Ian could visit him on the Jolly Roger. Ian could have his own cabin. Henry could, too.

Killian fleetingly entertains the idea of Emma living aboard with him, but dismisses it immediately—she needs a house with spacious rooms, lots of windows to let the light and air in, and a sprawling yard. A view of the ocean wouldn't hurt, either.

Emma parks in front of the loft, and Killian's only just shaken Ian awake when Snow, David, and Henry flood out of the building.

Killian finds himself being embraced by Snow before he's even aware she's beside him.

"Oh, Killian! We're so happy you're okay!"

He wraps his arms around her tentatively. A snappy comeback dies in his throat, and all he can mumble is, "Erm, thank you."

Snow peels away from him and falls upon Ian with a storm of kisses. David takes Snow's place, but only shakes Killian's hand instead of hugging him, which Killian is tremendously grateful for.

"How was Boston?" David asks, an amused glint in his eye.

"Eventful," Killian says.
David grins. "We're glad you're back."

Snow shifts her attention to Emma, and David sweeps Ian up into a bear hug.

"How are ya, big guy?" he asks.

"I'd be careful if I were you," Killian says, noticing the way David's jouncing Ian up and down. "He threw up a few times on the way here."

David freezes and raises his eyebrows at Ian. "Uh-oh."

"I feel better," Ian says.

"Oh, okay. Then it's alright if I do this?" His hand drops to Ian's ribs and he tickles the boy until Ian's giggling so hard he can barely breathe.

"Dad, seriously," Emma warns.

Killian turns to Henry before he has to witness any projectile vomiting. "How are you, lad?" he asks, extending his hand and taking Henry's.

Henry returns his firm grip. "Good."

"You've been practicing your swordsmanship while I was away, I hope?"

"Of course."

"Good lad. And how's the fair lady Ava?"

"She's good," Henry says, cheeks reddening.

Killian winks, and then gets swiftly out of the way so Emma can hug her son.

They retreat inside, everyone grabbing a bag or a box to carry with them. Snow gushes over the photo albums, and Emma has to snap them shut in her face to get her to move off the sidewalk and into the building.

Snow whips up a pot of spaghetti for dinner, and they eat crowded together at the kitchen table. Ian tells his grandparents about their day at the aquarium, and Snow and David ooh and ahh at all the right places. One-Eyed Jim is passed around for inspection. David pretends that the octopus comes to life and attacks him, and Ian has to rush to his rescue and pull the stuffed animal from his grandfather's face while the rest of them roar with laughter.

Ice cream is brought out, and Monopoly. Snow produces the photo albums as if from thin air and makes Emma go through them with her.

When Killian asks David quietly and out of the side of his mouth what's been going on in Storybrooke for the past five days, he's told they'll talk about it tomorrow; it's nothing important, nothing that can't wait.

David keeps an eye on Ian in the bath while Killian and Henry play a round of checkers.

"Ian's very good. Did you teach him?" Killian asks, sliding one of his black pieces forward.

"Yea. He used to beat my friend Avery all the time and Avery hated it," Henry says, chuckling.
Afterwards, they take to the various couches in the living room area. Killian thought someone might politely but firmly hint that he leave, return to his room at Granny’s, but no one does. They put on the TV, but keep the volume low, conversing with each other more than watching the program.

Ian falls asleep tucked against Killian's chest with his clean-smelling hair beneath Killian's cheek, and his legs spilling out of Killian's lap and into Emma's. Henry announces he's going to bed first—which Emma mutters means he's going upstairs to text Ava. Snow and David are next, and Killian takes that as his cue to leave.

He carries Ian up to the top of the loft. Emma follows him, her hand tucked into the crook of Killian's arm. Killian lays Ian down in the bed he and Emma share, then tucks Roger and Mr. Jim in beside him, as he's done for the past five nights. He bends and places a kiss on Ian's brow. Ian mumbles, but doesn't wake.

Henry is laying on his back on his bed in the corner, his phone hovering over his face, lit only by the pale blue glow from its screen.

"Goodnight, Henry," Killian says.

"Night," Henry says, glancing briefly from his phone to Killian.

When Emma and Killian get back downstairs the pullout bed is waiting.

Emma snorts when she sees it. "Thanks, mom," Emma says.

"Thank you," Killian echoes.

"No problem," Snow calls, vice muffled by the thick curtains that separate her and David's room from the rest of the loft. "Goodnight, you guys."

Emma sits on the bed and watches while Killian shucks his shoes, socks, and belt, then strips off his vest and un-tucks his shirt. It's not as comfortable as pajamas, but his are in a bag all the way back upstairs, and he hasn't the energy to retrieve them. He folds everything neatly and lays it on the armchair beside the pullout bed.

Emma stands, then, and presses herself into his arms. They go around her immediately and pull her close, before Killian can stop to think if it's appropriate or not.

Her breath ghosts along his lips and he finds himself kissing her. Warmth crawls up his spine and pools in his gut. Emma's lips move against his, soft, pliant. Her teeth and tongue tease him. He's already hard and straining against his jeans, but he knows this can't go anywhere, and he clamps down hard on his rising lust—though he lets her be the one to break the kiss, savors the taste and heat of her mouth until she steps back.

Her eyes are heavy-lidded, lips parted, moist and slightly swollen. He wishes more than anything that they were alone, that he could tear the clothes from her body and have her right here on the floor. He can tell she feels his arousal, and he lets that be enough, for now.

He lifts his hand to her shoulder and brushes her hair back, then presses his lips to her ear, and whispers, "I love you."

She turns her cheek into his, and her hands slide up to his forearms and squeeze before she steps from his arms. Killian watches her cross the loft and climb the stairs to her bed, then he turns and gets into his own.
Hello! Ok, the beach scene was supposed to be tacked on at the end of this chapter, but, you know, I just really want to write a lot about Emma and Killian's first time at the beach together, so I'm going to give it a whole goddamn chapter to itself--also because we're now in the final part of this story, but I'm not really in a hurry to finish it!!! I'm back to school/work tomorrow, so updates will now go back to being pretty slow, probably every two weeks, so thank you in advance for your patience and understanding :)

Henry wakes up early the next morning, while everyone's still sleeping, and sneaks out.

He dresses for running and grabs his headphones just in case anyone asks him where he's going, but his mom and Ian are snuggled up together on the double bed, there's no sound or movement from behind the curtain that hides his grandparents' room, and Hook looks asleep—he doesn't really trust Hook not to be faking though, so he says, "Going for a run," out loud just before he slips out the front door.

The morning's gray and chilly, the sky streaked with pale gold along the horizon. Henry walks quickly, looking over his shoulder only a few times to make sure Hook's not tailing him or anything.

He turns off Main Street and heads towards the residential areas, the old-looking part that has a bunch of Victorian Gothic mansions, one of which is apparently Neal's current hideout.

The neighborhood's quiet in a sleepy way; Henry's pretty sure most of the families with young kids live either in the area directly to the west of town, where Ruby and Belle and Robin live, or in the area to the north that has houses as big as (but way less creepy than) the ones Henry's walking by.

He's never been inside Gold's house, but he knows which one it is, and he has no trouble finding it. It's still that pukey pink color with ugly dark green trim. Henry's stomach turns as he looks at it, though he thinks it's partially from nerves. He thought often about going to Neal, about bargaining with him, but the idea of having to go behind his mom's back to do so always stopped him.

Today is different.

Today he's not here to bargain—he doesn't want to make a deal with Neal, not after what he did to Hook, and not after he saved Henry from pirates but let Ian get kidnapped.

Today Henry's here to make a decision.

He takes a deep breath, and starts up the front walkway.

He knows his mom doesn't want him to be mad at Neal because of what he did to her when she was 17, but even though Henry tells her he isn't, he is. He's mad at himself, too, because he acted like a petty little shit when he was 11 and found out she had lied to him about his birth father, and he's mad at Neal again for being all self-righteous about the whole thing, like he was the victim and Emma was the asshole.
And the truth is, even if Henry wasn't pissed at Neal for abandoning his mom, he's still pissed at Neal for a whole slew of other things—things that only cover the last month of Neal being back in their lives, things that being the Dark One can't fully excuse.

That's why Henry's here: to look Neal in the face and decide whether or not there's actually anything left inside of him worth trying to save.

He reaches the porch and hops lightly up the steps, moving quietly half out of habit (if you want the Xbox to yourself for an hour every weekend morning, you'd better be able to traverse the apartment silently), and half out of wariness. Surprisingly, there's no magical reaction to his arrival; he's not repelled by the warding spells his mom said were on the front door, but neither does it swing open of its own accord, so Henry's forced to knock. He bangs on the heavy door with his fist, four insistent, resounding thumps, and then steps back.

A long moment of silence follows. Henry wrings his hands, squeezing his smarting knuckles. His heart is beating too hard and too fast in his chest. He tries to force down his nervousness, but it just lodges in his stomach and makes his insides writhe until he feels like he's going to be sick again.

Just when he's about to bail, he hears soft footsteps approaching from the other side of the door. He shoves his hands into his shorts pocket and straightens, plastering on the calmest, most nonchalant expression he can muster.

Locks click, the knob turns, and then the door's creaking open, revealing a very disheveled, crocodile-skinned Neal. He blinks greenish-gold eyes blearily at Henry, and then says, "Does your mom know you're here?"

Henry didn't notice before, but he's taller than Neal. For some stupid, obviously male reason, that gives him confidence.

"No," he answers. "She doesn't."

Neal grins with something like pride then, and Henry almost—almost—gets angry.

"You wanna come in?" Neal asks.

"No."

That wipes the smile off Neal's face, but the moment Henry says it he regrets it.

He doesn't want to go inside, he feels like it's agreeing to something and he'd literally rather die right now than give Neal what he wants—but it would have been an opportunity to look around and maybe find out where Neal keeps the Dark One's dagger.

Oh well, too late.

Neal's expression changes, becomes calculating.

Good, Henry thinks. Let him see me for real, instead of seeing the little kid he's been having some fantasy father-son relationship in his head with for 7 years.

"Why are you here, then?"

"To talk."

"You don't want to talk inside? Have some breakfast or something?" A glimmer of excitement
reappears in Neal's eyes. "You've never had my scrambled eggs before. Your mom used to-

"Here's fine," Henry says, cutting him off.

Neal's mouth closes slowly, the light in his eyes extinguished. The air seems to cool between and around them.

"Are you afraid of me?" Neal asks quietly.

"No."

"But you don't trust me?"

"I don't trust what's inside you," Henry clarifies.

"I have it under control," Neal snaps. "I don't know what they've been telling you, but the Dark One doesn't control me; I control it."

"So you're saying it was your decision to try and murder Hook?" Henry asks. Neal's face immediately drains of color, the gold fading to grey, but Henry presses on. He prepared, had this conversation a thousand times inside his own head, and this is exactly where he knew it would go. "It was your decision to let Pan's Shadow pretend to be Hook so he could break my mom's heart? It was your decision to let my little brother get kidnapped by Blackbeard?"

"Henry..."

"What?" Henry challenges.

Nothing.

Neal says nothing.

He sags against the doorframe, as if it's the only thing holding him up. Henry takes in his disheveled appearance again, and asks, "Did you sleep?"

"Dark Ones don't sleep," Neal says flatly, gaze fixed on Henry's gym shoes.

Henry sees regret in the twist of his lips, in the lines creasing his forehead. But is it regret for what he did, or just regret that it didn't work out how he wanted it to?

"I need to know why you did it," Henry says.

"Did what?"

"Everything."

Neal blinks dully at the floor, and then slowly drags himself back up the doorframe and looks Henry in the eye.

"I want a second chance to be a family with you and your mom. I thought after Neverland we could..." He pauses, sighs. "Henry, what Regina and I did was the only way we could see you again."

"You killed your own dad," Henry says.

"That was the price," Neal replies, then shrugs. "He was already dead anyway."
"Yea, but then you brought him back to life and killed him again. You're really okay with that?"

Neal's gaze drops to Henry's shoes again.

"What about Regina?" Henry asks. "Do you feel bad about what happened to her?"

"That was an accident."

"But do you regret it? Do you regret anything you did? Or does it not matter because you only care about getting what you want?" He stops, jaw clenching tight for a moment; Neal opens his mouth, but before he can respond Henry plunges on. "Did you really think I wouldn't care how you got here or who you killed along the way? Did you think I'd be so happy that you and my mom were back together that I would forgive you for murdering Hook? Did you really think my mom would forgive you for murdering Hook?"

Neal snorts softly, a spiteful smile curving his lips as he shakes his head at the floor.

"You sound just like Emma."

"Don't say that like it's an insult," Henry says. Anger flares up inside him, but he keeps a firm hand on it, keeps it under control. He refuses to get mad, and he refuses to drag his mom into this. "You don't exactly have the moral high ground to be passing judgment on anyone right now anyway. Good people don't do what you did."

Neal regards him, gaze calculating once more but the nasty smirk still on his face. "When did you get so smart?" he asks.

"I was always smart. Apparently you didn't notice before."

*You were so busy trying to be cool and make me like you that you never stopped to learn anything about me.*

The truth of that hurts, but Henry buries the pain and buries his anger. He came here for a reason, and it wasn't to be reminded of all the different ways Neal sucks.

"I still want an answer," he says. "Do you regret anything you did?"

Neal's brow knits, his eyes widen imploringly.

"I just want to see you Henry."

Henry's anger goes cold. He had this conversation a million times, but he could never predict the end, foresee the resolution—perhaps because there can be no resolution.

"We're going to help you," he says. The words taste bitter on his tongue and he spits them out as fast as he can. "We're going to get the Darkness out of you."

"How? The only way to do that is-"

"We have a plan. We found a way to do it without hurting or killing you."

Neal straightens, hands sliding out of his pockets and clenching at his sides.

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you."
Neal's eyes narrow. He stares at Henry, long and hard.

"Why are you still helping me?" he asks.

"Honestly?" Henry says, shaking his head. "I don't know. I guess because I'm still stupidly hoping you're not really as shitty of a person as I think you are." Tears prick his eyes suddenly. He feels hollow, in a desperate way. "I'm hoping that maybe if we give you one more chance, you won't fuck it up as badly as you're fucking up this one right now."

He thinks of Ian and Hook, how happy they are. Henry wants that.

"Henry..." Neal says. He takes a step forward, reaches out, but Henry turns sharply away, out of reach.

"Whatever," he mutters, and plunges down the stairs.

Tears blur his vision but his feet carry him steadily up the sidewalk and back towards town. He takes deep, calming breaths as he walks, trying to settle himself down, and turns his thoughts away from the past ten minutes and directs them forward.

Today's the 4th of July. They're all going to spend the day at the beach together. Ava will be there. She hasn't experienced real 4th of July fireworks—not that a box of Roman candles and aerial shells bought from a gas station in New Hampshire is anything compared to the Boston POPS and 23 minutes of quality fireworks over the Charles River, but it's the best they're going to get this year.

The promise of something that feels like normal life again—and the prospect of seeing Ava in a bikini—lifts his spirits, and he's smiling by the time he turns the corner onto Main Street.

His smile falters when he sees Hook, standing outside the loft. Before Henry can decide whether to run and hide or keep walking, Hook looks over, pulling his eyes from the glorious pink and orange sunrise happening to the east, and sees him.

"Everything alright?" he asks.

"Yea," Henry says, feigning breathlessness.

"How was your run?"

"Good." Henry strains, trying to produce some sweat, make it cascade down his temples and squirt from his armpits, but fails.

Hook raises an eyebrow. "Care for a little sparring?" he asks. "Or are you too...worn out?"

Henry grins. He appreciates that Hook understands him, and he appreciates that Hook doesn't pry.

"Yea, let's go," Henry says. "Should we wake up Ian and grandpa?"

"Just you and I this morning. I need to make sure your grandfather hasn't been coddling you while I've been gone."

"Not me. He's been coddling my mom a little bit though."

"Your mother has been sword-fighting? Without me?"

"Yea."
“Well,” Hook says, but he doesn’t finish, he just makes a noise in his throat that sounds like indignation and takes off down the street towards the docks.

Henry chuckles to himself, and follows.

Neal watches Henry storm down the block and disappear, then he turns into the house, closes the door, and leans back against it, letting his eyes fall shut as he does.

"I know what their plan is," says a giggling voice.

Neal's eyes fly open. Rumplestiltskin's there, farther down the hallway, standing in the doorway that leads to the kitchen.

Fear creeps through him, like ice spreading through his veins. He hasn't seen his father—No, he tells himself, the Darkness—since he let it convince him to do nothing while Emma's other kid got taken by Blackbeard's men.

Neal assumed he'd be able to handle the Darkness; his father had, after all, and his father was a weak man. But maybe that's the difference. His father relished the power. Neal doesn't want it, not really—it's just a consequence, a burden he was willing to bear in order to get back to Emma and Henry.

He thought he was fighting it, he thought he had it under control, he thought that not seeing it meant he was winning, but apparently not.

Apparently he miscalculated this entire thing.

Rumplestiltskin reads Neal's thoughts—not a difficult task, when he's already in Neal's fucking head—and smirks, but doesn't respond.

"What are you going to do?" Neal demands. The Darkness may have access to his mind, but that connection doesn't work both ways.

"Oh, we're not going to do anything," Rumplestiltskin says, steepling his long fingers beneath his chin. "We're going to sit here and let them bring what we need to us."

"What do you mean 'what we need'? What do we need?"

"A very particular, very powerful magical object."

Neal's head is spinning. He doesn't understand.

"Why do we need it?" he asks.

Rumplestiltskin giggles. "Because it will give us everything we want."

The Darkness shows Neal its plan then, like a movie playing inside his head, behind his eyes, and then Neal understands.

"Okay," he says, feeling a smile spread slowly across his face. "Okay, that could work."

Emma wakes up snuggling Ian, her face pressed into his hair, breathing in the scent of that Old Spice shampoo that both David and Henry—and therefore Ian—use, and just like that, everything feels back to normal.
She hears voices coming from the kitchen and smells coffee and pancakes, but she lets herself lie in bed a bit longer and enjoy the quiet. It's going to be a long, busy day. Emma hopes that's all it's going to be. She doesn't care if it's selfish or foolish, she just wants one day to pretend that everything really is totally normal. They can all go back to reality tomorrow.

Downstairs, David's interrogating Killian about Emma's living situation, and Emma smiles into Ian's hair while she listens.

"Was it in a safe neighborhood?"

"I believe so. It appeared rather quiet. There was a park nearby."

"Were there other kids around?"

"Some. Ian's best friend and her little brother apparently visit the building often, as their grandmother lives there. The three seem quite fond of each other."

"Did they have a backyard to play in?"

"No, but they made do just fine with the front yard."

Snow's humming is just audible over the crackle of cooking bacon. Emma wonders briefly where Henry is, until she realizes the shower's running.

"How about her neighbors?" David asks. "Were they friendly?"

"I only met the one."

"That Sarah woman?"

"Aye, Sarah Fisher. From what I understand, she regards Emma as a daughter."

There's a loud clink as a plate or a cup is set down on the countertop a little too hard.

"I'm sorry," Killian says. "Perhaps I shouldn't have-"

"No, no, it's alright," says Snow, hurriedly. She clears her throat. "I shouldn't be jealous. I'm glad Emma had someone to watch over her."

Regret is like a knife twisting in Emma's gut. They're all together now, but reminders that they weren't still hurt. The nearly 7 years they spent apart must have been torture for her parents. She's probably lucky she and Henry didn't have their memories, because otherwise they would have lived every day beneath the weight of the same crushing sorrow as her parents and Killian did.

"Hey, have you seen this picture?" David asks.

"Which one?" Snow asks.

"This one."

Oh my God, Emma thinks. They have my photo albums out.


"How old do you think they are?"
"Ian looks like he's 2. That would make Henry...14?"

"His sweatshirt says 'Charlestown Track & Field'."

"Must be his freshman year."

There's a long moment of silence, Emma can only assume as they all gaze heart-eyed at whatever picture David pointed out.

"You know, they still kind of do that," Snow says.

"Aye, I've seen the lad share everything—including ice cream."

They must be looking at the picture she took at a restaurant of Ian feeding Henry a French fry. It was after Henry's first ever track meet, which was pretty much a disaster. Ian had sensed he needed consoling, so he hand-fed Henry every fry from his plate, one at a time, until Henry finally smiled.

Ian shifts in his sleep, mumbling something about a dog. Emma feels his shoulders tense, and her whole body goes still in response. His toes curl into her shins, then his face scrunches, and he draws in several quick, short breaths before relaxing again.

Emma waits, but he doesn't stir further.

She's glad; Killian said he'd had several bad dreams in Boston, nightmares about falling and drowning, but he didn't have any that night or the night before. She doesn't necessarily think that means Ian's healed from the trauma of getting kidnapped and almost killed by pirates, but for now she's just grateful he's having dreams about the past, and not about the future.

"What can you tell me about that Walsh guy?" David says, voice almost too low for Emma to hear.

Oh, fuck.

She starts easing her arm and legs out from underneath Ian as her dad adds, "Do we need to go take care of him?"

"Really, David?" Snow hisses.

"Emma already took care of him," Killian says.

"Yea, but do we need to go take care of him?"

Emma manages to untangle herself from her kid, a stuffed octopus, and the blankets. She sets her feet on the floor and crosses the room to the stairs, tying her hair back in a ponytail as she walks, not bothering to mask her footsteps or avoid the creakiest floorboards.

"Emma!" her mom greets her cheerily as she descends the stairs. "You're just in time for pancakes!"

Emma reaches the bottom, then stands with her hands on her hips, regarding the overly innocent faces of her parents, and Killian's smirk.

"You don't need to worry about Walsh," she says. "He's no one."

David's expression storms over immediately. "He's a stalker."

"Yep," she says, moving to pour herself a cup of coffee from the pot steaming on the counter. "But if he shows up at my apartment again, my neighbor's going to call the cops, and if by some miracle he
shows up in Storybrooke, I'm the cops. So, it's over. Now, can we stop talking about my life and talk about something else?"

She turns, leaning back against the counter and taking a sip from her mug. David looks put out, Killian's oogling her in her pajamas (Emma takes another sip of coffee to hide her smile), but Snow's face is lit up with excitement.

"Can we talk about Ian's birthday?" she asks.

Emma gets the sense that she was just waiting for an opportunity to bring it up, probably for at least two weeks.

"Your mom wants to throw a party," David explains. His tone and Snow's beaming smile fill Emma with sudden dread.

"What kind of party?" she asks, eyes narrowing. Killian quirks a curious eyebrow.

"The kind that involves the entire town and several permits from the fire department," David says. "Mom."

"Emma-"

"You are not throwing a carnival for Ian's birthday," Emma says flatly.

"Why not?"

Carnival was just a guess, but the fact that her mom doesn't deny it means Emma was extremely close—if not perfectly spot-on.

"Because he's six," Emma says. "That's way too much."

"Not for a prince," Snow counters, matter-of-factly. "If we were in the Enchanted Forest we'd have a kingdom-wide day of celebration and a royal ball. For Henry, too."

"But we're not royalty," Emma says. "Not here, at least. Ian's just a regular kid. He doesn't need a national holiday to feel special on his birthday—and he doesn't need his grandma to throw him a carnival to know that she loves him."

Snow frowns, deflated. "You're afraid he'll be spoiled?"

_Duh_, Emma wants to say.

Ian would fucking _love_ a carnival for his birthday—what kid wouldn't?—but that's not how Emma wants to raise him. Ian and Henry are both special kids; they're _good_ kids. Emma wants to preserve that.

And she wants to preserve the life _she_ gave them.

Carnivals and royal balls sound nice and everything, but it's not...her. She's homemade cupcakes for Ian's classmates and a pool party for eight of his friends. She's pizza and mozzarella sticks and Insomnia Cookie and a Star Wars marathon for Henry. Gifts from her are few and small, but meaningful.

Her kids know what's important in life. Her kids are grateful for everything they have, and they understand that Emma works hard for what they have.
She knows one carnival isn't going to trigger a complete transformation of Ian's character, but she knows it's a slippery slope, she knows that the one carnival would lead to other things, and those things could eventually cause expectations and possibly even demands.

The idea of Ian becoming a spoiled, bratty, Dudley Dursley type is terrifying. Emma would literally rather stab her own eyes out than watch her kid become like that.

She looks to Killian and her dad—mostly her dad—for backup.

David catches her eye, winks, and then turn to Snow."You know, you always said yourself that you were a spoiled little princess when you were younger," he says.

Snow's cheeks flush pink. "David!" she chides, as she whirls on him.

David shrugs, smiling his disarming smile. "I'm just saying I think we should trust Emma to know what's best for Ian. She and Killian should decide what they want to do for his birthday, not us."

Snow lets out a disappointed huff. "So, you don't want a carnival?" she asks Emma.

"I think a carnival would be awesome," Emma says. "Just not for Ian's birthday."

Henry exits the bathroom then, floating out on a billowing cloud of steam with a towel clutched tightly around his waist. He halts in his tracks when they all turn towards him, and blushes.

"There any hot water left?" David teases.

"Probably."

"Hurry up and get dressed," Snow says. "Breakfast's getting cold."

Henry begins a swift waddle across the loft, eyes averted.

"You and Ian are going for haircuts today," Emma tells him as he passes by. "And then you have to help Killian buy a pair of swim trunks."

Henry grunts wordlessly and mounts the stairs, wet feet squeaking on the wood.

Emma helps her mom set the table with plates, silverware, and glasses while David loads the pancakes and bacon onto trays. Killian hovers, clearly unsure how to help. Emma widens her eyes at him and then looks pointedly at the bottle of syrup sitting on the counter. Killian grins and grabs it.

As he sets the syrup on the table, Emma steps close, so their hips are touching, and says, "Wanna go put a pancake under Ian's nose and wake him up?"

"That sounds dangerous, Swan," Killian says. "I'm likely to lose a few fingers, and I've only got the five left."

Up close, Emma sees sweat slicking the hair at his temples. He and Henry must have gone to the warehouse to spar already. Killian smells like soap though, so he must have washed up in the bathroom before Henry showered—what was it he said? Hands, face, armpits, undercarriage?—and put fresh clothes on.

His eyes linger on hers, soft and vividly blue. He has the ability to make her forget where she is, who's around her; her world narrows down to him when he looks at her like that.

*I love you.*
He doesn't need to say it for Emma to know he's thinking it. She smiles, so he knows she's thinking it too, and brushes her fingers against his, from knuckles to wrist.

Emma pulls away, before David or Snow can say or do something to remind Emma that she and Killian aren't alone, and as she's heading towards the fridge to grab butter and orange juice for the table, she hears Ian's voice from upstairs.

"Ew, put some clothes on," he says.

"That's what I'm trying to do," Henry growls in answer.

"Try better."

Ian's scurried footsteps follow his words. He appears at the top of the stairs, smirking over his shoulder with his tongue stuck out, and before Emma can warn him that the stairs are wet, he's halfway down and slipping on one of the puddles Henry left behind.

Ian lands hard on his backside with a thud and a surprised gasp.

Everyone freezes.

"You okay?" Emma asks calmly.

"My butt..." Ian says, chin wobbling.

Emma waits. She read once that when babies fall, they look to their parents to see how they should react—if the parent's freaking out, then the kid's going to freak out. It's a useful bit of knowledge to have in your arsenal when your toddler climbs on literally everything.

Luckily, Ian's a tough little cookie. He can face-plant like a champ and then get up grinning. It's only when he actually cries that Emma's knows he's hurt for real.

"You know," David says, mimicking Emma's calm tone, "if you broke your butt, you're gonna need a new one."

Emma smiles. She never got to experience her mom and dad's parenting styles, but she's pretty sure David would be the kind of dad to smile and say, "You're not hurt. You're fine. Brush it off." whenever she fell.

"Yea, the hospital here does butt transplants," Emma says.

Ian's eyes widen. "Really?"

"Aye," Killian says, nodding grimly. "Should we call Dr. Whale?"

"We can tell him to start prepping for surgery," Snow says.

Henry's face emerges, leaning over the railing in the corner opposite the stairs. "I doubt he's got a butt lying around big enough to fit Ian."

"Shut up!" Ian yells.

Emma sighs. "You're supposed to be the mature one, you know," she says, just before Henry grins at her and then disappears from sight.

"They're brothers, Swan," Killian says, as he offers Ian a hand and helps him navigate the remainder
of the slippery stairs. "I can tell you from experience that maturity does not factor into their relationship."

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The rest of the morning passes quickly. While Killian takes the boys for haircuts and then to buy swim trunks, Emma, David, and Snow visit the hospital to check on Ariel and Will.

Will's awake, sitting up and eating on his own, eyes bright and the deathly pallor finally vanished from his skin. The bandages are gone from his hands and arms, revealing fading bruises along his knuckles, small, nearly-healed nicks, and one long, scabby scratch from wrist bone to elbow.

"The doctor told me I should be ready to go home soon," he says happily, then shovels a heaping spoonful of blue Jell-O into his grinning mouth.

"That's great," Emma says. "Ian's back. If you're still in here tomorrow, I'll bring him by."

Will's grin widens.

They check on Ariel next. She's still unconscious, but Smee's awake. He smiles nervously at them, hands twisted in his red beanie, turning it over and over in his lap. Emma considers telling him Killian's back in Storybrooke, but she stops herself.

One day. She just wants her one day for there to be no drama, no battles, no bloodshed. All she wants is to see Killian in swim trunks, to freeze her ass off in the ocean, and to watch some fireworks. That shouldn't be too much to ask for.

They manage to slip out of the hospital without running into Whale—Emma doesn't know how to tell them that his boat is currently at the Charlestown marina (and invisible), and then Emma heads to the Jolly Roger, to kill the final two hours before they're supposed to meet everyone at the beach.

It's a hot, clear day. Ian shouts and waves to her from the prow of the Jolly Roger as she walks up the pier. He's waiting for her at the top of the gangplank, bouncing on his toes eagerly.

"Hey, happy haircut," Emma says, taking it in. It's short on the sides and only a bit longer on top; it sticks up wildly in places, of its own accord, but it no longer flops over his forehead or falls into his eyes.

"Do you like it?" Ian asks.

"You look very handsome."

Ian grins, revealing his large, almost fully-grown-in two front teeth. He looks years older, less like a little boy, and Emma's not actually sure if she's okay with that or not. She reaches out and traces her thumb along the newly exposed scar running over his eyebrow and along his temple.

"Where're your dad and Henry?" she asks.

"Right here, love," comes a grunt from the left. Killian's laboring out of the trapdoor in the center of the main deck, dragging something up behind him. It turns out to be a barrel, full of refuse. Killian plants his feet on the deck and hauls the barrel up beside him. Henry follows, apparently having been pushing the barrel from below.

They both stand there panting for a moment. Curiously, Emma reaches out with a thin thread of magic and touches the barrel—and recoils instantly. Everything inside has that fuzzy, greyish-green
mold feeling she associates with Blackbeard. It stirs her stomach, revulsion rising up her throat like bile.

She releases her magic and the feeling fades, like a wave receding from the shore. She closes her eyes and holds her breath, letting it pass, letting her awareness of her surroundings creep back in, focusing on the sun warming her head and shoulders, on the cool caress of the wind, on the crisp scent of salt.

"You alright?" Killian asks.

Emma forces open her eyes."Mhm," she hums, then jerks her chin towards the barrel. "Is that all of it?"

Killian scowls. "Unfortunately, it's only the beginning. Blackbeard's crew really did a number on her."

"We'll fix her," Ian says, sucking in a deep breath and pulling a scowl identical to Killian's.

"Aye, lad, we will," Killian says, scowl softening briefly to a smile then he sighs and lifts his gaze to the deck, rolling his shoulders and tugging on his earring as he surveys his ship. His sleeves are rolled up and his collar is open, but there's sweat beaded along his brow and dripping down his shirt.

He got a haircut too, Emma realizes. It's similar to Ian's, but a bit edgier, probably two inches at its longest, fading sharply to a close crop along his temples and down to his neck. His ears are now bare, revealing the strange curve at the top that makes them look a little pointed.

Ian has the same ears.

Killian catches her looking, catches her grin, and then looks away. Emma thinks he might actually be blushing. She wonders who's idea the haircut was, his or one of the boy's?

"Perhaps you and Ian should stay up top," Killian says, meeting her eyes once more. One of his is closed against the glare of the sun, but the other is a brilliant blue, mirroring the color of the sky overhead. "It's rather warm below, and what I need to do today requires some heavy lifting. Henry and I can handle it."

"You sure?"

"Aye, love."

"I can help," Ian insists. The sunlight is turning his hair into a white-gold torch, painful to behold. He's squinting as well, and there's already a dangerous red glow on his cheeks and forehead.

"You weren't helping earlier," Henry says, one eyebrow raised pointedly. His haircut makes him look older as well, like a young man in his early 20's rather than an almost-18-year-old. It's kind of punky, shaved close on the sides, and left long on top to sweep artfully across his forehead.

"I wanna help," Ian says, a whine creeping into his voice.

"There will be more for you to do once Henry and I finish," Killian says. "Let Henry and I work, and tomorrow you can pick out which cabin you want for your bedroom."

It's a bribe, and a successful one.

Slowly, Killian scours Blackbeard's presence from his ship. Emma tests the Jolly Roger often with
her magic, enjoying the feel of Killian's turquoise aura reclaiming what was previously contaminated by Blackbeard. She might be imagining it—or not, because Killian definitely told her once that his ship was carved from Enchanted Wood—but she's pretty sure the ship is happy to have Killian back. If the ship were a cat, it would be purring.

Emma and Ian spend an hour cruising around the deck. Emma summons the sunscreen from her car, and Ian's so impressed by the display of magic that he holds still long enough for her to get his entire face and both arms.

She amuses him for a bit with more magic, drawing up a small spout of water to splash him, stirring the air into lazy spirals to tickle him, conjuring his hat from thin air and jamming it on his head. Whenever Henry and Killian emerge from below deck, panting and sweating, Emma whips up a strong wind to cool them.

"Oh my God, that feels awesome," Henry says, tilting his head back and spreading his arms as a heavy gust ruffle his clothes and hair.

"Indeed," Killian agrees, smiling with his eyes closed. "Thank you, Swan."

Ian explores while they wait. Emma has to constantly pull him off the rigging and the railings. Once, Killian has to scurry up some ropes to keep Ian from trying to climb to the crow's nest. Emma distinctly hears him say, "When your mother's not around," as he sets him back on deck.

Emma pretends not to hear. She trusts Killian, and she gets that there are father-son bonding things that have to happen without her presence (and maybe without her knowledge). Letting go like that, letting Killian step in and have some control, wasn't as hard as she thought it would be.

She watches him and Henry, the way Killian casually treats him like an adult, the way Henry responds to it. It's almost as if he becomes more mature purely to fit Killian's expectations; he's growing, in a good way.

Ian runs over to them every time they reappear on the deck, abandoning climbing the ship for trying to climb Killian. Killian laughs and wrestles with him, lets Ian gain the upper hand before grabbing him and tickling him until he's a giggling puddle at Killian's feet.

Emma almost sighs out loud with contentment. She shouldn't have made Killian leave, shouldn't have pushed him away; this is what Ian and Henry need.

When the excavation of the lower decks is complete, Killian seals the trapdoor and they all file down the gangplank back to the pier. Ian runs ahead, eager to get to the beach as fast as possible. Henry starts after him.

"Why don't you and Ian go put your swim trunks on in the car really quick?" Emma suggests.

"Okay," Henry says, and races to catch up with Ian. Emma watches them sprint towards the car, neck and neck, Henry holding himself back to keep pace with his brother.

"Oh, hey," Emma says, turning to Killian. "Did you get some swim trunks?"

His brows knit and he frowns, the edges of his mouth pulling into his beard. Emma raises her own brows.

"Swimwear here is..." He trails off darkly, shakes his head. His gaze drifts past her. Emma follows his line of sight and sees a balled-up pair of swim trunks get launched out of the open car door directly into Henry's face.
She snorts. "Were you and your brother like that?" she asks. She turns back to Killian, expecting to see that goofy, lopsided grin he gets when he reminisces about his brother, when he compares Henry and Ian to how he and Liam used to be—only Killian's frowning, more deeply than before.

His hand finds her arm and brings her to a halt.

"Killian?"

"There's something I think you should know," he says, quietly.

"What is it?"

Killian hesitates, eyes straying to Henry, briefly, and then back. "I think..." He pauses, brows twitching, threatening to pull together once more. "I think Henry might have paid his father a visit this morning."

"What?"

Emma feels as if she's been doused in cold water. She listens while Killian tells her how he followed Henry from the loft that morning, suspicious, worried. He was only able to discern the general direction Henry travelled in, and not his actual destination, but his behavior and the dispiritedness with which he returned were telling.

"What should we do?" Killian asks.

"We."

Emma likes it when he says we.

"I'll keep an eye on it," she says.

Killian raises an eyebrow.

"If I tell him that you told me, he'll think you betrayed him," Emma explains. "I don't want to do that to you." She sighs. "Plus, if he came back unhappy that means he was just as frustrated by Neal as I am. I don't think we have to worry about Henry plotting with Neal behind our backs or anything."

Killian nods. His hand is rubbing up and down her arm gently, soothingly. "He probably just wanted to talk to Neal," he says. "Perhaps understand his motives. Or ask him to stop."

"Yea." She lets out a deep breath, prying loose all the knots that the past five minutes caused to form in her stomach. It makes sense. She should really only be surprised that it didn't happen sooner. Henry suggested making some sort of deal with Neal before, trading time together for his family's safety. If Neal wasn't the Dark One this would be such a different dilemma.

Emma slumps forward and rests her head against Killian's collarbone.

"I just want to pretend that everything is normal," she says. "Just for today. One goddamn day."

Emma thinks Killian might argue, protest, tell her she's being naive, but he merely slips his arms around her waist, and presses a kiss to her hair.

"Aye, love, that sounds splendid," he murmurs. "I'm looking forward to today."

"That's not what it sounded like ten minutes ago," Emma says, chuckling into his shirt. It's damp with sweat but she doesn't mind.
"The swim trunks are...problematic," Killian says, voice straining over the words swim trunks. "But I'm determined to make the best of the situation. And I'm sure spending the day swimming with you, Henry, and Ian will far outweigh any, er, discomfort I may experience."

"It'll be fun," she says. "And maybe after-" She turns her head, pressing her nose into the exposed patch of his chest hair, places a kiss there. "-we can send the boys home with my parents."

She doesn't know what exactly she's suggesting—beach sex or going back to his room at Granny's—but he shivers and clutches her closer. Through his chest, Emma feels his heart start beating faster.

"We should go," Emma says, but she doesn't move.

Killian kisses her hair again. "We have to talk to Ian soon. About us."

"We will," Emma promises. "Let's do it tomorrow. We can take him out for breakfast and then find a nice bench on the pier to sit him down and talk to him."

"Is the breakfast a bribe?"

"No, the breakfast is so he'll sit still for ten minutes. I'm gonna make him eat so many pancakes he can't move."

A honk rings out across the docks, followed by the faint but distinct sound of Henry and Ian's laughter.

"I believe were being hailed, love."

Emma sighs, and pulls away. "You ready to experience yet another facet of life in the Land Without Magic?"

Killian grimaces. "Are the swim trunks truly necessary?"

"Yes," Emma says, and smirks.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Terribly sorry for the long wait on this one: September was crazy! So, I started writing the sequel to I belong to you, you belong to me, and I want to write the first 3 chapters before I return to AUIGH. I'm shooting for beginning of November for chapter 40. I appreciate your patience in advance, and just want to be totally clear that I am NOT giving up writing AUIGH, this is just a short little break so I can get Between the Daylight and the Deep Sea rolling :)

East Point is a long, curving crescent of a beach, all sand, sloping gradually into the sea. Unlike the beaches to the north of town, where the water is deep, rocky, and freeze-your-tits off cold even near the coast, the water at East Point is relatively warm and stays shallow pretty far out, so it's a nice, safe place to swim.

If not for its location in a town that no one else in America knows about or can enter, it would probably be one of Maine's most attractive gems.

Ruby, Belle, Robin, and her parents already have a spot staked out by the time Emma, Killian, Henry, and Ian arrive. There are only a half dozen other small groups dotting the beach, so Emma spies her mom's frantically waving arm immediately; she waves back, and then sets about loading up Ian and Henry with things to carry before either of them can escape. When their arms are full of towels and toys, Emma sends them trudging across the sand.

She and Killian follow more slowly, Killian dragging the cooler, and Emma with the giant bag of essentials (mostly extra clothes and backup sunscreen). It takes her a full minute to realize Killian's glowering. Still glowering, in fact—he's been glowering since they stopped at Granny's so he could change into his swim trunks.

And they're actually really nice swim trunks. Emma expected Henry and Ian to pick out something pirate-themed, or tropical, or just plain black—leather, even—but the pair he walked out of Granny's in are very...L.L. Bean.

They're navy blue and lined with thin red, white, and light blue stripes; they end about an inch above his knee, and the fit flatters his legs, ass, and, well, his package—which doesn't need flattering, in Emma's opinion, but she appreciates the way the swim trunks (and the lack of underwear underneath) give Killian...shape.

Luckily, Killian's too busy trying to stab the sand, the sky, and other beachgoers with just his gaze, so he doesn't notice the way Emma's flushes a furious red, or how she turns her face away, into the wind to cool her cheeks.

They catch up to Ian just as Emma's pulse resettles. He's taking his sweet time crossing the beach, slogging along miserably, hunched over and swaying from side to side, pretending Emma weighed him down with a literal ton of bricks instead of an armful of completely weightless plastic beach toys.

Emma looks over at Killian, scowling at a seagull as if the seagull is personally responsible for inventing swim trunks, and then she looks back at Ian, and decides that Killian is the source of Ian's
"You know," Emma says, to Killian, "I really didn't peg you as the modest type." He has a t-shirt on, and his swim trunks aren't any more revealing than those of any other guy currently on the beach, so Emma doesn't see the point of him pretending he's meek when it comes to his body—especially considering his pirate shirts cut down practically to his belly button.

Killian's scowl deepens, but he doesn't answer.

"You don't seem offended by Ian wearing swim trunks," Emma points out.

Killian turns his frown on her. "When I was his age I swam naked," he scoffs. "So, if anything, Ian's over dressed."

Ian perks up, eyebrows inching towards his hairline, a smile forming on his lips.

"No," Emma says, firmly. "Absolutely not. You're keeping your trunks on. There are people here who do not want or need to see you naked."

Ian rolls his eyes. Killian resumes glaring at everything within sight, and they make it another half dozen steps before he stops short.

Emma halts as well, expecting this to be some sort of final protest against swim trunks, but Killian's staring across the beach, stricken, though Emma's not sure if it's with fear or wonder. She follows his gaze and spots two ladies in bikinis, one pink, one orange and polka-dotted.

"In case you're wondering," Emma says dryly, "it's called a bikini."

Killian snaps his gaping mouth closed and turns his wide eyes sharply to her.

"And yes," she adds. "I'm also wearing one."

He looks down at her t-shirt and jean shorts, and swallows hard, Adam's apple jumping visibly.

Killian walks a little faster after that. They reach the group, and add their blankets and beach towels to the patchwork of others already lying on the sand. Someone brought lawn chairs and two huge umbrellas, and someone else (Emma guesses Robin) set up a dome-shaped camping tent.

Inside are an assortment of coolers, bags of clothes and a pile of extra beach towels, and Roland Locksley, sitting cross-legged in lime green swimming trunks, smothering himself with sunscreen.

"Hi, Emma," he says brightly. Someone—probably Belle—gave him a thin, stretchy headband to keep his thick black curls off his face.

"Hey, kid," she says, setting her bag in an empty corner. "You excited?"

He nods vigorously. "I like swimming."

"Did you swim a lot in the Enchanted Forest?"

Roland shrugs. "Rivers and lakes." He smiles. "I like the ocean better."

"I like it, too," Emma says, and smiles before ducking back outside the tent.

Beneath the shade of one of the umbrellas, Rowan is standing stock-still with her eyes closed while Belle rubs sunscreen onto her nose. A few feet away is Ian. He's wearing Spiderman swim trunks,
and he's either already shed or been forcibly removed from the remainder of his clothes—Killian and Henry have got him pinned between them, Henry holding Ian by the arms while Killian hurriedly slathers sunscreen onto his bare chest.

"Ok, turn him," Killian says. There's a brief struggle. Ian, now slippery as a fish, almost escapes, but Henry and Killian manage to wrestle him around so Killian can sunscreen his back.

"I don't need it," Ian says, glaring pure murder.

"Yes, you do," Killian says, patiently.

"Hey, can you get his face and arms again too?" Emma asks.

Henry and Killian pull their heads up, eyes wide, looking exactly as if she just asked them to jump naked into a volcano. Ian twists violently, wrenching one arm from Henry's grasp—an arm Killian catches immediately before redoubling his efforts.

Emma finds an out-of-the-way bit of blanket and strips down, slowly and somewhat self-consciously, peeling away shirt and shorts to reveal her faithful old yellow bikini. She knows she shouldn't feel insecure, but Emma doesn't think she's been to the beach with other adults since...ever.

Emma glances around furtively while she folds her clothes.

Ruby and her mom are also in bikinis, though Ruby's built like a super model and Snow is as slender as a pixie. Emma's neither of those things. She knows she's in pretty good shape, but her pregnancy with Ian left her with some permanent cellulite on her buns and some stretch marks on her tummy. She suddenly wishes she had a wrap skirt like her mom, or a cover up like Belle—or was wearing black like them.

At least Ruby's in her signature bright red. She catches sight of Emma, still folding her jean shorts with infinite care, and wanders over, either because she knows Emma's mind or because of her wolf senses, and waggles her eyebrows. "Has Hook seen you yet?" she whispers.

Emma glances past Ruby to Killian. "I don't think so."

"Alright, well I'm gonna stand right here because I wanna see his face when he does. I'll bet you twenty bucks he has to run for cold water."

"Oh my God, Ruby," Emma groans, and before she can stop her, Ruby's shouting for Killian.

"Hey, Hook!"

Killian looks over. He looks at Ruby first, and then his eyes slide over to Emma. His hand, twisting the cap back onto the bottle of sunscreen tucked into the crook of his arm, stills.

"I give him ten seconds," Ruby mutters. "Ten...nine...eight..."

Ruby's not entirely wrong. Killian gulps again as he takes her in. Emma knows him, knows his body's responses, knows what arouses him, knows what his face looks like when heat begins to coil in his gut, and she knows that it's only his ironclad self-control that's keeping him from pitching a tent in his swim trunks.

"Can I go be somewhere else right now?" Henry asks, pointedly.

"Yea, like the ocean," Ian chirps helpfully, though Emma doubts he noticed the bikini oogling going
Roland steps from the tent then, with his ridiculous baby hobbit smile and his entire face streaked chalky white. "I'm ready!" he declares.

Ruby, practically purring with satisfaction, smirks and walks away, stepping lightly over the carpet of blankets and beach towels to rejoin Belle and Rowan. Killian ducks his head and busies himself with recapping the sunscreen, but the tips of his ears are pink and his usually dexterous fingers are suddenly clumsy.

David and Robin volunteer to take the first shift swimming with the kids. Robin trots off with Rowan attached to his hand and Roland and Ian jogging alongside; David, in bright red swim shorts, challenges Henry to a race, and the two take off running and pushing each other like overgrown children. Belle and Snow both drop into their shaded lounge chairs with nearly identical sighs of contentment and open a book, while Ruby sprawls in the patch of sun beside Belle, elbow crooked and fingertips brushing Belle's arm.

Emma hovers awkwardly, watching Ian dive into the waves gracelessly but without hesitation. He disappears for a moment, and Emma's stomach clenches. It's been a year since what happened at the pool on his birthday, and Ian's swam a bunch of times since then with no problem, but Emma gained a fear that day that lodged itself deep inside her, probably forever.

Ian reappears, laughing and spitting water. Killian snorts softly beside her. "You'd never guess he nearly drowned less than a week ago," he says.

"He almost drowned once before that, too," Emma replies softly, eyes still on Ian.

"What?"

Emma begins reliving it in her memories.

"I had a pool party for him on his birthday last year," she says.

She can still see the entire scene perfectly. It was indoors—which is lucky, because it rained that day. Ian invited Sienna and Cole, a few of his friends from preschool, and two kids from his baseball team.

"Tiana was helping me chaperone. We were talking..." Emma shakes her head. Henry wasn't there. Emma didn't think Ian would be brash enough to leave the shallow end on his own. She should have known better. "He wanted to jump off the diving board. It was too deep. He went all the way to the bottom. There were some teenagers swimming, too. They didn't know he was there. I think he got stuck underneath them."

The life guard blew his whistle. Emma looked over—she almost didn't look over, assuming it was the teens in the deep end getting too rowdy again, but she knew something was wrong immediately. The room was silent. The shallow end had a handful of pale, round-eyed little faces, and none of them were Ian's.

Luckily, the life guard knew CPR. Luckily, he knew how to concentrate on breathing life back into a child while that child's mother has a breakdown practically in his face. Luckily, Ian's eyes snapped open and he started coughing up water after only the first chest compression.

Emma sent a bunch of 4-year-olds home with a cupcake, a goody bag, and memories she hoped wouldn't haunt them for the rest of their lives. After a quick trip to the ER, just to be safe, Emma ordered pizza, bought two gallons of strawberry ice cream, rented all five movies Ian requested from
Redbox, and spent the rest of the night hugging him and telling him she loved him every five minutes.

Killian's arm slipping around her waist startles her out of her reverie. She didn't realize she'd crossed her own arms over her chest, tight enough that her ribs hurt. She unclenches one hand and drops it to her hip, to tangle her fingers with Killian's.

He steps closer, his body heat warming her even though she's standing in full sunlight.

"I'm sorry," he mutters.

"Mm, you should be," she says, leaning into him. "I'm 99% certain he only tried to jump off the diving board because he was trying to impress Sienna—showing off for a girl sounds exactly like the sort of thing he would have inherited from you."

Killian bursts out laughing. Ruby sits up quickly and twists towards them.

Emma tenses instinctively—she sort of forgot they weren't alone, she's sort of not used to flaunting her and Killian's relationship in public, and Killian sort of has his hand on her bare hip—but Ruby only slides her sunglasses down her nose to quirk one disbelieving eyebrow at them.

"Are you two still here?"

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The water is pretty much freezing, as expected. Emma walks in up to her knees and pauses, trying to will warmth into her legs. Killian's beside her, apparently unaffected by the temperature of the water lapping at his shins. He stops as well and smiles down at her, bemused.

"You don't have to wait for me," she says.

Ahead, David, Henry, and Robin are in up to their waists, tossing around a beach ball, keeping it just out of the reach of Ian, Roland, and Rowan, who giggle as they leap from the water, arms flailing in futile attempts to intercept.

"Take your time, Swan," Killian says. "I don't mind waiting."

He looks strangely naked in just his swim trunks. He's usually all covered up; even when it's hot and everyone else in Storybrooke is sweating their ass off, Killian's in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt, and usually a vest.

"You look good," Emma says, admiring what she can see of his chest from the corner of her eye. He doesn't look like a guy that lifts weights or does thousands of sit-ups, but he's lean and wiry, with the sort of muscle Emma supposes he gained from sword-fighting and whatever labor a captain does aboard his own ship.

It's not the first time Emma's noticed how attractive he is—or how attracted to him she is—but it's different seeing his body as exposed as it is in a context outside of a bedroom. It makes her want to find a nice sand dune to drag him behind.

"You look stunning as well, love," Killian says, voice low and deep, barely audible over the sound of the waves.

"Thanks."
He grins. "I'm not sure it's completely appropriate public attire, however."

"Oh? Do you want me to put my clothes back on?"

"No—well, _yes_, actually. I don't want anyone else seeing you like this."

"Jealous?" she teases.

"Yes," he growls, his desire to drag _her_ behind a sand dune glinting in his eyes.

Emma smiles. _That_ will have to wait until later. She snatches up Killian's hand and marches purposefully forward, plowing through the waves into deeper water before her brain decides it's too cold and she chickens out.

Ian catches sight of them and starts waving. David, either on purpose or on accident, passes the beach ball to Henry a little too low, and Roland, the tallest of the three kids, manages to get a hand up and spike the ball down—directly into Ian's face. Caught by surprise, Ian falls backwards and slips underwater.

Killian sucks in a breath, even as Ian pops back up, grinning.

"Is he alright?"

"He's fine," Emma assures him. "A beach ball's nothing. He once took an actual baseball to the face and then refused to stop playing."

"What's a baseball?"

"It's—let's just say it's hard and it hurts when you get hit with one."

That happened in the fall. The kid up to bat hit a grounder right to Ian, only the ball took a weird bounce in the dirt and ended up hitting Ian square in the mouth. Even with blood dribbling down his chin, he wouldn't leave the field—mostly because he was mad that he didn't catch the ball and make the play.

_God_ her kid's a magnet for accidents.

_He always bounces back though_, she thinks, then looks at Killian and realizes that may be another trait Ian inherited from his dad.

Killian's torso is littered with scars. Most are obviously from a bullet or a knife, though there's one gouge in his shoulder that Emma can't guess the origin of. The worst in appearance are the ragged scars on his bare wrist—but the most horrifying ones are the thin, nearly invisible lines that crisscross his shoulders and lower back.

Whip marks.

"_They're old_," Killian once told her. "_The oldest I have._"

Normally they're barely noticeable, but Emma's only seen them in indoor lighting—usually dim indoor lighting, at that. Today the sunlight is making the scar tissue glow.

_Oh, fuck_, she thinks as she stares at Killian's back. Suddenly, his qualms about swim trunks make a little more sense.

Emma slows, but Killian continues past, flashing her a smile, so Emma follows, swallowing down
her guilt and resolving to apologize to Killian later.

Ian climbs up Killian as soon as they reach each other, and clings to him like a wet koala. The beach ball is tossed towards Emma and she's plunged into the game of keep-away. Killian joins, with Ian clinging to his back trying to bat the ball away any time it comes near. Killian manages to catch the ball one-handed and keep it from Ian—though he does occasionally pretend to fumble the ball long enough for Ian to slap it away to Roland or Rowan.

Eventually Robin and David head back to shore. Emma thinks longingly of the hot sand and hotter sun, but forces herself to stay—maybe the water's not that cold (and maybe spending time goofing around with Henry and Ian and Killian is more enticing than a warm hug from a dry beach towel).

Ava arrives after an hour, slinking up to Henry in an aqua blue bikini and dunking him underwater, to the roaring approval of Ian. Emma almost expects her and Henry to depart and find a quieter slice of ocean, but they stay and initiate a round of chicken fights.

Predictably, Ian chooses Killian's shoulders to scramble onto, so Roland climbs aboard Henry, and Ava takes Rowan.

Roland knocks Ian off with ease, but doesn't know how to handle Rowan. Ava takes advantage of Roland's hesitation and tickles Henry, making Henry squirm so hard Roland loses his balance and falls. Ian proves equally unable to grapple with a girl significantly smaller than him, so Rowan emerges the victor.

David and Robin are drawn back into the water by the chicken fights. Ruby trails them, treading slowly with her hands held carefully above the water and her nose scrunched up.

"I didn't know wolves could swim," Killian says.

Ruby throws him a withering glare—and retreats back to dry land five minutes later.

Ian and Killian stay in the water the longest. Emma has to wade in to her knees again and shout that it's time to eat before they finally stop swimming.

She watches them return to shore, giggling and splashing and pushing each other. She only looks at the way Killian's wet swim trunks cling to his front parts a little bit, and only until Ian reaches the sand and crashes into her.

"I'm so hungry," he groans.

"Yep," she says. "That's why it's dinner time."

He's soaking wet and shivering; he presses his cold nose into her stomach so she wraps her arms around him.

"Is it dinner time already?" Killian asks, running his hand through his hair, slicking it back.

"Sort of. We skipped lunch so we're eating a bit early. Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

Ian pulls his head up and tilts it backwards to peer at Killian upside-down. "What's 'famished' mean?"

Killian leans over Ian's face and gives his head a little shake, sending a cascade of water droplets
dripping onto Ian's cheeks. "It means very hungry," he says, and tweaks Ian's nose.

Ian rights himself and regards Emma seriously. "I'm famished too," he says. Behind him, Killian grins.

"It's a good thing we have extra sandwiches then," Emma says, and starts steering Ian back towards the group.

"What kind of sandwiches?" Ian asks, suspiciously.

"The kind you're going to eat no matter what because your grandma made them."

Ian frowns, slowing and leaning back into the arm Emma has around his shoulders. "They're not tuna, are they?"

"They're peanut butter," Emma says—Snow found out the hard way a few weeks ago that Ian does not like tuna.

"Oh, okay," Ian says, expression clearing. "Can I put Goldfish crackers on mine?"

"If you really want to."

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The rest of the afternoon passes quickly into the evening. After their early dinner and an hour of building sandcastles, they go for a final round of swimming.

The air's cooler, so Emma's in and out pretty quick. Killian and Ian are once again the last two in the water, and Killian has to drag Ian out, tucked under his arm like a piece of shivering, complaining luggage. They wrap him in a beach towel and plop him on a blanket, where he pouts until he falls asleep. Emma checks his forehead for a fever, just in case puking in the car yesterday wasn't carsickness, but he feels fine so she lets him rest in the shade.

Ian wakes at sunset, just in time for another meal.

"Have a nice nap?" Emma asks, brushing his bangs to the side with her fingers. His hair dried while he was sleeping, and it's sticking up at odd angles all along the top of his head.

"Mm," he mumbles, still groggy.

They eat, then pack away the beach toys and stow the umbrellas. Emma gets Ian out of his swim trunks and into clean shorts and a sweatshirt. David and Henry go back to the parking lot to fetch the fireworks.

The three kids cram into the open mouth of the tent, snacking on chips and cookies and giggling. Emma helps shake out the towels and blankets, put the wet ones to the side, and resettle all the dry ones. She hears Ian rattling off the names of different constellations, and looks up. The sky is darkening, and the first spray of stars is visible.

"Hercules," Killian says, in her ear. His arm slides around her waist and gently tugs, pulling her body snugly against his.

"Hm?" Emma says, distracted by the fingertips pressed against her stomach.

"Hercules," Killian repeats. Warm air gusts down Emma's neck as Killian presses his cheek to the side of her head, lips just behind her ear. "It's right above us, Swan."
"Oh?"

"Aye," he says with a chuckle. His hand leaves her belly and lifts towards the sky. "Four stars form a square, and branching from each of those stars is a limb; two outstretched above, and-"

"Is he supposed to look like he's dancing?"

Killian's hand returns. "It is a rather interesting pose," Killian agrees.

Emma leans into him, and his arm tightens. It's a weird, vulnerable feeling, being so "public" with Killian. Not that anyone seems to care. Emma guesses they all knew anyway. The only one who doesn't know is Ian—well, Emma's sure he knows, he just doesn't...know know. They have to talk to him.

"Can I ask you something?" she says quietly. There's a little bubble of space around them, affording them some privacy.

"Anything," Killian says.

"The reason you were upset about wearing swim trunks...is it because of your scars? The ones on your back?"

He stiffens, and Emma turns in the circle of his arm to face him. His expression is closed, his eyes averted and faraway, and for a moment he looks lost, lost in his memories...but then the light returns to his eyes.

"Aye," he says softly. "Those scars are a part of my past I don't wish to be made public."

Killian told her the man he and his brother were sold to was cruel. She thinks about that gentleness she sees inside him, and she thinks about how he is with Ian, how patient he is; he can be firm, stern, but he doesn't yell or visibly lose his temper, even when Ian's at his most exasperating.

He's looking at her, but Emma doesn't know what to say so she goes up on her tiptoes. He dips his head to meet her lips and they share a short, soft kiss. She drops back to her heels, but Killian follows, keeping his forehead pressed to hers.

"I love you," he murmurs, just loud enough for her to hear.

"I-"

A towel slaps her on the ass, stinging her, and she yelps.

"Firework time, lovebirds," Ruby says.

"Hey!" Ian yells from the tent mouth. "Don't hit my mom!"

Ruby turns towards him with her hands on her hips. "Oh yea?" she teases. "What're you gonna do about it?"

"I'm gonna hit your mom!" Ian replies hotly.

Ruby arcs and eyebrow. "You're gonna hit Granny?"

Even in the near darkness, Emma sees Ian go pale.

"No," he breathes, horrified.
"Smart kid," Ruby says.

"Ian," Emma says, "Don't threaten to hit people's moms. It's not nice."

He frowns. Emma can see him reevaluating his crush on Ruby, and it's actually sort of flattering to know his love for his mom is stronger than his infatuation with arguably the most attractive woman he's met in his entire 6 years of life.

David and Henry return with two huge boxes of fireworks—way more than Emma remembers buying.

"We got some more," David explains with a shrug.

Henry volunteers to set off the fireworks, but David pushes him firmly towards Ava. Emma and Killian find an empty blanket and sit side-by-side; within a minute Ian pushes himself into the narrow gap between them and settles himself across their laps with his head resting on Emma's shoulder.

Everyone's silent except for the occasional gasp and quiet *ooohs* and *ahhs*. The fireworks are nowhere near as grand a display as what they're used to in Boston, but Emma would rather be here on the beach with her family with nothing but a pack of sparklers than back in Boston.

A particularly loud shell bursts a little too low in the air, and she and Ian jump. Killian scoots closer. His hand slides over hers on the blanket and their fingers tangle.

Emma lets out a contented sigh. It was a good day. Tomorrow is back to normal life, back to figuring out how to parent Ian together, how to be dating with this "I love you" thing they just said, how to save the town from her stupid ex without ruining Henry's life-

A few feet away, Snow's cell phone lights up in her lap and starts buzzing. Snow snatches it up hastily and presses it to her ear.

"Hello?"

Emma hears a male voice on the other end, but she can't make out the words.

"Okay," Snow says, after a minute. "We'll be there in the morning. Thank you, doctor." Snow lowers the phone and looks towards Emma. "That was Dr. Whale. He said Ariel's awake."

"Oh, good," Emma says. One of the many tiny knots she's been carrying inside her loosens.

"I should go tell David." Snow stands and jogs away across the sand towards where David's crouching beside the box of fireworks.

"Does grandma mean the Little Mermaid?" Ian asks.

"Yep."

Ian grins. "Cool!"

"Ariel's here?" Killian asks.

"Yea," Emma says. "Do you know her?"

A boom signals the release of another firework, and a moment later it bursts, filling the sky with glittery red light.
"Ariel and I have..." His voice is tense. Emma sees him swallow hard, and then his eyes flick from her to Ian and then back. "We have a past, love."

Emma knows he doesn't mean a romantic one.

The red light fades from the sky, and they're plunged once more into darkness.

"It's okay," Emma says. She turns her hand beneath his and squeezes his fingers. He grips back hard, hand trembling.
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

Aaaaaaaaaaand I'm back! Sorry for the long wait, it's just been...so busy. I took on a lot of extra responsibilities at work this year, and we've had a family member staying nearby while they complete an internship downtown, so...ugh. I'm going to put Between the Daylight and the Deep Sea on the back burner for now, until the AUIGH muse is exhausted and needs a little break. I'll be working solely on AUIGH for at least two more chapters before *maybe* switching again, but we'll see. Anyway, enjoy!

Killian sits in the hospital waiting room with his head leaned back against the wall and his eyes closed, clinging to his sun-drenched memories of the beach from the previous day, holding the gold-tinted images firm and bright in his mind, gently cradling the bubble of warmth and happiness inside his belly.

Emma tried to get him to talk after they left the beach, but he shut her out and brushed her off. He spent the night alone in his room at Granny's, drinking rum to dull both the fear and his rising panic. He doesn't know what will happen when the truth is revealed, when Ariel tells Emma what he did six years ago. Will she look at him differently? Will she decide she doesn't want him around after all? Will she tell him to leave her and Ian alone?

The bubble quivers, threatens to burst.

If Emma asks him to leave, he'll do it. It will break him, but he'll do as she wishes.

He can feel Ian fidgeting in the chair beside him, buffeting his arm and occasionally his leg. Killian knows that, were he to look, he would see dusty sneaker prints on his jeans from ankle to thigh.

"Is your hat magic?"

Killian opens his eyes. Smee is with them, sitting in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the waiting room.

"No," says Smee, touching the red knit hat atop his head. "Should it be?"

Ian shrugs. "No. It would just be cool if it was."

Smee smiles, the same polite but bewildered smile he's been giving Ian since they were introduced, and then he looks at Killian, for at least the thousandth time, seeking an explanation that Killian has neither the energy nor the patience to provide. Ian is his son, and Emma is Ian's mother, and that's all Smee needs to know—he can draw whatever conclusions he wishes.

Killian's just closing his eyes again when Ian asks another question.

"Are you my dad's best friend?"

Smee's eyebrows climb so high they nearly disappear beneath the folded brim of his cap. "Well, I'm, um, I'm your, uh, your father's, uh..." His tone is delicate, and he says "father" as if the word is fragile, as if it might break apart in his mouth. His eyes flick to Killian's, once, and then back to Ian.
"I'm his friend, yes."

"Yea, but are you his best friend?"

"No, I'm just a...a regular friend."

Killian's guts twist, adding shame and guilt to the already churning swirl of emotions eating away at the edges of his very being. Smee is perhaps Killian's only real friend, and yet Killian followed Henry and Ian into the portal to Storybrooke and left his crew behind without a thought spared for their wellbeing.

Ariel called him selfish and heartless.

She was right.

Ian sighs loudly and slumps backwards. He kicks his feet back and forth for a few moments, then sighs again and slides so low in his chair that his chin comes to rest on his chest; the back of his t-shirt is bunched up around his neck, exposing a large expanse of his stomach, including ribs, belly button, and the waistband of his Incredible Hulk underwear.

It's all part of an elaborate protest.

Emma asked them to stay behind while she, her parents, and Belle went to speak with Ariel. Naturally, Ian was less than pleased by his exclusion. Henry was also not invited, but, unlike Ian, he chose not to be sullen and grumpy about it and instead went to visit Will Scarlet.

Perhaps that's what Killian should do. It would be a good distraction from Ariel, from Smee. Besides that, he hasn't visited young Will yet, and he owes him an enormous thank you for putting himself in between the boys and Blackbeard's men.

And speaking of Blackbeard, Killian could pay him another visit as well. A very final visit.

Hell, if everything's about to come crashing down around him, what's one more death, one more dark deed to add to his tally? He may as well kill the bastard that kidnapped his son and ordered him flung off a cliff. It's the very least Killian could do, and he truthfully wouldn't feel even the tiniest modicum of regret.

"Hey."

Killian tenses and looks over. Emma's standing in the doorway of the waiting room with her arms folded tightly over her stomach.

"Hey," Killian echoes. He searches her eyes for some sign that she knows, for some subtle indication that she hates him now.

"Ariel wants to see you," she says.

Her voice is flat, her expression closed. Killian's fear solidifies, forms a solid lump in his throat that chokes him. He nods mutely and stands. Ian jumps up beside him, nearly tripping him as he tries to pass.

"Can I go too?" Ian asks eagerly.

"Not yet, kid," Emma says. "Ariel's not ready for more visitors right now."

"But my dad's going," Ian points out.
"Yea, well, your dad's an adult—and Ariel asked for him."

Ian frowns. Killian can see his brain working furiously, generating arguments and counterarguments.

"Stay here, lad," Killian says.

"But I don't want to."

"I know you don't want to, but you have to," Emma says. Her eyes slide to Smee, and then to the pile of toys and books in the corner. "Maybe if you ask nicely, Mr. Smee will help you build one of those puzzles."

"Just 'Smee' is fine," Smee says, smiling politely again. "And I'd be happy to."

"Those puzzles all suck," Ian pouts.

"Watch your language," Killian growls.

Ian ignores him. "Mom, please!" he begs, shoulders falling and body quaking like a piece of pleading jelly. "I really want to see her!"

"She's not a zoo animal, Ian."

"I know."

"I don't think you do," Emma says under her breath. She turns sideways so Killian can slip past her into the hallway, then adds, louder, "We'll be back in a few minutes. Stay with Smee."

"But mom!"

Killian trudges down the hallway on leaden legs. He can hear Ian whining, but the sound grows fainter the farther away Killian gets, so he knows the boy obeyed and remained in the waiting room. Emma catches up to him and sighs. "He didn't sleep well last night," she says, as if apologizing.

"Nightmares again?" Killian asks quietly. He slows, and Emma falls into step beside him, nodding.

"Yea."

They walk in silence down the remainder of the hallway, but when they turn the corner Emma grabs his arm and halts him. Killian turns to face her, forcing himself to meet her eye.

"He's been through some shit, Killian," she says. "I think he should talk to someone—a professional. Archie, maybe."

"Archie? You mean that grasshopper bloke?"

_The one I once kidnapped and held prisoner aboard the Jolly Roger_, he thinks.

"I think he's actually a cricket," Emma says, "but yea."

Killian raises an eyebrow. "You want Ian to talk to a cricket? Why?"

"Because Archie's a psychiatrist."

"A what?"
"A psychiatrist. It's his job to talk to people and, you know, help them work through their issues and stuff."

"Well, can't we do that?"

Emma matches his raised eyebrow with one of her own. "Haven't we already been trying?"

There's something in her eyes, some deep sorrow he feels reverberating in his own chest, drowning out all else. Killian looks away. Emma's correct: they've been trying to reassure Ian that he's safe and everything's alright, but the boy's world has been chaos since he and Henry first left Boston a month ago.

"Is that what you think is best, Swan?" he asks, gaze fixed firmly on a water fountain to his left.

"I do. I think maybe Henry should talk to him to. He'd never admit he needed to, but...it might be good for him."

Killian nods, turns his gaze from the water fountain to the toes of his boots.

"Hey," Emma says gently, "this doesn't mean we failed."

"That's not how it feels, Emma."

She lays her hand gently on his arm, just above his elbow.

"Killian, nothing that's been going on can be considered normal circumstances. Ian's entire life just got turned upside down, and we need to help him understand what that means and how to deal with it. We're doing our best, but..." Her hand falls away, and she shrugs. "It's not a weakness to ask for help—and if there's someone out there who can do a better job than we can right now helping Ian, then why wouldn't we want them to help?"

Killian gives his head a little shake and then lifts it. "You're right. We should do what's best for Ian."

She smiles, a small, tentative compression of her lips. Killian wants to reach out, touch her, take her hand, but he feels as if there's a barrier between them. She's watching him warily, a small crease between her brows. The tension is like a spike driven through him. The uncertainty of the moment makes Killian want to scream, to break something. The only solution that comes to mind is to take the plunge, to leap off the edge into the darkness below, come what may.

"Emma, love, I thought you said Ariel-"

"She does." Emma folds her arms over her stomach again. "I just..." Emma pauses and bites her lip. The crease between her brows deepens. "She said Blackbeard kidnapped her and then starved her and beat her for two weeks until she agreed to open the portal to Storybrooke. When she heard you were here in the hospital...Killian, what happened between you two?"

That tiny bubble of warmth inside of him—the bubble that's been growing smaller and smaller with every passing second—finally bursts. Cold floods his limbs, fills his veins with ice.

"Please," Emma says, taking a step forward. "I gave you your space last night because you said you weren't ready to talk about it, but I need to know. I'd rather hear it from you than from Ariel."

There are tears in her eyes, and Killian realizes she must have been up all night, imagining all the terrible possibilities—just as he was—wondering how things would play out, what Killian would do—what she might have to do.
He lets out a shaky breath. He moves his hand, turns it, and finds Emma's fingers there, waiting. Her warmth is a lifeline that he clings to.

"Six years ago, Ariel came to me seeking aid," he says. "Blackbeard had stolen her true love away, and she needed my help to get him back." He stops, and she squeezes his hand. "There...came a moment when I had a choice—it was either her prince or the Jolly Roger..."

"And you chose the Jolly Roger."

It's not a question.

Ariel's words from six years ago echo back to him: *Isn't true love more important than a few planks of wood and a sail?*

"Aye. I chose the Jolly Roger."

There's disappointment in Emma's eyes, and it stings—worse than he thought it would.

"It was wrong," Killian says. Hysteria or something similar is rising up his throat, quickening his pulse, compressing his lungs, making his heart work double-time. "I knew it was wrong at the time, and I did it anyway. I have no excuse. I don't deserve forgiveness-"

He's babbling. He tries to pull his hand from Emma's, but she only grips his fingers harder.

"Maybe Ariel will forgive you anyway," she says.

Everything inside of him stills.

"Emma, can you forgive me?"

She blinks. She takes another step forward, fingers sliding more firmly between his. Killian feels the weight of her other hand wrap around his hook. Her golden hair and cream-colored skin fill his vision. Warmth seeps back into his body, his pulse slows, and the jagged ache leaves his chest.

"I know you have a dark past, Killian, but I also know that you've changed. Whatever you did..." She shakes her head. "You're not that person anymore."

Emma leans in, green eyes bright and steady on his, and Killian follows. He brushes his lips against hers.

"You can tell me about your past on your own time," she says. Her nose bumps his. "It's not gonna change anything between us. I'm going to choose to see the best in you."

Her hands slide up his chest to his collarbones. Killian leans in again, and-

There's a scuffling noise, and Killian jolts backwards, all his instincts attuned to identifying and dispatching whatever threat has found its way into their midst.

The threat turns out to be Snow and David. They're an entangled mess of expletives and flailing limbs, both trying to scramble around the corner and out of sight but in different directions. When they notice they've been spotted, they cease jostling each other.

Snow clears her throat. "Sorry, we just...we didn't want to interrupt."

"So you awkwardly stood there and watched?" Emma asks.
"Only for a little bit."

"Next time interrupt," Emma grunts.

Killian follows her to Ariel's room and tries not to wonder how much Snow and David might have overheard.

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Ariel's lying in what Killian can only describe as a bathtub. It's standing where in all the other rooms a bed would be. The end of Ariel's glittery teal tail protrudes from one end, curving over the edge of the tub and nearly touching the floor.

Belle is sitting in a chair beside her, leaning over with one elbow resting on her crossed legs and her chin in her hand. They're speaking in low voices, but their conversation ceases when Killian enters the room.

Ariel's eyes lock on his, and her face goes rigid.

"You."

Her words ring out, and Killian's head jerks as if physically struck by them.

Snow and David glance over with raised eyebrows before carefully schooling their faces back to neutrality. Belle doesn't look surprised, but neither does she look angry.

"Hello, Ariel," Killian says. He can't bring his feet to carry him any farther into the room. In fact, it's as if his entire body is trying its best to shrink in upon itself.

"What did you take from him?"

Killian lifts his head a little, meeting Ariel's fiery gaze. "Pardon?"

"Blackbeard," she spits. Her red hair, damp at the ends, is a gnarled halo around her head, and there are dark circles beneath her eyes and hollows in her cheeks. "What did you do to him this time?"

Emma's hand on his arm reminds him that she's with him, no matter what. Killian takes a deep breath and straightens. He owes Ariel his honesty.

"I stole a magic bean from him."

"And what could Captain Hook possibly want with a magic bean that was worth leaving his precious ship behind?"

"I had to get my son and my son's brother back to this realm—back to their mother."

Some of the anger drains from her face, and she frowns. "I didn't know you had a son," she says. He can hear the suspicion in her tone, and he can't blame her.

"Neither did I," he says, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

She stares at him for a long moment, then says softly, sadly, "You traded a man's life for your ship."

*You promised me that you would help find Eric. Please!*

"Aye, I did."
"What kind of person does that?"

I know that you're a good man—and I know that man is still in there somewhere. It's not too late to do the right thing.

"The kind that's empty," he says.

I feel sorry for you. You'll never be happy.

"The kind of man that believes a ship can fill a void left by a broken heart."

She's mine. She's all I need. Those were the words he'd snarled six years ago. They weren't the truth, they were merely a mask for the truth: She's all I have left. The Jolly Roger was all he had left to try and fill the void Emma Swan left behind, because he feared that if he didn't fill it, it would only grow and grow and grow until it swallowed him whole.

"I was desperate," he says.

"And that makes it okay?"

She's blinking back tears and Killian's throat feels suddenly tight—he hurt this woman so much, and he does regret it, because she didn't deserve it.

"No, it doesn't make it right," he says. "I would give anything to take it back, to make things right-"

"How can I believe you? How can I trust anything a man who no longer believes in love says?"

"Because I still do."

He looks at Emma. She looks startled to have been brought into the conversation so abruptly, but her shock softens quickly into a small smile.

"Is she the woman that broke your heart?"

Killian smiles, and Emma blushes and looks down.

"Yes," he says.

"And your son?"

"He's here. Smee's watching him."

Suddenly, Ariel breaks into sobs. Killian freezes, terrified that he's the cause, but Snow and Belle rush forward and lay their hands gently on her arms and shoulders.

"Ariel, what's wrong?" Snow asks.

"My daughter," Ariel says. "I lost her!"

"You have a daughter?"

Ariel nods. "Eric and I have been searching for her, but we can't find her! I was looking for her when Blackbeard and his men captured me." She looks up, imploringly, face red and streaked with tears. "I have to get back to the Enchanted Forest! I have to find her!"

Killian, Emma, and David exchange glances.
Snow strokes Ariel's hair and makes shushing noises until Ariel's calmed down enough for her to say, "Ariel, honey, tell me what happened. Maybe we can help."

"I don't know," Ariel says, in a shuddery voice. "She was visiting with my mother and father in Atlantica. They said there was an earthquake—something happened above the water that sent shockwaves all the way down to the bottom of the sea—and when everything cleared, she was just gone."

"Is she a mermaid too?"

"No—I mean, yes, but not all the time. She has to wear a special bracelet to help her transform." Ariel pauses, and her face starts to crumple again. "If she's lost at sea she could be anywhere, and it's already been a month, and I don't...I don't..."

"A month?" David says, while Snow resumes comforting Ariel. He looks over, to Emma.

"The Dark Curse was cast about a month ago," Emma says.

"You don't think that maybe-"

Something small runs into Killian's legs and crows, "I know who her daughter is!"

Everyone stops and goes quiet and looks at Ian, clinging to Killian's legs with a huge grin. Killian doesn't even bother trying to feign surprise. Of course Ian gave Smee the slip. Of course he's been eavesdropping.

"Ian!" Emma hisses. "You're supposed to be with Smee!"

Ian shrugs. His grin doesn't falter.

"How did you-"

"This is your son?" Ariel asks.

Killian lays his hand on Ian's head, and Ian leans into him.

"Aye. This is Ian. Ian, why don't you say hello?"

"Hi," Ian says. "I like your tail."

Through her tears, Ariel smiles. "Thank you," she says, then looks up and looks between Emma and Killian. "He's so young."

"He's almost six," Emma says. There's some motherly connection happening between her and Ariel that Killian is completely missing. "How old's your daughter?"

"Three," Ariel says. Then, to Ian. "Do you really know my daughter?"

"Melody," Ian says. "I met her."

Melody. The name rings a bell faintly somewhere in Killian's memories.

"You met her?" Ariel gasps. "She's here?"

"Yea! She's at that big house with Nemo!"
Killian can picture her now, a little girl with black hair and aqua eyes, stuck to Ian like a barnacle.

"Misthaven House," Snow says. "She's at Misthaven House."

"I'll call Nemo," David says, pulling his cell phone from his pocket even as he strides from the room. "I can get Melody and have her here in less than an hour."

Ariel breaks out in fresh sobs, though it's clear that this time they're sobs of relief.

---

While they wait, Ian insists on sitting next to Ariel. Emma and Killian try to convince him to give the poor woman some peace and quiet and privacy, but Ariel actually smiles and says it's okay. Emma leaves to check that Smee's still alive somewhere, and Ian climbs into Killian lap and proceeds to ask every single question that comes into his mind.

"Is King Triton your dad?"

"Yes."

"Does he have a big white beard?"

"Yes."

"And a trident?"

"Yes."

"And Prince Eric is your husband?"

"Mnhm."

"Do you live together all the time?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"What do you mean?"

"How do you live together if you're a mermaid and he's not?"

"Well, I have a special, magical bracelet that lets me be a human for as long as I wear it."

"Oh. Do you guys have a big fluffy dog named Max?"

"We do. How did you know?"

It continues for what feels like hours. Emma returns and sits in a chair on the other side of the tub. She doesn't speak, she just watches Killian and Ian with a soft smile and twinkling eyes.

When Ian finally runs out of questions, Killian feels compelled to fill the silence.

"So, you found your prince then?"

"Yes, after I left your ship, I found the island he was on."
Killian appreciates how she phrases things in front of Ian. It's a kindness he doesn't deserve.

"We've been living happily ever after ever since."

"I'm glad," Killian says. He means it. He's grateful his actions didn't ruin the woman's life, destroy her happiness forever. Not everyone he wronged was as lucky.

Snow arrives, beaming, and announces, "She's here!"

David carries Melody in on his hip. She's dressed all in yellow with little red sneakers, and her long black hair is pulled into a ponytail. Her eyes go wide when she sees Ariel.

"Momma!" she cries, and wriggles out of David's arms and to the floor. She sprints to the tub, right into Ariel's waiting arms.

"My baby!" Ariel says, burying her face in Melody's hair. "Oh, I missed you so much!" She squeezes the girl tight and begins rocking her back and forth.

Killian slides one arm under Ian's knees and stands, bringing Ian up with him, and he and Emma slip from the room as silently as possible.

---

Snow and David remain at the hospital to keep Ariel company, and to ensure Melody is given a bed and allowed to stay with her mother. Killian, Emma, and the boys have the loft to themselves for the evening, so Emma buys pizza setups and Henry rents a movie.

After they eat, they clean up and then move into the living room area.

"Indiana Jones?" Emma asks, when she sees the title frozen on the television screen.

"Yea, it's a classic," Henry says.

"It's also kind of scary."

"No, it's not.

"What about that one scene at the end?"

"Oh, well, I don't know, cover Ian's eyes or something so he doesn't get scared."

"I'm not scared!" Ian insists, through a mouthful of popcorn.

Henry scoffs.

Emma and Killian share a look as Emma wedges herself onto the couch in between Henry and Ian, just managing to thwart Ian's attempt to stick his foot in Henry's popcorn bowl.

"Is this Indiana Jones a pirate?" Killian asks.

"No, even better," says Henry. "He's a-"

"I beg your pardon?" Killian interjects. "Did you just imply there's something better than a pirate?"

Henry grins.

"Wait, that reminds me," Emma says, brow furrowed. She turns to Ian. "How did you get past
"Smee?"

"Uh..." Ian's cheeks go red and he scrunches closer to Killian, attempting to disappear into the narrow gap between Killian's body and the couch cushions.

"Ian."

"Ian, lad, answer your mother."

"I told him I had to go to the bathroom," Ian says.

Emma's eyes narrow. "I don't-"

"The bathroom on that floor has two doors," Henry explains. "They both let out onto different hallways."

Emma levels Ian with a stern look. "So you went in one door and out the other?" she asks flatly.

Ian nods.

Emma sighs, and looks at Killian. "If Smee ever wants to be Ian's babysitter, he's gonna have to be a little less gullible."

Killian almost chokes on the piece of popcorn he just snagged from Ian's bowl. "You want Smee to babysit Ian?" he asks. "Smee?"

Emma shrugs. "Well, you know, my parents can't do it all the time, and Belle and Ruby have Rowan now. We need to expand our babysitter pool. He's your friend, right?"

"Aye. He's my friend," Killian admits.

"Ok, so?"

"I'll keep it in mind, Swan."

She smiles, and turns back towards the television.

Ian resettles himself comfortably, wiggling beneath Killian's arm and stretching his legs across Emma's lap—Henry eyes Ian's feet and pointedly moves his popcorn bowl from his lap to rest on the cushion beside his thigh.

Killian drops a kiss on the top of Ian's head. "You did a good job today, lad."

"Huh?" Ian says, tilting his head back.

"I don't mean the trick you played on Smee," Killian clarifies hastily, in response to Emma's horrified glare. "I meant with Ariel. You helped her find her daughter."

"Oh," Ian says. "I just didn't want Ariel to be sad. I know mom would be sad if she thought she lost me or Henry."

Killian doesn't mention the fact that that's exactly how he and his brother lured Emma to Storybrooke in the first place.

"You made Ariel very happy," he says instead, tapping Ian's nose.
Ian grins at him. Killian grins back. The boy's not like him. He has no darkness, and Killian intends to keep it that way. If the cricket can help, then Killian will do everything in his power to ensure that happens.

He looks up at Emma, at the soft smile she's giving him.

*I'm going to choose to see the best in you.*

It feels like a second chance. Everything he's been trying to build could have crumbled to dust today, but it didn't, because Ariel's a better person than he is, and because Emma is choosing to believe in him.

He's not going to let her down.
Chapter 41

Killian's history with Ariel turned out to be not nearly as terrible as Emma feared, given the way Killian acted after he found out Ariel was in Storybrooke.

Honestly, Emma probably would have chosen the Jolly Roger too—at least, she knows what she would have done if the Bug was literally all she had left in the world and some stranger assaulted her and then asked her to trade her only possession for the whereabouts of some other stranger.

She also definitely would have gone with the option that involved Blackbeard and sharks, though that might only be in light of recent events.

Still, she gets that Killian feels like the shittiest human being ever for going back on his word and for not making the more heroic choice. Emma was initially a bit disappointed when he finally told her the truth, but it was more so because he hadn't just told her the truth from the beginning. She told him that she knows he's changed, and she meant it.

In any case, Killian seems determined to make up for what he did. The next day, when Ariel tells them that she needs Melody's magic bracelet in order to take Melody home, Killian volunteers to lead the search.

Which is why Emma's currently rummaging through the pawn shop—and probably contracting some sort of respiratory infection in the process.

Without Gold around to keep things tidy, the dust has taken over; it blankets everything, laying in a thick layer over the cabinets and glass display cases, rolling across the floor in tumbleweed-like clusters, and bursting in clouds from literally everything Emma touches.

"*Fuck,*" she swears, as she erupts in a flurry of sneezes. She instinctively slams her face into the crook of her arm to contain the germs spraying from her nose and mouth, and the weird golden lamp she just pulled off a shelf jolts from her fingers and falls to the floor with a clatter.

"You okay?" David asks from across the shop.

"Yea," Emma replies, wiping her wet forearm on her t-shirt, wishing she had hand sanitizer or maybe some hospital-grade disinfectant. She looks around blearily. "Find anything?"

"Just these," David says, holding up two of the ugliest dolls Emma's ever seen, one in each hand. "Think Ian would like them?"

"Just these," David says, holding up two of the ugliest dolls Emma's ever seen, one in each hand. "Think Ian would like them?"

The sight clears Emma's head immediately. The dolls are male and female and clearly meant to be a couple, both with carved wooden faces and stiff, matted hair. The man doll's teeth are bared in what Emma can't believe was ever intended to be a smile, and the lady looks like she's crying.

Killian stands, rising up from behind one of the glass display cases a few feet to David's left. There are streaks of dust on his sleeves—which he insists on wearing buttoned to the wrists even in the heat—and on his vest. He takes one look at the dolls and wrinkles his nose in disgust.

"Dad," Emma says, "Ian already has bad dreams. He doesn't need any more nightmare fuel."

"Oh." David turns the dolls so he can see their faces, and after a moment he grimaces. "Yea, I see what you mean." He turns and stuffs them back into a cabinet, mumbling, "They're probably cursed or something anyway."
Killian grins and winks at Emma before ducking back down behind one of the display cases.

Emma plucks the lamp she dropped off the floor and sets it safely aside, then sighs, plants her fists on her hips, and surveys the shop, looking for something she missed, some secret nook or cranny or a loose floorboard.

"Are you sure it's not at Misthaven House?" she asks, raising her eyes to the ceiling just in case Melody's bracelet is dangling from the light fixture or taped to the crown molding.

"Nemo said Melody wasn't wearing a bracelet when they first found her," David says.

"And your mother told us that what's lost usually ends up here," Killian reminds her, voice muffled by whatever cabinet he has his head stuffed in.

According to Snow, Gold's is the place to look for any personal items gone missing during the Dark Curse, but they've been searching the shop for over an hour, and while they've definitely come across plenty of strange, curious, and sometimes horrifying objects—like a literal dead cat in a box that Killian swiftly removed from her shaking hands and deposited in the trash—none of them are a magic bracelet capable of turning a little girl into a mermaid.

Emma drops her gaze back to ground level. Her dad's peeking into a small wooden chest that Emma knows he's already inspected twice. Killian stands again, surfacing right beside David, and places a long, flat box atop the counter. He frowns when he flips the lid open. Emma's not surprised; she can't see inside the box but she knows it contains a collection of silver spoons—and she knows that because she already looked inside that box twenty minutes ago.

Between the five of them they've probably touched every single item in the shop.

Wait.

Emma blinks, and looks quickly from side to side.

"Where're Henry and Ian?" she asks.

Killian raises his eyes from the spoons he's tugging his ear at. "In the back, I believe," he says.

Emma tilts her head and listens.

It's quiet. Too quiet.

Killian seems to realize it the same instant she does. They both start for the curtain that separates the shop from the back room at the same time.

Some inexplicable mom instinct—honed from years of busting the boys attempting everything from stealing cookies before dinnertime to flushing firecrackers down the toilet—keeps Emma's footsteps careful and quiet. Killian reaches the curtain first and eases it open the tiniest fraction with his hook. Emma steps up beside him and peers through the parted fabric.

Henry and Ian are crouched, heads bent together, beside what looks like an old record player cabinet. They're whispering, and Ian's fiddling with something, and it takes Emma only a second to realize that her six-year-old is trying to pick a lock, and Henry is coaching him.

"You're jiggling it too much," Henry says smugly.

"Shut up," Ian hisses. "I am not."
"Yes, you are. You're going to break it. Mom said those picks are pretty cheap so we have to be careful with them."

Emma suddenly regrets the handful of afternoons she spent walking Henry through the basics of lock picking—and for allowing him to keep the set of picks he found stashed in the Bug. Before she can lose all credibility as a parent, she steps through the curtain and clears her throat.

Both Henry and Ian start guiltily, and Emma hears one of the picks hit the floor with a metallic ping.

"What are you doing?" she asks, which is actually a really dumb question, considering she knows exactly what they're doing, but the looks on their faces are a balm to the shred of dignity she's trying to hold onto.

Killian's quiet chuckle behind her is not helping.

"I asked you guys a question," Emma says, when neither of the boys answer right away.

Henry opens his mouth and goes for an uncertain "Um..." but Ian blurts, "The bracelet's in there," and points to the cabinet he was trying to break into.

Emma raises an eyebrow. "How do you know?"

"Because I do," Ian says, with that stubborn, annoyed expression that means he tried to explain the same thing to Henry and Henry didn't believe him. He had the same look on his face when some of his Nintendo DS games went missing last summer and he told Henry that Henry's friend Avery stole them, but Henry refused to listen.

Ian ended up being right—which really should have been Henry's cue to ditch Avery right then and there, which may have also in turn spared Henry the heartbreak of having his so-called best friend hookup with his longtime crush, but that's all in the past and not worth worrying over. If Ian's correct now, then they'll have Melody's bracelet; if he's wrong, Emma can just give him a lecture about not trying to break into cabinets that don't belong to him and they can all move on from the incident.

She crosses the back room, weaving around Gold's work table and a rickety spinning wheel, and squats down in between Ian and Henry. She collects the fallen pick from the floor, and both boys scramble sideways to give her space.

A little pressure, a little scraping, some infinitesimal rotating, and then there's the faint click of the picks catching and the lock opening.

Emma smiles in satisfaction, Ian and Henry grin, and David says, "I didn't know you could do that."

Emma just barely manages to keep herself from starting as guiltily as Henry and Ian did a minute earlier, and turns her head to smile innocently at her dad and his furrowed brow over her shoulder.

"It's just something that's come in handy," she says.

"For what?"

Killian's smirking, and Henry might be smirking, but Ian's trying to open the cabinet door that Emma's only keeping closed with the force of the two picks she still has in her hands and stuck in the lock, so she says, "You know, bail bondsperson-ing," as vaguely as possible and turns back to the cabinet.

She pushes Ian's fingers out of the way and opens the door. Inside, amongst a jumble of pins and
broaches, is a cuff made of mesh and wire, entwined with rubies, and emblazoned with a diamond-studded octopus.

It's exactly how Ariel described it.

_Gotcha._

Emma takes the bracelet gently and pulls it out. The gems glitter when they catch the light, winking red and white and gold. Ian gasps.

"An octopus!" he says, reaching for the bracelet. "I wanna be an octopus!"

Emma plants her free hand on Ian's chest and holds the other over her head. "I'm pretty sure it turns you into a mermaid, not an octopus."

"Yea?" Ian says, still reaching.

"No, Ian, I mean it like..._it turns you into a mermaid._"

Ian keeps reaching, leaning into Emma's hand with all the strength he possesses in his small body, so Emma turns and tosses it to David, who catches it neatly and tucks it directly into his shirt pocket.

Ian makes a face. "I wanted to try it on."

"You want to be a mermaid?" Henry asks.

"No, I want to be an octopus."

"I just told you the bracelet turns you into a mermaid," Emma says.

"But there's an octopus on it."

"What would you even do if you turned into an octopus right now?" Henry says. "You're on dry land."

"First I'd slap you in the face with my eight arms."

"Whoa, hey, okay," Emma says. She stands and brings Ian up with her, ignoring the exchange of stuck-out tongues between him and Henry, and nudges the kid towards Killian. "Let's go get some fresh air."

With her hands on his shoulders, Emma shuffles Ian along in front of her back into the shop and then out the front door. Henry and Killian file out behind her, with David bringing up the rear and locking up with the key Belle loaned them.

As soon as they're on the sidewalk Ian twists from Emma's grasp and beams brightly up at David.

"Hey grandpa, did you know-"

"Hold on," David interjects, holding up a halting hand. He removes Melody's bracelet from his shirt pocket and hands it to Killian.

Killian takes it, and holds it uncertainly. "What's this for?"

"Your son's about to try and schmooze me for it, and I'm no match for him when he smiles at me like that."
"Ah, so you're acknowledging that my willpower is greater than yours?" Killian asks, cocking an eyebrow.

"No, I'm saying I'd rather it be your fault he turns into a mermaid and not mine," David says. Hands on his hips, he smiles down at Ian. "Okay, so, what did you want to tell me?"

Ian's jaw clicks shut. His eyes slide over to Killian, reassessing. Killian snorts, then passes the bracelet to Henry, who grins wickedly.

Ian lets out a huff of indignation and throws his arms wide. "Oh, c'mon!" he says, loudly and accusingly, voice rising to a high pitched screech at the end—and then he leaps for the bracelet dangling from Henry's fingers.

With a grunt, Killian drops his shoulder and scoops Ian out of midair. Ian also grunts—or growls, Emma can't tell—as he's hoisted like a sack of potatoes and carried away down the sidewalk.

"Alright, lad, time to cool down," Killian says. "I thought I saw a seagull over here somewhere. Let's go talk to it."

Blazing eyes still fixed on Henry, Ian scowls and crosses his arms.

"You know," Emma says, "one day Ian might be bigger and taller than you, and he's going to remember all the times you teased him."

Henry shrugs, and hands her the bracelet. "All the more reason to enjoy it while it lasts," he says, grinning.

---

Because he apparently does have a soft spot for Ian a mile wide, David volunteers to take him and Roland to the beach while Emma and Killian deliver the bracelet to Ariel. Ian promptly forgets he ever wanted to be an octopus and gleefully skips down the street alongside David to his pickup truck, and Emma tries not to think too longingly of the warm sand and cool water she could be enjoying instead of going to the hospital.

They drop Henry at the library, Emma tells him to be home for dinner—and to bring Ava if he wants—and then she drives to Storybrooke General with Killian turning Melody's bracelet over nervously in his hand in the passenger seat beside her.

It's a blessedly short visit. Her mom and Belle are there, having an animated conversation with Ariel while Rowan and Melody sit squished together in the armchair in the corner, reading a book. Emma feels distinctly on the outside of things the moment she and Killian walk through the door. It's sort of like seeing two of your close friends sitting and laughing with someone you hate in the cafeteria—not that Emma ever had that experience because she never had even one close friend growing up, but she's seen enough movies to compensate.

And Emma doesn't hate Ariel exactly, she just sort of...resents her a little bit.

She asked a favor of Killian that wasn't totally fair, and then when he couldn't come through—again, Emma totally can't blame him for choosing the Jolly Roger—he was left carrying around a metric fuck-ton of guilt for six years.

Emma's ready to continue (sort of) resenting Ariel, until Ariel's face lights up like a Christmas tree when she spots Melody's bracelet in Killian's hand, and her subsequent outpouring of gratitude includes tears and the phrase, "You have a good heart, Hook."
Killian mumbles what sounds like, "Thank you," and hurriedly leaves the room, a blush creeping up his neck and along his cheeks. Emma finds him at the end of the hallway by a window, thumb stuck in the tiny hip pocket of his vest and his hook arm hanging loosely by his side. His eyes are fixed on something far away, and he doesn't speak when she steps up next to him, but he blinks, and Emma knows he's turned his attention from whatever he sees on the horizon to her.

"Feel better?" she asks softly.

"Aye," he replies, equally quiet. "Retrieving the bracelet doesn't make up for what I did, but..."

He falls silent and his mouth pulls into a firm line.

"I know. I get it," Emma says.

Helping Ariel is an ending. He can move on, begin forgiving himself, letting go of some of the guilt he's held onto tightly for half a decade. He's probably done plenty of things that it's no longer possible to make amends for, so this one instance is especially meaningful.

Emma moves closer and slides both hands around his hook arm. She waits, waits for the tension to leak from his muscles, waits for his brooding to end, waits for him to return fully to the moment, to her.

"You know," she says, "I don't have anywhere to be for a few hours..."

Only his head moves, turning slightly towards her, just one blue eye visible beneath its lowered lid, long black lashes catching the sunlight.

"Oh?" he says, breathily. She definitely has his full attention now.

"Yea. Know anywhere we could go?"

"I believe I know just the place."

---

The place is his room at Granny's.

They shed their clothes at the door, pulling at each others' shirts and waistbands as much as their own. Killian's fingers and lips mark warm trails down her neck and sides, down her collarbones, over her breasts. She shivers and clutches him closer, nails dragging lightly into his back; his breath hitches and his hips push into hers.

When they finally reach the bed, Emma's on top. She likes being up there, likes the way she can squeeze Killian's cock, likes the way she can control the angle and the depth, alternate between short, shallow strokes that tease her where she's most sensitive, and slow, deep thrusts that make Killian's eyelids flutter.

She enjoys his facial expressions the most, the way his pleasure is visible in the crease that appears and disappears between his brows, in the way his teeth graze his own parted lips, and the small, nearly inaudible gasps.

Then he rolls them over expertly and takes her from behind, and that's its own sort of delicious. Emma grips the sheets. There's something satisfying about his fingers digging into her thigh, pulling her hips back to meet his, his hard thrusts, feeling him take his own pleasure as she took hers when she was on top.
As he climaxes his hand slithers over her hip and between her legs, sliding through her folds and bringing her orgasm crashing after his. Their cries mingle in the air, filling the room. Emma closes her eyes and pushes back into Killian, every point of contact—inside and out—anchoring her as wave after wave washes over her, gradually receding until she's left trembling and feeling both spent and filled to the brim at the same time.

Afterwards they lay in bed while they catch their breath and their skin cools.

"Do you think Granny has room service?" Emma asks, tracing one finger through his chest hair. It's thickest right in the center, over his breastbone.

"What's room service?"

"It's when you can have food and drinks brought directly to your room."

"Mmm," Killian hums. "That sounds lovely, but I suspect it would be perilous to even suggest to Granny that such an amenity be introduced to the inn."

"You're probably right," Emma says. Granny's more of a "get it yourself" type, which Emma can relate to—it wasn't often that Emma gave in to Ian or Henry begging her to bring them a snack because they didn't want to leave the Xbox. Actually, Emma never caved to their hungry whining when the reason they were hungry was just because they'd lost track of time playing Minecraft.

It feels conspicuous to linger for too long, so they only lie for a few minutes before they rise from the bed and begin dressing.

Emma watches Killian out of the corner of her eye, taking in the curve of his ass and the ripple of muscles in his thighs and calves. He shrugs on his shirt and begins buttoning it one-handed. The delicate movements of his fingers is almost as mesmerizing as the skin he's slowly covering up.

He grins when he catches her watching him.

"Deft fingers," he says with a wink.

"I'm aware," she says, smirking back.

His gaze falls to her breasts, covered only by her bra. His hand slows its buttoning, and his blunted wrist moves noticeably towards the bulge already forming in the front of his jeans. Emma wonders what it would be like to watch him pleasure himself. It's a brief thought, but enough to flood her belly with heat and make her cheeks flush.

As they're leaving, Killian snags her wrist and draws her back, pulling her gently to his chest. Emma expects him to tease her, maybe suggest they remain in the room a while longer, but instead he says, "When are we going to tell Ian about us?"

The contentment she felt a second earlier fractures. "Soon," she says.

"You said 'tomorrow' two days ago," Killian points out.

"Yea, and then Ariel woke up."

Killian frowns. "I'm beginning to think maybe you don't want to talk to Ian about us. Emma, everyone already knows we're together-" He pauses, brows knitting. "We are together, aren't we?"

"Killian, of course we're together."
"Then why do you keep putting this off?"

Emma hasn't been stalling, but she hasn't exactly been taking initiative or putting in the effort to make it happen, either.

"I thought you wanted Ian to know about us," Killian says. "I thought once things settled down a bit you wanted us to talk to him—to help him understand."

"I do want that."

Killian raises a brow, in the way Emma knows means he's prompting her to continue, to explain.

She takes a breath, and holds it as she says, "I'm afraid to jinx it."

"Jinx it?"

"Yea. I'm afraid that once we tell Ian about us something bad will happen."

His face contracts in a hurt expression. "You still think that this won't work out? That you and I won't work out?"

"No," she says calmly, steadily, "I just think that I've been unlucky too often."

I can't lose you. I've lost too much, I won't lose you too.

"I trust you, Killian, I just don't trust the universe."

His expression softens. "I share your sentiments, love, but I'm not willing to let the universe win." A grin spreads slowly over his face. "Are you?"

Emma holds his gaze, lets his blue eyes pierce her to her core, and says, "No."

"Next chance we get then," he says.

Nervousness wriggles in Emma's gut, but she clamps down hard on it and takes Killian's hand. "Next chance we get," she agrees.
Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

Ok, I REALLY tried to fit all of Ian's birthday stuff into one chapter, but it didn't work. I'm leaving for Greece tonight and I wanted to post an update before Christmas, so here it is, one part of what's now a two-part birthday extravaganza. As always, thank you for reading and for putting up with how I update, and I hope everyone who celebrates has a wonderful Christmas, and everyone else at least has a really good week :D

Killian glances up from the row of small, jewel-bright fish in pint-sized glass bowls he's been examining for ten straight minutes and looks at Emma.

"What do you think, love?" he asks.

Arms folded beneath her breasts, brows drawn together, chewing her lip, she says, "I was wondering what's a polite amount of days to wait until we ask Ariel about getting that thing from the Apprentice's old mansion once she gets back to the Enchanted Forest."

The thing being whatever mysterious object the Apprentice said could rid Neal of the Darkness without killing him. Fate dropped a mermaid—a creature capable of travelling between the realms—into their laps, and they intend to take full advantage.

"We should probably wait a few more days," Killian says.

"It's already been two."

"Perhaps at least one more, just to be courteous."

"One more is tomorrow, and tomorrow is Ian's birthday."

"Two days, then."

She nods, still chewing her lip, and then her eyes widen and snap up hurriedly to meet Killian's.

"Oh," she says. "You were asking me what I thought about the fish, weren't you?"

"I was."

She steps closer and leans down. Her hair is loose, cascading over one shoulder in golden waves. She's close enough for Killian to smell her shampoo, that subtle, floral aroma that fills him with a deep contentment whenever he catches it clinging to Ian's collar or his own, or lingering on his bed sheets and around his room.

"I don't know," Emma says. "Which one do you like?"

"I'm rather fond of this one." Killian lightly taps the side of the bowl containing a brilliantly red fish with a fanned tail and long, flowing dorsal and ventral fins. The sign on the shelf claims they're called Betta fish.

"Mm. Why that one?" Emma asks, likely noticing the more iridescent fish to the red one's left, or the
"Well," Killian says, "for starters...it's not dead."

Emma blinks. Her gaze slides along the row of fish, half of which are floating belly-up at the tops of their little glass bowls. The piebald Betta and the iridescent one are alive, but only barely judging by their sluggish swimming. The red fish is the only one showing any real spark.

"Okay," Emma says, straightening. "Looks like we're getting that one then."

Killian removes the red fish's bowl from the shelf, then hesitates. "You're certain Ian will like it?"

She's already halfway down the aisle, heading back towards the front of the store where they saw aquariums and aquarium accessories for sale. "Of course I'm sure," she says. She reaches the end of the aisle, notices Killian's not following, and turns on her heel. "Wait, are you actually that nervous?"

"No," he says.

She lifts a brow.

"Fine. Yes," he admits. He looks at the fish in his hand. It's clearly upset at having its home in Killian's custody, flitting around the disturbed water, glaring at Killian with beady black eyes, possibly sizing him up.

Emma walks back along the aisle and stops beside him. Killian can see her gym shoes standing toe to toe with his boots, see her long, bare legs. "You know, it's really not that big of a deal," she says.

"I beg to differ, Swan..."

That morning, Ian made a special announcement as he bounded into Granny's.

"It's my birthday eve!" Ian crowed, and hurdled into the booth Killian occupied, smashing into him with a grin and a loud Oof!

Killian pretended Emma hadn't already warned him about birthday eve and put on his best quizzical expression. "Birthday eve? What's that?"

"It's when you get to open some of your birthday presents early because you were an extra super good boy all year!"

"Mm," Killian hummed thoughtfully, also pretending that Emma hadn't explained that the real reason she celebrated the boys' birthday eves was because she didn't want her gifts to them going unappreciated amidst the chaos of the kid's party. "And were you an extra super good boy this year?"

"Uh-huh! Mom said so. She said I could open three presents this year!"

"Three?" Killian feigned incredulity. "It sounds like you were an extra extra super good boy then."

Ian's smile widened.

"Birthday eve's not a real thing," Henry said, sliding into the booth across from them with a great deal more dignity than Ian did.

"Yes it is," Ian retorted hotly.
"No. It isn't."

"It is," Emma said, arriving and ending the argument. When Henry scrunched up one side of his face skeptically, Emma added, "We celebrate your birthday eve too, even if you refuse to call it that."

Henry rolled his eyes and looked away, buried his nose in a menu. Ian's grin returned and he fixed it upon Killian.

"Did you get me a birthday present?" he asked.

"Ian," Emma said.

But Killian didn't mind—he would have been surprised if Ian hadn't asked.

"I did," he said.

"Whadja get me?"

"You'll see when you open it."

"Can I open it now?"

"I don't have it on me currently."

"Can you go get it?"

Ian's excitedly sparkling eyes were almost enough to make Killian run upstairs and fetch the wrapped box from his dresser, but Emma cleared her throat and shook her head.

"Birthday eve rules are clear, kid," she said. "No opening presents until the actual eve part—that means nighttime."

Ian huffed in obligatory disappointment, but talk of gifts ceased. Unfortunately, Killian's brain persisted. He'd spent many sleepless nights wondering what to purchase, wondering what could be enough to make up for missing Ian's previous 5 birthdays. Emma continuously tried to assure him that it wasn't that big a deal, that he needed to relax and not over-think it, that Ian would love whatever Killian got him, but her parents were throwing around words like pony and bouncy castle, and in the face of Ian's anticipation Killian couldn't help but feel suddenly that his gift—the pocket spyglass he'd bought after much internal debate—was deficient.

He worried about it all through breakfast, barely touching his order of eggs and bacon, and when Emma sent Henry and Ian to Ava's to pick up the ice cream cupcakes they ordered for Ian's birthday eve dessert, Killian asked her where he might acquire a fish—a pet fish.

"Killian," Emma says, calling him back to himself. Her hand is on his arm, and she's smiling a familiar smile, one he's seen several times in the past two days, usually followed by-

"You're about to tell me not to worry again, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yep." Her hand slides around his elbow and settles in the crook of his arm. Gently, she tugs him into motion, pulling him down the aisle. "You're going to give Ian that fish and that other thing—"

"The spyglass."

"Right. The spyglass. And he's going to love both because they're from you and you're his dad and he loves you. Okay?"
"If you say so, Swan," he says, mostly to hear her click her tongue impatiently and to feel the pressure of her elbow against his ribs. He knows he's being a tad dramatic, but even though he feels foolish for how he's acting, the little anxious voice inside of him won't be silent. Emma's reassurances help—or at least help distract him.

She continues leading him towards the front of the store with her hand on his arm, her fingers warm on his skin even through the fabric of his shirt. "C'mon," she says, "let's go get this fish a home. Poor little dude looks like he's had a rough life so far."

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They buy food pellets and water conditioner, a square tank, and what the teenage store associate calls decor—some dark blue gravel, a few fake plants, some larger, smooth white stones, and a tiny treasure chest.

On a picnic table near the docks Emma and Killian assemble the aquarium together, pouring in the gravel and then carefully adjusting the positioning of the plants, stones, and the treasure chest by miniscule degrees until the arrangement is perfect. The final touch is a large red bow that Emma conjures from midair and fixes to the top of the tank.

"You're getting quite good at that, Swan," Killian says. She doesn't use her magic openly that often, especially not for menial tasks, but every time she does she seems increasingly in control and confident.

Emma smiles. "Thanks. It's getting easier. Check this out." She places her hands on either side of the tank, and after a moment it begins filling with water, from the bottom up.

Killian watches, captivated. Magic never used to fascinate him—only fill him with dread, but in Emma's hands magic is different. It's not a tool of destruction or terror, it's actually quite wonderful.

"Where is the water coming from, if I might ask?" he says.

Emma shrugs. "Honestly, I don't know. I just kinda...felt it there. And then I told it to get in the tank." She wrinkles her nose up at him. "Does that make sense?"

"No," he says, and smiles. "But I don't think it has to—not to me, at least."

He wants to ask about Ian's magic—what Emma knows about it, when the lad might start using it—but refrains. He knows that if she knew, she'd tell him.

They transfer the red fish from the glass bowl to the aquarium and watch him examine his new home. Emma folds her hands on the tabletop and rests her chin on her knuckles. Her eyes follow the fish around the tank as it glares dubiously at everything in turn, from the gravel to the fake fern to the treasure chest. There's something childlike in her gaze that makes him ask, "Have you ever had a pet before, Swan?"

"No," she says. "One of the foster homes I was in had a hamster, but it wasn't really mine, and the older kids wouldn't let me play with it." She looks up at him, chin still resting on her hands. "What about you? Have you ever had a pet?"

He shakes his head. "I begged my father for a dog but he always refused. I used to feed the strays around the docks though, and I almost got one to follow me home once, but Liam ran it off; he said it was feral and that our father would be upset if we brought it aboard. I think he must have hated animals."
"Oh." A crease appears between her brows, but she doesn't do the thing most other people would do, the thing Killian hates—she doesn't pity him. Instead, a soft smile appears on her lips, and she says, "You know, Ian's never had a pet before either."

"Really?"

"Mmhm."

Elation fills his chest, drowning out that anxious little voice that pestered him for days. He grins. Ian's first pet will be a gift from him.

Emma's smile grows. "See?" she says. "I told you not to worry."

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The arrival of two large pepperoni pizzas heralds the eve part of Ian's birthday eve celebration. It's not much different from other nights at the loft, save for they allow Ian to eat at the head of the table where David usually sits, and he's wearing a paper crown that Henry made for him—it sits lopsidedly on his head, folding one of his ears over; Ian wrote his name on it in his spindly handwriting, alongside a bunch of sixes (which Emma groaned at).

After dinner Killian expects Emma to bring out dessert, but instead, after all the plates are cleared, she stands beside Ian's chair and asks, "You ready for presents kid?"

"Yes!" Ian says, perking up so quickly he knocks his crown even further askew—he nearly tumbles off his chair entirely as he scrambles to keep it from falling off his head; he catches the hat and Killian catches him.

"Emma," Snow says, "don't you want to do cupcakes first?"

Emma shakes her head. "If I tell him he has to wait until after dessert to open his presents he's going to eat so fast he won't even taste the cupcakes," She looks down at Ian with a raised eyebrow and an exaggerated frown. "I'm not even sure he tasted the pizza..."

Ian grins toothily, confirming Emma's theory. She snorts and walks away, disappearing briefly into her parents' room and returning with several wrapped gifts. She tosses a small rectangular one to Henry, and sets the other two in front of Ian.

"Okay," she says. "Technically this is two things but I'm counting it as one."

Ian gleefully rips the paper off the packages, revealing a sketchpad four times the size of the paper he normally draws on and a pack of scented markers. His eyes light up joyously.

"I love these!" he gushes.

"I know you do," Emma says, smiling.

Ian stands and hugs her. With the added height from the chair he's nearly as tall as her. Emma squeezes him back tightly, tucking her face against his cheek. Killian notices then that Ian's hair is actually a touch lighter than Emma's, and he wonders for a moment if it will stay that color or darken, perhaps to the deep, burnished gold shade of David's hair.

When Emma releases Ian and he sits back down, she steps behind his chair, folds her arms along the top of the backrest, and says, "Open Henry's next."
Ian tears into the next package, and from the wreckage of the wrapping paper pulls out a box that says *Lego Creator* and has a picture of a dinosaur on it.

"It's 3-in-1," Henry explains, leaning around the corner of the table to tap the box in Ian's hands. "You can make a T-Rex, a triceratops, and a pterodactyl—all with the same pieces."

"Can we make it later?"

"Yea. We can put it together after cupcakes."

Ian tilts his head back to look up at Emma. "Mom, can we do cupcakes now?"

"Not yet, kid," Emma says, reaching down and tweaking his nose. "You've got one more present to open. It's from your dad."

Ian's eyes snap to Killian, and Killian's heart begins beating nervously against his ribs.

"Really?" Ian asks.

"Aye, lad," Killian says. "You have to close your eyes though."

Ian does so eagerly, grinning so broadly that his tongue is poking between his teeth.

"No peeking," Killian warns as he rises from the table.

Henry helpfully slips a hand over Ian's eyes.

Emma retrieves the aquarium from her parents' room and hands it to Killian. Killian carries it carefully, ignoring Snow, David, and Henry's reactions, focusing on Ian, grinning expectantly with Henry's hand covering his face. He tries not to let the jitters he feels in his chest and gut vibrate down his arms. The water sloshes a bit anyway, and the red fish flits to the side of the tank closest to Killian to glare at him accusingly. Killian apologizes silently as he sets the aquarium on the table in front of Ian.

"Alright, lad. Open your eyes."

Henry removes his hand and Ian opens his eyes. He looks down, and freezes.

For a moment, time stops as Killian watches and waits for Ian's reaction. A thousand scenarios play out in his mind in milliseconds—Ian's unimpressed, Ian's disappointed, Ian hates the fish, Ian hates Killian—and then Ian springs out of his chair and onto Killian.

Killian's caught by surprise and almost pulled to the ground by the weight around his neck, but he gets his arms around Ian and keep them both upright.

"It's the best birthday gift I've ever gotten!" Ian says—or screams; Killian can't tell, as it's directly in his ear. Over Ian's shoulder Killian sees Henry pull a face of mock indignation, while Emma just smiles and presses a hand to one of her cheeks.

"I'm glad you like it," Killian mumbles.

Ian's still squeezing him, and although Killian rather enjoys it, Snow's beaming eyes are making his face burn hot, so he loosens his grip and lets Ian slide down his chest and back into his chair.

"You have to give it a name," David says from across the table.
Ian looks at David and then at his fish. He takes the tank by both sides and slides it closer until it's an inch from his nose.

"Ruby," he says, after a pause.

"Uh, it's a boy fish," Henry says.

"So?"

"Ruby is a girl."

"Oh." Ian frowns. "I wasn't thinking of her-" She'll be devastated, Killian thinks- "I thought it because of my dad's earring. It's a ruby."

Killian tugs his ear, the one containing the stud in question. "Ruby. I quite like it," he says—only partly because he's imagining all the different ways he can tease the wolf about it. Emma raises an eyebrow at him, clearly onto him.

"Ruby it is," David says commandingly, and slams his hand palm-down on the table.

"Did you just royally decree the name of a fish?" Snow asks him.

"I did."

"Can you royally decree that it's time for cupcakes?" Henry says.

"I can, and I shall deliver them upon you myself." David stands and crosses the kitchen to the freezer. "Gird your loins everyone; these cupcakes are not for the faint of heart."

Snow rolls her eyes as she follows him to fetch clean plates and silverware. Emma mutters, "Oh my God," under her breath and clears the wrapping paper from the table.

The cupcakes Ava prepared are twice the size of normal cupcakes and somehow filled with ice cream. Killian eats his slowly, savoring the sweetness and the mix of flavors—strawberry frosting, vanilla cake, and Oreo ice cream. David devours his within two minutes and helps himself to a bit of his wife's, which nearly earns him a couple of stabbed fingers. Henry makes it through half of his before he leans back with a pained expression and ruefully pats his stomach.

Ian gets to his final bite and then asks, "Can fish eat cupcakes?"

"No!" Emma says quickly, eyeing the proximity of Ian's fork to Ruby's tank. "He'll get sick if you give him people food. He can only eat fish food."

"Oh," Ian says, put out.

"Don't worry, lad," Killian says. "I heard Ruby say he doesn't like cupcakes anyway."

"Yea, Ruby's watching his waist line," David says. Snow elbows him.

"So fish can't eat dessert?" Ian puts his fork down, apparently in solidarity.

Killian and Emma exchange glances. According to the boy at the pet store, Bettas are partial to something called bloodworms, but he cautioned them to use them as a treat and not the fish's main source of nutrition. Emma was too repulsed by the picture on the label to buy them, but now her brow knits, and she says, "Ruby can't eat cupcakes, but I have something else you can give him instead."
She holds up her hand, and a small cylinder appears in her palm.

Killian raises his eyebrows at the label. *Freeze-dried bloodworms.*

"What's that?" Ian asks, scrunching up his nose.

"It's like dessert for Betta fish," Emma says. "Trust me."

As she leans across Killian to hand the canister of bloodworms to Henry, he whispers, "Swan, did you just *steal* those?"

"*Shut up,*" she growls, but she's blushing. She settles back into place, folds her arms over her stomach, and mutters, "I'll pay the store for them tomorrow."

Killian smirks. "I always knew there was a little *pirate* in you," he says. He offers his hand to her beneath the table and she takes it, sliding her fingers between his and resting their joined hands on her thigh.

They remain at the table for the rest of the evening, the adults chatting while Ian and Henry build the Lego T-Rex Henry bought for him. Despite the age difference between the two it's clearly an activity they can do together—without bickering that is, which is perhaps the more miraculous part. Ian's half paying attention to Henry's directions, eyes straying to the fish in the middle of the table. Killian catalogs his expression, stores it away in his brain to appreciate later.

Snow floats around snapping pictures with her cell phone, some posed, some candid. A lull in conversation prompts David to open Ian's new package of scented markers and begin sampling them. He sniffs each in turn and then offers them one-by-one to Killian to smell.

"That's good," Killian comments as David recaps the black marker.

"Do you like it because it's black or because it smells like licorice?"

"What's licorice?" Killian asks, ignoring the jab.

"Candy," Emma says.

"*Gross* candy," Ian adds.

"It's an acquired taste," Henry says.

"You always say that," Ian drawls, fiddling with one of the T-Rex's legs. "Just admit you have *bad* taste."

A fit of coughing breaks out around the table as Killian, David, and Emma are forced to stifle their laughs. Henry glares at Ian and, five minutes later, when Ian asks to smell the markers and David's holding a green one beneath his nose, Henry bumps David's arm so that the marker hits Ian and leaves a broad emerald streak along one nostril.

Henry bursts out laughing. "Oh my God it looks like boogers!"

Ian's sour expression turns immediately mischievous, and he leaps into Henry's lap to smash his face into every inch of Henry he can reach shouting, "*Boogers!* *Boogers!*"

Emma lets them get it out of their system, and when the boys are two panting, sweaty messes on the kitchen floor she announces that it's bath time and then movie time and then bed time. Ian attempts to disappear but Killian snatches him before he can slither away and carries him to the tub.
When they bring Ian up to bed after watching yet another Spider-Man movie, he insists on carrying Ruby's tank himself. Killian hovers, but Ian ends up not needing his help. He places the fish on the nightstand and then climbs into bed, his eyes never leaving his new pet while he shimmies under the covers and performs his usually nightly wiggles to get comfortable.

Emma's arm slips around Killian's waist, her fingers a light caress along his back, settling warmly just above his hip.

"Do you wanna do it now?" she asks quietly.

Killian glances to the right, at the dresser, where Henry's *Once Upon a Time* book is.

"No, Swan. Not tonight. Tomorrow."

He wants to preserve this moment exactly as it is. They can talk to Ian about their relationship tomorrow. He has to laugh at himself a little, for putting it off after he gave Emma a hard time about putting it off, but it doesn't feel right to try and force the conversation to happen now. There will be another time—a better time.

They sit beside Ian. Roger is beneath one of his cheeks, and One-Eyed Jim is in his arms. His eyes are already half-closed, and he doesn't move or look over when the mattress tilts as Emma and Killian add their weight to it. Killian reaches over and runs a finger along Ian's brow, just above his eyebrows, over the scar on his temple. Ian's eyelids flutter, and then close all the way.

They remain that way until Ian falls asleep. Emma leans into him, her chin falling onto his shoulder, her hands wrapping around his hook. Below, Killian can hear Snow and David getting ready for bed, and the faint sound of the television from the living room area that means Henry is staying up to watch another movie.

Emma shifts, snuggling her nose against his collar. "What's your happiest memory?" she asks.

"Pardon?"

"From when you were a kid. What's your happiest memory?"

"I don't know," he admits. Killian looks at Ian. He doesn't think he ever felt the peace or the happiness as a child that Ian's felt his entire life. "I think we were happy when my mother was alive, but I barely remember her. After that..."

He searches his memory. There are bright spots, amidst all the darkness, all involving Liam. He remembers a pastry Liam nicked for him once. Killian thinks it might have been on his birthday. It was aboard Captain Silver's ship. The cook was a drunk and had fallen asleep. Liam brought the pastry to him wrapped in his shirt, and they devoured it together in a dark corner, eating too fast to enjoy it but fearing if they ate it slowly they'd be caught and punished.

One of Emma's hands leaves Killian's hook to wrap around his waist again. She's warm, and the weight of her arm and body is comforting. "My childhood was pretty shitty too," she says. "I can't really remember ever being happy."

She's only ever told him small things—bit and pieces, here and there—but the larger picture is clear. Emma suffered.

"I don't ever want Ian to have to grow up the way I did," she says. Pressure on his brace tells him Emma's fingers tightened on his hook. "I don't want his childhood to be like mine."
Killian leans his head to rest his cheek atop her hair. "It won't be, Emma. Neither he nor Henry will ever experience what we experienced."

She sighs. "I know."

He can't really remember what his life was like before this—before Ian, before Emma, before Henry and David and Snow. It all seems much farther away than it used to.

He smiles, even though he knows Emma can't see. "Do you want to know what my happiest memories are, love?"

He feels her tip her face up towards him. "Tell me."

"All my happiest memories happened in the past month."

She exhales a small laugh, a soft release of air against the skin of his neck. "Mine too."

He turns his head towards her.

"It took a long time to climb out of my past, but now I'm here. And so are you."

He kisses her, lightly, just a brush of his lips against her, a bumping of noses, a shared breath.

"Are you going to stay tonight?" she asks.

"Not tonight, love. I've a few more things to do aboard the Jolly Roger before it's ready for tomorrow night."

"Ok. Are you coming over in the morning for Ian's birthday breakfast?"

He presses his forehead to hers. "Of course, Swan. I wouldn't miss it for the world."
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait again (I can't believe it's basically been a month since I posted the last chapter). Hopefully this one's worth it! I'm gonna try my best to finish the next one a bit faster, but I can't make any promises. Also, this is probably gonna be the last totally nice, fluffy chapter for a long time, so...savor it???

Boston, 6 years ago

Emma cradles her newborn son, all cleaned up and swaddled in hospital blue, and realizes that they're alone. The doctor is long gone, the nurses only recently so, and for the first time in what feels like an eternity, it's quiet. The only sound in the room is the low, even breathing of an infant sleeping peacefully after his exhausting first hour of life—an hour which consisted entirely (and impressively) of wordless screaming at a pitch that probably would have deafened everyone within hearing range if his lungs weren't the size of kiwis.

Gently, Emma clutches the baby closer.

The little guy that's been playing soccer with all her organs and making her crave pickles smothered in nacho cheese and French fries dipped in ice cream is finally here.

Killian.

Emma snorts. She has no idea what possessed her to name him that. Killian definitely wasn't on her list; she and Henry were in between James and Matthew, with Emma leaning a bit more towards James and Henry resolutely determined to call his little brother Mattie no matter what his birth certificate says—hopefully he'll forgive her.

Emma frees one hand from beneath the baby to stroke a finger along his cheek.

Killian, she thinks to herself, and smiles. There's something about the name she really likes—something that feels right. She leans down to brush her nose lightly over the baby's, then places a lingering kiss on his forehead.

Faintly, she can still smell that clean, salty scent of the sea. Whatever drugs made her smell it—and leather and rum—in the first place must still be in her system. It's strange—and also probably a hallucination—but she doesn't mind. It's actually sort of comforting, and if she closes her eyes she swears she can hear ocean waves. Emma snuggles her son, and lets the sound lull her until the nurses return.

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The Enchanted Forest, 6 years ago

Killian stalks to his cabin, driven below by the apparition of Emma Swan. The cries of the babe that broke the spell still disturb him. The sound is inside of him, ringing in his skull, shaking him to his very core. He doesn't understand why he's rattled, so he paces, hoping desperately to banish the babe's wails.
As he rounds his cabin an ache spreads through his chest. He squeezes his eyes shut and grits his
teeth against the pain, focusing on moving his legs, trusting instinct and muscle memory to guide
him.

The Jolly Roger was supposed to be the answer—it was supposed to fill the emptiness inside of him,
give him purpose, a reason to keep living...

He realizes now that there's no returning to his old life, not truly. Emma Swan changed him.

The constriction in his chest grows worse, like a fist clutching his heart, pressing the air from his
lungs. He stops pacing. His thoughts have gone suddenly silent. He lets out a long, shaky breath,
forcing the tension from his limbs, but when he inhales again there's a floral scent in the air.

Emma's there.

Killian can feel her again, as if she's standing just behind him, as if he could turn his head and catch a
glimpse of her golden hair or emerald eyes.

As before he's afraid to move, afraid to dispel her presence once more, so he waits, breathing slow
and deep, allowing the gentle lapping of ocean waves against the Jolly's hull to lull him into a
meditative state, concentrating on the feel of her warmth against his back, holding on to her
apparition or ghost or whatever this is for as long as possible.

He can convince himself that he's gone mad, or he can choose to believe this is a sign—a sign that
she's not lost to him forever.

Hope begins to fill him, and Killian lets it.

Storybrooke, Now

David makes pancakes in the morning, and while Ian's distracted by all the shapes David can make
with the batter (using a condiment bottle as a dispenser, something David apparently saw on
Pinterest), Emma slips out of the loft.

Emma tilts her face up to the sky when she gets outside. It's sunny and cloudless, hot but not humid
—the perfect day for an outdoor birthday party.

She stops at the pet store to pay for the bloodworms she magically stole the previous night. The kid
at the cash register looks mildly confused when she explains, "I looked at my receipt when I got
home yesterday and realized you hadn't charged me for something," but he doesn't object.

Granny's is next. Emma buys a dozen donuts, three coffees, and a hot chocolate, and then she heads
to Robin's; he volunteered to host Ian's birthday party, and Emma agreed—it was either that or her
mom was going to rent the city hall auditorium and invite the entire town, which is only a small step
down, in Emma's opinion, from her initial carnival idea.

Emma told Robin that she was in charge of setup and takedown and Robin was not allowed to lift a
finger, but when she arrives she finds balloons adorning the front porch, and the side yard already
decked out with streamers, more balloons, a Slip 'N Slide, and, way in the back where there's a giant
tree, a piñata.

Emma lets out a sigh that's also half-growl, and goes inside.

Will Scarlet is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea beneath a banner that reads: HAPPY
"Morning!" he says cheerfully, and tilts his mug in her direction.

Emma dumps the box of donuts on the table and plants one fist on her hip. "I told you guys not to worry about decorating," she says.

"I am happy to be out of the hospital," he says with a grin, "thank you for asking."

Emma raises an eyebrow. Will was released from Storybrooke General two days prior. He looks thin and drawn, his face a bit paler than usual and his eyes ringed by dark smudges, but his spirit is obviously not diminished.

"You look like you're feeling better," she says.

"I am."

"I'm glad."

"Me as well."

"Ian's going to be happy you're here."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"I'll warn him not to hug you too hard."

"Much appreciated."

"We don't want you bursting any stitches."

"That would be ideal, aye."

Emma sets the drink carrier down next to the donuts and frees her coffee. It's perfect drinking temperature now, and Emma takes a long sip, savoring the clash of the bitter dark roast and the sweet creamer. On the counter next to the sink are the packages of plastic table cloths, plates, cups, and plastic silverware—all in matching shades of blue, and all mercifully still unopened.

Emma lowers her coffee away from her lips and gestures at the banner hanging above them.

"You guys didn't have to do all this," she says. "I'm serious."

Will shrugs. "Mostly I just watched-"

"Watched and told me my streamers were crooked," Robin corrects.

Emma startles, slopping coffee over her wrists. Robin grins apologetically at her from the back door—he made it up the creaky back stairs and through the creaky screen door without making a sound. At least, not a sound that was apparent to her; Will looks unsurprised and unimpressed.

"Well, your streamers were crooked, mate," he says. He lifts his mug to his mouth and adds, in a mumble, "Still are, in fact."

Robin cuffs Will lightly on the back of the head as he passes behind his chair on his way to the sink, where he pours himself a glass of water from the tap.
"Oh, I brought some coffee, if you want it," Emma says.

"I'd love one, thanks," Will says. He reaches for one of the cups in the carrier, but Robin swoops in like a hawk and slaps his hand away.

"Coffee's not on your list of approved beverages," he chides. "The doctor said no caffeine until you're off the antibiotics."

"The doctor can go bugger himself," Will mutters, taking a sulky sip of his tea—something herbal, Emma's now assuming.

Robin shakes his head and gulps down his water. Emma takes another swig of coffee, then reaches down and flips the lid off the box of donuts.

"What did the doctor say about these?" she asks.

"I don't know," Will says. He swings his head towards Robin. "Mother? May I have a donut?"

"Yes," Robin replies, patiently. "But save one with sprinkles for Roland, will you? He likes those."

Will selects a donut and bites it gleefully in half. Emma turns to Robin, who's watching Will's obnoxious open-mouthed chewing with narrowed eyes.

"Where is Roland?" she asks. Usually he's underfoot, in a good way.

Robin blinks, visibly pulling himself out of whatever murderous thoughts he's having towards Will, and says, "Roland's out back inflating the pool."

"He's not doing it himself, is he?" Emma can picture poor little Roland determinedly trying to blow up the 10-foot long rectangular swimming pool she bought for the party with the strength of his lungs alone.

"Uh, no," Robin says haltingly. "There's a—um, a machine."

She recognizes the note of exasperation in Robin's voice; she hears it in Killian's tone often.

"Having trouble?" she guesses.

"A bit, yea."

"Want help?"

"Please," Robin says, relieved.

Outside Emma helps Roland inflate the swimming pool, then they prop Will in a white lawn chair beside it with the running hose in one hand and the box of donuts in his lap while they finish setting up the yard.

At 11 Emma decides it's time to head home, shower, and start wrangling Ian. At 12:45 David and Snow take David's truck to Robin's, Henry takes the SUV to pick up Ava and the cake, and Emma and Ian hop in the Bug. They swing by the docks, where Killian's waiting for them.

He smiles and waves as Emma pulls up to the curb. After he slides into the front seat and closes the door, he twists around to look at Ian.

"Happy birthday, lad," he says.
"Thanks!"

They grin at each other like goofs, one a smaller, younger, blonder version of the other. Killian’s clearly as excited as Ian, his eyes twinkling like a child's, though he manages—unlike someone—to keep his feet from drumming the upholstery.

At Robin's, Emma releases Ian from the car; he bolts across the lawn as if he was shot out of a cannon, and flies through the front door. Inside, Emma hears a chorus of greetings and birthday wishes hail his arrival. She and Killian follow more slowly, walking in companionable silence, his arm around her waist.

The house is crowded with guests—from the dwarves and the Merry Men and the Apprentice to her parents, Belle, Ruby, and Granny—but no one notices Emma and Killian enter. Ian is the center of attention, happily tearing the wrapping paper off a gift on the living room floor with Rowan and Roland crouched beside him.

Emma swears silently. She told everyone no gifts, but there's a pile on Robin's coffee table anyway.

She starts forward, intent on shuffling Ian away from the gifts and towards the backyard, but Robin slips fluidly through the infinitesimal gap between Smee and Little John and appears in her path.

"I told Ian he should open that one," he says, hurriedly. "It's from Roland and I. It's something for him to play with during the party." His eyes flick over her face. "Is that alright?"

Emma sighs, crossing her arms over her chest. "You know I'm gonna get you back for all this one day, right?"

Robin smiles his warm smile, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Roland's birthday is in the spring," he says, then winks, and disappears once more into the green and brown mass of Merry Men.

_Bouncy castle, Emma thinks. I'm getting that kid his very own bouncy castle._

Robin's gift is a Super Soaker, and Roland cheerfully informs Ian that he and Rowan also have Super Soakers, which gives Emma all the reason she needs to shove Ian out the backdoor and into the backyard. The rest of the guests follow, and the whirlwind begins.

One of the reasons Emma likes celebrating "birthday eve" is because kids' parties are completely crazy. There aren't so many kids this time, but the sheer number of adults more than makes up for it. It's pure chaos, coordinating snacks and drinks and then the actual meal, trying to get Ian to sit down for said meal and then realizing she forgot to make him put on his swim trunks and that his regular clothes are soaked through and he's tracking water all over the house.

In Robin's bathroom she supervises Ian changing while magically drawing the water out of his wet clothes and directing it down the shower drain; through the door Robin asks if she needs help with anything, and she firmly tells him to go away and continue pretending he's one of the guests. The door opens anyway, and Emma turns to find Killian.

Eyes on the ribbon of water extending between the t-shirt Emma's holding and the bathtub, he asks, "What can I do, love?"

"Nothing," she says brightly. "Go enjoy the party." He's been at her elbow all day, anticipating her needs, lending her hand and hook. It's actually been pretty awesome having his help, but she doesn't want him to miss out on the first of Ian's birthday parties he's ever been to.

In spite of her words, Killian steps fully into the bathroom with her and Ian, closing the door quietly
behind him. He smiles softly. "I'm Ian's parent too, Swan. That means this party is also my responsibility." He moves closer, and his voice drops. "You're not alone anymore."

His eyes are as soft as his smile, and currently a particularly light shade of blue that Emma thinks might be her favorite. He reaches out and gently brushes his fingers along her arm, from elbow to wrist. There's an answering blossom of warmth in her stomach.

Behind her, Ian grunts.

Stifling a laugh, Emma jerks her head towards Ian, who's hopping up and down trying to shimmy his swim trunks up his wet legs and over his bare backside. "Can you help him?"

"My pleasure, Swan."

There's more grunting, encouragement from Killian, a gentle "Watch the hook, lad," and then a shout of triumph. Ian's out of the bathroom before anyone can stop him, and two seconds later Emma hears the screen door in the kitchen creak open and then bang shut. Laughter erupts outside, the sound floating in through the open bathroom window.

"He seems to be enjoying himself," Killian observes, standing up from the floor.

"Yea," Emma agrees, smiling.

Killian takes the now dry t-shirt from her hands, neatly folds it, and sets it atop the folded cargo shorts and pair of underwear that Emma left beside the sink, then his hand snags her hip and tugs her against his chest.

Emma lifts her head in time to catch Killian's lips. His mouth is hard against hers for a moment, and then slips sideways, leaving a trail of kisses along her cheek and jaw, all the way to her ear and down her neck. Her hands settle on his hips, bunching themselves in his shirt.

The sounds of the party fall away as Emma's world narrows to Killian's lips on her skin, his hushed breaths, and his fingers stroking the exposed skin between the waistband of her jean shorts and her t-shirt. Finally, he buries his face in her hair and says, "You're a wonderful mother, Emma."

Emma blushes. Her arms tighten around his waist. She doesn't know how to respond. She's never thought of herself as being a wonderful mother before—hard-working, sure; but wonderful?

"I should do the cake now," she mumbles.

"Everyone just ate, Swan, they're fine," he says. His nose bumps her skin, tracing a pattern from her earlobe nearly down to her collarbone. "Come enjoy the party yourself for a moment. We can do the cake a bit later."

Emma really, really likes it when he says we.

She follows him outside (reluctantly, because what she actually wants to do is make-out in the bathroom a bit more), takes the can of Summer Shandy that her dad tosses her, and tries to relax.

Everyone's standing or sitting around the yard in small groups. Belle's having an animated discussion about books with the Apprentice; David is sitting next to Will and allowing the younger man small sips from his beer whenever Robin's not looking; baby Gideon is waddling around on his chunky legs with Snow walking behind him holding to his hands; Roland's trying to convince Little John to try the Slip 'N Slide, and Granny's watching Melody in the pool, swimming very much like a little mermaid despite her present lack of tail—Emma asked her mom why Ariel didn't come (as she was
invited), only to be cryptically informed that Ariel currently had a condition (Snow's emphasis) which made changing her form both dangerous and unpredictable, and was therefore cautiously remaining under observation at the hospital.

Emma quickly eases into the flow of things. She makes the rounds, greeting everyone and thanking them for coming, catching up on everyone's news. No one mentions the crisis they're living under, and it's sort of nice.

The Super Soakers are an absolute menace. When the kids aren't using them, the adults are. There's no one in the yard who doesn't have at least one large wet stain on them somewhere—except for the Apprentice, though Emma suspects that has something to do with the wand she knows that he carries up his sleeve.

Once, while Emma's bent over helping Rowan refill her Super Soaker from the hose, she catches Killian creeping up behind her, water gun in hand.

She turns, both hands raised. "You know what I can do to you if you squirt me."

He raises an eyebrow, and squirts her anyway.

With a twist of her wrist she deflects the stream of water away harmlessly; she's considering levitating the entire swimming pool and throwing it at him when another stream flies past her ear—headed in the opposite direction.

Rowan to the rescue, Emma thinks with a grin.

Killian, either because he's surprised or because he's being a good sport, takes the water directly to the face. He splutters and reels backwards, then rights himself and rumbles, "You'll pay for that, lass."

Rowan squeals in unmistakable delight and darts away. Killian chases after her at a slow jog, firing off small blasts of water from his Super Soaker that land near her feet but never actually hit her. Ian joins in, putting himself in between Rowan and Killian, stopping whenever Killian gets too close and providing cover fire so Rowan can escape farther into the yard.

Emma watches, amused. Killian shows far less mercy with Ian than he did with Rowan, squirting every inch of him he can reach whenever he's within range. It only makes Ian giggle, and he gives as good as he gets. There's a lot of collateral damage, but everyone seems used to it and the complaints are mild.

Eventually, Killian relinquishes his Super Soaker to Henry and stumbles back over to Emma, panting and soaking wet. There's a moment when Emma thinks he's going to wrap his arms around her and scoop her up, but then Ian sprints through the space in between them, babbling what sounds like a string of terrified curse words that Emma's going to pretend she didn't hear; Henry's hot on his heels, slung low to the ground like a wolf on the prowl.

Emma watches for a moment to ensure no one's actually about to get hurt, then turns back to Killian. His cheeks are flushed from exertion, his eyes sparkling with joy, and his grin is nearly too wide for his face. It's a rare look, one she only ever sees in the warehouse by the docks, when he's sparring with the boys. It's almost as if he becomes a boy again himself in those moments.

"So, who won?" she asks.

"I believe they did, Swan," he says, dragging his hand through his damp hair. "I'm no match for them. They're quite the team."
Emma smiles in agreement. She's about to tease him some more about getting his ass handed to him by a 6-year-old and a 5-year-old, but she's interrupted by a loud growl from her stomach.

Killian cocks his head to the side. "Did you eat, Swan?"

"I don't know," she admits. "No?"

Killian lets out his own growl and starts dragging her towards the house.

"But the cake..." she says in a weak attempt to protest, even while her stomach gurgles happily in anticipation.

"I'll take care of the cake, Swan," Killian replies. "You are going to eat something."

In the kitchen Emma eats cold chicken and mostaccioli off a paper plate while Killian pulls the birthday cake from the refrigerator and deals with the candles. She watches the yard through the window, pretending to ignore Killian's muttered curses behind her. Roland reclaimed his Super Soaker from Henry. Someone gave Will a smaller squirt gun, and he's squirting everyone who passes within range of his lawn chair.

Emma counts the ticks of the lighter and the small pauses in between, and when she gets to six she turns around.

Ava made a magnificent cake. Somehow it's shaped like a pirate ship, covered in thick fudge frosting textured to resemble wood paneling, and sitting upon a sea of more frosting that fades from aqua to cerulean and curls like ocean waves. Killian put the six candles on the main deck beside the little chocolate treasure chest filled with M&M's.

"It's kind of too pretty to eat," Emma says.

"Aye, though I doubt Ian will feel the same way—and I doubt Ava would appreciate it if we allowed all her hard work to go to waste." To prove his point, he plucks a stray M&M off the deck and pops it into his mouth. He picks up another, and lifts it to her lips. "Want one?"

She takes the M&M from his fingers, and his thumb swipes along her lips.

"Your candles are melting," Will says. Emma jumps—he came up the back steps and through the back door as silently as Robin had earlier. Killian throws him a glare, which Will shrugs off. "I'm just sayin' you may not want to get hot wax all over that gorgeous cake."

Emma rolls her eyes. "Will, can you get the door, please? Killian, will you go make sure everyone's ready to start singing Happy Birthday—wait!" Emma freezes, a horrible thought striking her. "Does everyone know the words to Happy Birthday?"

"Yes," Killian and Will say together. They exchange glances, and then Killian continues, "I believe that particular song is known in every realm, Swan. It's universal."

"Oh. Well, good. Let's go then."

Ian's already sitting at the head of one of the folding tables outside when Emma brings the cake out. Ian gasps audibly when he sees it, and his wide eyes track it avidly as she carries it over and sets it in front of him.

David leads them in the first verse of Happy Birthday, everyone's voices joining and blending together in a loud but pleasant chorus. Henry's alternate version, the one every school age kid knows
and includes several references to monkeys and one to body odor, still rings out clearly amongst the
din, and several of the Merry Men stumble over their lines and have to duck their heads to stifle
giggles.

Ian doesn't notice; Ian only has eyes for his cake and his candles. The song ends, and Ian leans in.

"Make a wish, kid," Emma says.

He hesitates. A grin spreads slowly over his face, and he tilts his head back to look mischievously at
her and Killian, standing to either side of his chair, before straightening and blowing out his candles.

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The party ends well after sunset. When the last guests trickle out, Emma, Killian, and her parents
start cleaning up while Ian, Roland, Will, and Robin play Ian's new set of Old Maid in the living
room. Robin tries to help but Emma shoos him away; Henry also tries to help, but Emma tells him to
go and enjoy what's left of Ava's day off.

It's almost 10 o'clock when they finally leave. Roland's already curled up asleep on the floor next to
the coffee table, Will's nodding off in an armchair, and Ian's yawning. Snow and David wheel Ian's
shiny new bike—Emma managed to talk her dad down from a pony to a bike—to the pickup truck,
and Emma, Killian, and Ian take the Bug to the Jolly Roger. Killian finished scouring it clean the day
before, and it's now officially his home once more.

They park near the docks, and Killian carries Ian to his ship and up the gangplank on his back.
Emma trails two steps behind, savoring the moment, smiling to herself because she knows what
surprise Killian has for Ian waiting aboard the Jolly Roger.

The heat of the day wore off and it's a clear night, the stars are on full display like glittering diamonds
on a swath of black velvet.

Ian is limp and quiet, his chin nestled on Killian's shoulder, and Emma thinks he might have fallen
asleep until he lifts his head and says, "The stars!"

Killian chuckles. "They're beautiful tonight, aren't they?

"Yea," Ian agrees softly, reverently.

"Would you like to take a closer look?"

"Do you have your sext-ing thingy?"

If Emma didn't know Ian meant sextant, she would wonder what sorts of conversations Killian was
having with their son.

"Sextant," Killian says patiently. "But no, tonight I have something even better."

"Really?"

"Mnhm."

"What is it?"

"I'll show you when we get to the quarterdeck."

They climb the set of stairs that leads to the deck that Emma just thinks of as the deck with the
steering wheel on it. As they do, Emma dips into her magic and opens herself to the ship. All traces of Blackbeard are gone, and all that's left is Killian—that cool breeze on your skin, crisp and clean, sea salt on the tip of your tongue feeling.

The item Killian's looking for—his final birthday gift to Ian—is in his cabin, below their feet. It's on the table in the center of the room. Emma pictures it in her hand instead, and a spyglass tied with a dark blue ribbon and a parchment tag with Ian written on it in Killian's elegant script appears in her palm.

Emma tugs on Killian's jacket sleeve and then slips the spyglass into his waiting hand. Killian bends his knees to let Ian down, and when Ian's feet touch the deck Killian turns and kneels in front of him, the spyglass held up between them.

Ian looks down at it. "What is it?"

"A spyglass," Killian says. "Something every young sailor needs."

"It's for me?"

With all the gifts he received that evening, Emma doubts he noticed that there wasn't one from Killian.

"Aye, lad, it's yours. Happy birthday."

Ian delicately lifts the spyglass from Killian's fingers. It's not a professional-grade spyglass, but neither is it a toy.

Ian grins. "It's awesome!"

"I'm glad you approve," Killian says, dipping his head. "Shall we try it out?"

In answer, Ian hugs him tightly around the neck. Killian returns the hug, hand and hook circling Ian's back protectively. Emma can see both of their faces, Ian's eyes squeezed shut and his lips pressed together, trying to communicate all the feelings in his small body through one mighty gesture, and Killian with his dark head leaned against Ian's light one, the look in his eyes both happy and sad at the same time.

Emma steps closer and slips her hand into Killian's. He loosens his hand from Ian's back to allow her access, and then grips her fingers hard. Ian breathes out deeply, contentedly, as if aware of the connection. Killian smiles, noticing, and then turns his head and whispers something in Ian's ear. Ian nods and rotates so he's hugging Emma instead, his cheeks pressed to her stomach. Killian's hand still holds to hers.

"I love you, mom," Ian says.

"I love you too, kid," she says, running her free hand through his hair.

"Thank you for my birthday party."

"You don't have to thank me, kid, but I really appreciate it. I'm glad you had fun." She squeezes his shoulders. "C'mon, let's go try out your new spyglass."

At the very rear of the ship, Killian lifts Ian so he's straddling the railing. It's wide, and Ian usually has the balance of a mountain goat (except for when he doesn't), but Killian keeps his hook arm firmly around his waist.
Emma leans on the railing beside them, to Ian's other side. Ian passes her the spyglass when he's spotted a constellation he recognizes, and then he and Killian guide her until she spots it too, but mostly she observes. She enjoys watching the interaction between Ian and Killian, enjoys seeing the parts of them that only they seem able to bring out of each other. She raised Ian on her own for nearly 6 years, loved him with her whole heart, tried to encourage his talents and foster his good qualities while also teaching him to manage his energy, impatience, and temper that was sometimes too close to the surface. She thought she knew everything there was to know about Ian, but it's as if there were parts of him that were hidden and just waiting for Killian to arrive so they could finally show themselves.

The same could probably be said of Killian. With Ian he holds his quick temper in check, and instead displays what seems like an endless amount of patience. He's nurturing in a way Emma wouldn't have expected either, and she thinks that's her favorite part.

She's admiring his profile—his long, straight nose, thick lashes and full lips, the black strands along his hairline that curl towards his ears—when he catches her looking and turns his head to face her. Whatever expression she's wearing makes his eyelids lower and his lips part, and Emma knows this is it, this is how they're announce to Ian that his mom and dad are dating—they're going to kiss in front of him. Again.

Killian seems to sense what she's thinking and, even though this is not how they discussed approaching the subject of them dating, he leans in. It feels right—maybe because Emma's sort of used to just winging it and this is definitely just winging it, but she holds to that feeling.

They keep their kiss short and PG, but Emma doesn't try to pretend that it doesn't mean anything, or that she's not enjoying it. When they part Ian's watching, caught between them, his head resting on Killian's shoulder and his hands cradling his spyglass in his lap. It's the second time in two weeks he's seen them kiss, and this time he isn't recently almost-drowned and there's nothing to stop his questions.

"Does that mean you two are boyfriend and girlfriend now?"

He doesn't look or sound surprised, so he's probably noticed more the past few weeks than Emma suspected.

"Yes," Emma says. "Your dad and I are boyfriend and girlfriend." She waits, gives her words a minute to sink in before she asks, "Do you know what it means when grownups are boyfriend and girlfriend?"

Ian nods sagely. "You guys hug and kiss and hold hands and go on dates and stuff."

"Yea, that's pretty much it," Emma says. "Did Henry tell you that?"

Ian shrugs, a non-answer. She waits again, watching him watch them. He's not exactly smiling, he's wearing a cool, calculating frown that's more of a Henry expression, so she doesn't know how to proceed except to verify that, at the very least, he's not upset.

"Are you okay with that?" she asks hesitantly. "Are you okay with me and your dad being boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Are you guys gonna get married?"

Two pink spots appear on Killian's cheeks.
"I don't know," Emma says. She and Killian agreed that they'd be as open and honest with Ian as possible, no matter what hard questions he was bound to ask. "Sometimes boyfriends and girlfriends get married. Sometimes...they don't."

"You mean sometimes they break up?" Ian clarifies. Emma sees the downward twitch of his lips, sees a crease appear between his brows and begin to deepen.

"Not necessarily," Emma says. "Sometimes boyfriends and girlfriends stay boyfriend and girlfriend forever, even though they don't get married. But yea, sometimes boyfriends and girlfriends break up."

Ian's eyes hold steady on hers. The intensity of his stare in that moment reminds her strongly of Killian. Eventually he nods, then looks to his dad.

"But you won't go anywhere, right? Even if you and my mom break up?" he says. Killian opens his mouth but before he can reply Ian adds, "You promised."

Killian almost laughs. "Aye, lad, I did promise. And no, I'm not going anywhere. Ever. I'll always be your dad, and I'll always be right here—even if one day your mother and I aren't boyfriend and girlfriend anymore."

Ian's eyes drop to the spyglass in his lap. "When I blew out the candles I wished that you guys would get married," he says.

Emma can't help the snort that escapes her. "Ian," she says. "You're supposed to use your birthday wish for a dinosaur or something."

Ian looks at her. "I did that too," he says solemnly.

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When Ian starts yawning, they take him downstairs and show him the cabin that's now his room. It's plain, just the bed, a small chest, and a battered wooden bedside table, but it's clean and it has plenty of space for personal touches.

"Are we gonna live here now?" Ian asks as he flops onto the bed.

"No, we're gonna live at the loft," Emma says, throwing the blanket over him. "But your dad's going to live here now, and this is your room for whenever you want to sleep here."

"Will we live here if you and my dad get married?"

Emma hears Killian's huff from behind her that indicates he's blushing and flustered again.

"How about we talk about some other time?" Emma says.

*Like if and when Killian and I ever get married.*

She begins to blush herself at the thought.

"Ok," Ian says through another yawn. "Does Henry have a room?"

"Yea. It's across the hall."

"We'll show it to you tomorrow, lad."


Emma pulls Roger and One-Eyed Jim from the backpack she brought Ian's pajamas over in, and tucks them in beside Ian.

"Goodnight, kid. Happy birthday."

She kisses his forehead, runs her fingers through his hair, and stands back so Killian can say goodnight. They're at the door when Ian's voice stops them.

"Hey, mom?"

"Yea?"

"When you guys go on dates can I come too?"

"Ehhh, that's not really how dates work, Ian."

"Oh," he says with a frown.

"How about the next time your dad and I go on a date you can have a sleepover with Roland?" she suggests. It probably wouldn't be too hard to convince her parents to host such an event—at least, not as hard as it would be to convince Henry to babysit instead.

Ian nods vigorously.

"Alright, kid, goodnight."

"Goodnight, mom."

Emma steps into the hallway, and Killian raises his hand to the lantern hanging from the rafters.

"Do you remember how to get to my cabin?" he asks.

"Yea."

"Don't hesitate to come and get us if you need us."

"Ok, dad. Goodnight."

Killian extinguishes Ian's lamp but leaves the one in the hallway alight and leaves Ian's door ajar.

"Isn't that a fire hazard?" Emma whispers, gesturing at the lamp.

"Enchanted Wood," Killian says, giving the nearest doorjamb a tender pat. "She can't burn."

"Can she sink?"

"Aye, Swan, of course she can—but she won't."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm one hell of a captain."

Emma smiles and shakes her head behind his back while she follows him to his cabin. They change into their pajamas and crawl onto his bunk, both too tired to do anything more than shuffle around until they've found the most comfortable position.

They end up spooning, Killian's face nuzzled in her hair and his fingers beneath her t-shirt, idly
stroking her belly. She can feel his arousal pressed against her backside, but he's making no moves to do anything about it, and the sound of his breathing and the movement of his hand soon lulls her.

"Was the birthday party a success?" he murmurs sleepily.

"It was," she murmurs back. "Thank you."

He presses a kiss to her neck. "No need to thank me, Swan. I was happy to be there and happy to help."

He resettles his face in her hair. Emma closes her eyes, and pictures that afternoon. What strikes her most are the people, both the amount of them and the fact that they were all there for Ian.

"It was probably the best birthday party he's ever had—and it's not just because of all the extra presents he got this year."

Killian hums a laugh against her ear before placing another kiss on her neck. "I'm glad."

"I'm glad you were there, Killian. I know that means more to Ian than anything."

"It means the world to me as well, Swan."

He doesn't say I've missed too much already, but Emma knows he's thinking it. She takes his wrist, pulls his arm more tightly around her and scoots backwards, snuggling as deeply into him as possible.

"What do you usually do for your birthday?" she asks.

His body tenses, almost imperceptibly. "Truthfully, I haven't celebrated it since my brother."

"Really?"

"Aye."

"What about with Milah?"

Killian shakes his head. Emma rests her hand over his, and strokes her thumb along his knuckles until he relaxes fully once more.

"Can I ask when your birthday is?"

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Aye."

"When's your birthday?"

"First day of the New Year."

January 1st. Emma files that away.

"Ian will want to celebrate it," she says.

"Aye."

She hesitates, not certain if she should push him or not. "Will you let him?"

"Of course."
"Will you let me?"

"You don't have to-"

"I want to."

He's silent for a moment, body tensing momentarily before melting against her. "Then yes."

His arms engulf her further and clutch her to his chest, his heat wrapping around her like a warm blanket. Emma imagines he's wearing the exact same expression Ian was earlier, the look of a person trying to communicate all the feelings in their body with just a hug.

Gradually, he loosens his hold. "When's your birthday, Swan?"

"October 23rd."

"How do you usually celebrate?"

Emma smiles. "The boys make me cards and bake a cake. Sometimes they buy me a little gift. It's cute."

"Will you permit me to celebrate it as well this year?"

"Yea." She's not super big on celebrating her birthday, but if Killian will let her celebrate his, then she has no reason not to allow him the same consideration.

"Will you perhaps consent to a private celebration?"

"A private celebration? You mean something like this?"

She wiggles her hips, grinding her rear end against his erection. His inhales sharply, and suddenly Emma's wide awake.

"You gonna do anything with that, tiger?" she purrs, repeating the movement of her hips.

His answer is a gentle nip of her ear and warm fingers sliding beneath the waistband of her pajama shorts.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Hello! Happy Sunday! I decided to go for a softer segue into doom than originally planned, so please enjoy this unexpected update, and hopefully I can have the real doom all ready to go by next weekend!

In the days following Ian's birthday, they revert to what (for them at least) passes for normal life in Storybrooke.

Snow leaves the loft first every morning, flitting off to city hall to handle all the latest bureaucratic crises that make Emma grateful she's just the Sheriff, Killian picks up Henry and Ian and takes them to the warehouse by the docks for their sparring lessons and then a quick breakfast, and Emma and David strap on their guns and badges and hit patrol for a few hours to avoid the paperwork waiting for them at the station.

Ian usually spends his days with Killian, learning everything there is to know about the Jolly Roger, and taking trips to the beach to swim and harass seagulls; Henry divides his time between his job at the library and Ava.

In the evenings they all come together, at the loft or at Granny's, for dinner.

One night Ian sleeps on the Jolly Roger with Killian. The next morning Killian informs Emma that Ian inspected Killian's cabin from top to bottom and questioned him on the what, how, and why of literally everything Killian owns. Apparently, Ian was disappointed that Killian only owns books of history, philosophy, and science, all with tiny words and hardly any pictures.

Henry overhears, and helpfully recommends the children's section at the library.

The following morning Emma is perched on a chair during her lunch break, watching Killian shuffle through an armful of *Curious George*, *Amelia Bedelia*, and *Henry and Mudge* books.

"What about *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*?" she asks.

"We finished it in Boston," Killian mumbles.

"Oh. Well. He'd probably like *Treasure Island*," she says, remembering that it was one of the books in the stack Henry gave to Killian and insisted he read.

Killian looks up quickly in surprise. "Really?"

"Yea. You'd have to read it to him though—and skip over anything that's too, um...*mature*.

Killian turns thoughtful. After a full minute of silence, Emma adds, "He likes science-y stuff too. You know, animals, rocks, outer space. It just has to be kid friendly."

"You mean it has to have pictures?" Killian clarified with a raised eyebrow.

"Yea. *Lots* of pictures."
They bring their dilemma to Henry, and he shows them an entire glossy display of National Geographic readers for kids. Killian's mesmerized—so much so that Belle waives the 10 book limit and lets Killian check out as many as he wants.

Later, when Emma returns to the loft after spending an hour after work practicing magic with the Apprentice, she finds Killian and Ian sitting together on the couch immersed in a stack of books devoted to the solar system.

"I think when Ian goes back to school you're going to be in charge of helping him with his homework," she tells them.

Both Killian and Ian grin gleefully at the prospect.

Another night Emma convinces Henry to entertain Ian in any way possible for a few hours so she and Killian can have a glass of wine alone together on the Jolly Roger; the night after Snow and David agree to host a sleepover so Emma and Killian can have an actual date—dinner out and then a stroll along a secluded beach to the north of town, which ends with some impromptu skinny dipping and then Emma on her back on a blanket in the soft sand, Killian on top making tender love to her as if it's their first time.

Things have changed only slightly since Emma and Killian told Ian they were dating. It was never really a secret, but now it no longer feels like a secret. For Emma it was as if telling Ian made it both official and officially public.

Killian takes it as authorization to put his arm around her in front of her parents.

David teases her about it at every opportunity, though Emma can tell that beneath his smirk he actually approves and is happy for her. Snow doesn't even bother to hide how satisfied she is, and beams at every gesture of affection Emma or Killian express towards each other, no matter how small.

On Friday, Ariel and Melody depart for the Enchanted Forest. The mysterious condition Snow alluded to at Ian's birthday party turns out to be pregnancy. Apparently using magic to morph from human to mermaid and then back again isn't super good for a developing fetus.

Before they leave the hospital they fill Ariel in on their situation with Neal and ask if she can help them obtain the object they need. She agrees, which triggers a weird, anxious response inside of Emma that she stuffs deep, deep down and tells firmly to wait.

They transport Ariel to the beach in the bed of David's pickup truck, which the Apprentice magically waterproofs and then has Emma fill with saltwater she calls from the ocean. Killian and Ian meet them at the beach, and standing knee-deep in the sea they all say their goodbyes to Ariel and Melody.

Emma wishes Ariel good luck and thanks her for her help. Ian and Melody have a hushed conversation that ends in a hug; Melody clings to Ian the way a little girl might cling to her big brother, and has to be coaxed into letting go. Killian says a quiet but formal farewell, to which Ariel responds, "You have a true heart, Hook. I'll always be grateful that you helped me."

Killian nods but turns away the moment Ariel does, his expression strained. Surprisingly, David's the one there to halt Killian with a bracing arm and a clap on the shoulder. After a moment Killian nods again and David moves away. Emma takes his hand then, and squeezes it gently.

After a brief but emotional goodbye between Snow and Ariel, Ariel and Melody depart. Emma's
final glimpse of the pair is the twin surfacing of their tails—one large and teal and one tiny and a brilliant yellow—just before they disappear fully beneath the waves.

Back in the parking lot, Emma turns to the Apprentice. "How long do you think it will take for Ariel to get the thing from your mansion and bring it back?" she asks.

"Two weeks. Perhaps more."

It isn't the estimate she was hoping for, but they don't really have much of a choice. Deep inside of her that anxious feeling quivers. It's been nearly two weeks since Emma last saw Neal, and she can't imagine that he's been up to nothing that whole time. The quiet doesn't make sense.

She sleeps restlessly, dreams uneasily, and on Saturday she wakes up with her anxiety sitting in her throat, threatening to choke her.

Her phone tells her it's nearly 9, but the loft is silent; Henry's snoring softly on the twin bed in the corner, and Ian's somewhere beside her buried beneath the blankets and his two stuffed animals—she can see a bare foot and some blonde hair.

Emma eases herself out of bed, checks that Ian's actually breathing, and slips downstairs. She's startled to find David at the kitchen table, bent over a cup of coffee. His grim expression halts her before she even reaches the bottom step.

"Dad? Everything okay?"

"Grumpy just called," he says, hands tightening around the mug he's holding. "The cage is ready."

Emma sits down heavily. "This is it then," she whispers to herself.

They no longer have an excuse not to take action.

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Snow takes Ian to the park with his new bike (Killian hates the thing, which he calls "monstrously large") and Emma, David, and Henry pick up Killian from the docks and head to the mines.

Emma hasn't been down there in seven years, and it's just as creepy as she remembers. They walk for nearly half a mile, following the cart tracks laid on the ground. There are wooden beams hung with lanterns spaced evenly along their path, but the spaces in between are dark. The air's cool and a bit damp, but occasionally they pass the mouth of a tunnel where the air's a bit different—sometimes warm and dry, sometimes much, much colder.

After ten minutes of walking, the dwarves appear ahead, clustered at the mouth of yet another tunnel. They're lit not by the steady glow of the lanterns overhead, but by a deep orange, flickering light. Beside them is a cart loaded to the brim with rock chunks, and scattered about, leaning against the walls or just lying on the floor, are an assortment of pickaxes and other tools.

Grumpy peels away from the other dwarves as Emma and the rest draw near. He looks first to her, but then his eyes flicker away and he addresses David.

"It's done."

"Thank you, Grumpy," David says. "Can we see it?"

Grumpy waves them on, and they file past him to the mouth of the tunnel. Emma sucks in a breath
when she sees what's at the other end.

"Bloody hell," Killian breathes.

It's not so much a tunnel as it is a niche or a shallow cave. There are torches mounted on the walls to either side of the opening, and set into the far wall is a cell that's nearly identical to the one Emma was trapped in by Cora in the Enchanted Forest, down to the jagged vertical bars that resemble the fangs of some horrible deep sea fish.

"It looks exactly the same," David says.

"We didn't really see a reason to change the design," Doc replies from behind them.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Grumpy growls. It sounds like an old argument.

"And this will definitely hold the Dark One?" Emma says. She can't say Neal, she can't think that she might have to put a human being—a human being that's the father of her oldest son—into a literal cage. No matter the situation, no matter how much of a massive shit he is, it doesn't feel right to lock him in a dungeon—she will lock him in a dungeon, if she has to, but there's no way even then that she'll feel 100% okay with it.

"How is such a feat is possible?" Killian asks. Emma's relieved to see that he looks as unnerved and disgusted as she feels. "How can a few metal bars contain the Dark One?"

"Well, a shitload of fairy dust, for starters," Grumpy says.

"And after that, a little bit of dwarf magic," Sneezy adds, smiling faintly.

"Wait, dwarves have magic?" Emma says.

"He was speaking metaphorically, of course," Doc says, adjusting his round glasses. "My brother only meant that us dwarves have a special knack for building things that are unbreakable. It's not magic, per se, but it is a special talent belonging only to dwarves."

"Oh," Emma nods. She forces herself to survey the cage once more, and then she turns to the dwarves.

Seven tired, dirt-smeared faces stare back at her.

"Thank you," she says. "I know you've been working your asses off and it hasn't been fun, but I...I really appreciate it. This is going to help us keep the town safe."

The dwarves bow their heads and murmur; Emma hears several utterances of "You're welcome," and a "princess" or two thrown in there. Grumpy remains silent and gazes at her defiantly, but he looks away when she tries to meet his eye.

"Dinner and drinks are on me, tonight," David says. "Go get some rest. See you all at Granny's at 8."

The dwarves exchange surprised grins, but they recognize a dismissal and they waste no time collecting their gear and hustling out of the mines. When their footsteps and echoing voices finally fade, Henry says quietly, "We're really going to put my dad in there?"

His arms are crossed tightly over his chest. Emma steps closer, but doesn't touch him.

"Only if we have to, kid," she says. "And only until we can find a way to fix him."
Henry's shoulders hunch slightly. "Isn't there another option?"

Emma looks at David and Killian first before she says, "The dagger."

"Yea, but how're we even going to get it?" Henry asks dejectedly.

Emma presses her lips together.

She has a plan.

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"No," Killian says, when she fills him in on how she intends to get a hold of the Dark One's dagger. It involves her turning invisible and searching Gold's house until she finds it.

"Killian, I can do it."

"It's too dangerous, Swan."

"I know it's dangerous. I'm still doing it."

They're at Granny's, sitting alone on the patio, the dwarves' raucous drinking, singing, and dancing inside the diner providing the perfect opportunity for some privacy outside the diner.

"There has to be another way, Emma. We'll come up with a better plan."

"We don't have time to come up with anything better. Killian-"

Whatever song the dwarves are bellowing is interrupted by breaking glass and swearing, all clearly audible from the patio. Emma looks over to make sure that Henry and Ian are still safely in the care of a sober adult; Robin and Will are playing Candy Land with Ian and Roland at the table in the corner by the front window; Henry and Ava are suspiciously absent—if she were to go around the building to the parking lot in the back, would she find two teenagers making out?

"Emma," Killian says, voice low.

Emma looks at him.

"You don't have to be the one to do this."

"I think I do," she says. She sighs and leans back in her chair, dragging her bottle of Goose Island off the table and into her lap. She stares at it and starts picking at the label.

Killian's hand appears atop both of hers.

"What's on your mind, Swan?"

She shrugs, eyes still on her beer.

"Emma, you're thinking something. I know it. I can feel it."

A smile tugs at her lips, but it quickly fades. Her anxiety quivers, rises up her throat again. A week ago all of this seemed so far away. Reality crept back in slowly but surely.

"I don't want to sit here waiting for whatever fucked up thing Neal's going to do next," she says quietly. "He already hurt you and Ian. I can't take the risk that he'll do it again."
She can't go another second wondering when Neal will strike next, what he'll do, who will get hurt this time. It has to end, and Emma needs to be the one to end it.

Killian takes a shuddering breath. His eyes drift shut. He keeps them closed for a long moment, his hand still resting on her knuckles, and when he when he opens his eyes again, he shakes his head weakly and says, "I can't stop you, can I?"

"No."

She frees one of her hands from beneath his and reaches up to cups his cheek. He leans into her touch.

"I don't like this, Emma. I don't like you putting yourself at risk like this."

"I know," she says softly. "But you have to trust me-"

"I do trust you, Emma. Of course I trust you. But that doesn't mean I don't worry for your safety." His brows knit. "I couldn't bear to see you get hurt."

"I know."

She wishes she could give him more, but she can't. She can't promise that she won't get hurt—deep down, she knows it's a possibility. Neal won't hurt her, but the Darkness might, and as long as Neal and his dark passenger are going halvesies on Neal's body, Emma can't be certain she's safe around him.

It's a risk she's going to have to take.

---

David and Snow take the news only slightly worse than Killian did.

"What?" David demands loudly, face reddening.

"No!" Snow says. "Emma-"

"Shh!" Emma warns, one finger on her lips and her other hand gesturing frantically at the top floor of the loft, where Ian's currently asleep.

They're sitting at the kitchen table, Emma and Killian on one side, Snow and David on the other, Henry at the head. Despite his reservations Killian's at her side, his arm resting along the back of her chair, silently showing his support.

Snow and David clamp their lips shut, but their objections are clear in their hard stares.

"I'm doing this," Emma says calmly. "I'm ready."

"Ready?" David hisses. "Ready to what? Ready to get yourself killed?"

"I'm not gonna get killed. I can do this. I've been practicing with the Apprentice. Watch."

Emma plunges both hands deep into the pool of her magic, then grabs hold of the air around her and flips it inside out, imagining herself as a cross between a mirror and a window.

She knows she's invisible when David's eyes go wide and Snow gasps.
Emma eases herself out of her chair—not gracefully and not without noise, but whatever—and walks in a half-circle.

To her, it's sort of like wearing one of those clear plastic garment bags you get at the cleaners over her head. She can see everything clearly, but she can tell there's a barrier between her and her surroundings, and she has to move carefully and quietly in order not to upset the delicate fabric of what, in her mind, she's calling her invisibility cloak.

When she's behind her parents, she releases her magic. David and Snow whirl around, incredulous. Henry startles, but his mouth falls open in an awestruck grin.

"It's basically the same spell the Apprentice used to make Whale's sailboat disappear," Emma says, settling her hands on her hips. "I've been working on it since he showed it to me."

"Can he also show you how to make Whale's sailboat reappear?" Snow asks, one eyebrow raised. Whale, apparently too afraid to confront Emma directly, brought his complaints about his lost property to Snow instead.

"I'll get Whale's boat back," Emma says. "Eventually."

Henry snorts.

"Okay, can we focus?" she snaps. "I want to do this as soon as possible. I could really use your help, but I'll do it on my own if I have to."

"You're not going alone," Killian says. His expression is like a storm cloud, threatening thunder and lightning.

"We're going to help you," David says. "Just slow down a second and walk us through exactly what you're planning."

Emma tells them. It's a pretty simple and straightforward plan: she's going to get into Gold's house and look around until she finds the dagger. Immediately, however, Killian and David find a way to start poking holes in it.

"How are you going to get in?" David says.

"And once you're in, how are you going to get back out?" Killian adds.

"I was just going to ring the doorbell," Emma says.

When she last visited, Neal had Gold's house warded to prevent anyone from entering. The only obvious point of penetration is the front door—when it's opened from the inside.

"Emma, honey, that's a terrible plan," Snow says.

"And that's coming from someone who tried to wage war against an entire kingdom with just me and a few dwarves at her side," David says.

"Hey, we won, didn't we?"

Snow glares while David beams back adoringly—and then Henry speaks.

"I know how you can get in and out without my dad noticing."

All eyes at the table fix on Henry. He fidgets beneath their regard.
"There's something you don't know," he says.

Emma and Killian exchange glances.

Henry takes a deep breath, and hesitantly raises his gaze to Emma's. "I went to talk to my dad."

"I already know that," she says. She doesn't see the point in lying.

Henry's eyebrows jerk upwards in surprise. He throws Killian a look, which Killian meets unflinchingly and unapologetically.

"What's your idea, lad?"

Emma rounds the table and returns to her place beside Killian, which also happens to be in between Killian and Henry—just in case she needs to help deflect any teenage outrage.

But Henry doesn't disappoint her. He grimaces in resignations, and starts, "Ok, so, when I went to talk to my dad he invited me in-"

"You didn't go inside, did you?" Emma asks.

"No, I stayed on the porch. My point is, he stood in the doorway the entire time with the door wide open."

Emma sees immediately what Henry's leading up to.

"Henry, no."

"What? Why? Are you really going to try and tell me right now that it's too dangerous?"

"Yes."

Henry looks pointedly at Snow and David.

"That's different," Emma says. "You're 17, I'm 36. I can decide what's too dangerous for me and what isn't; you don't have the same privilege."

Emma braces for the outrage now, but Henry doesn't get angry. Instead, his expression turns serene, which is much, much worse.

"If you don't let me help you then I'll go and try to get the dagger myself," he says. "I bet my dad would invite me in again if I visited. And I bet I could get him to show me around." He pauses, waits for her to react. Emma wishes she could believe he's bluffing, but knows he isn't. He takes her silence for agreement, and continues, "I can keep him talking, mom. You can slip in and out without him noticing."

Killian's hand slides gently over hers, signaling his opinion on the matter. Snow's worrying her lower lip, but David's expression is calculating.

"Fine," Emma sighs. "You can help."

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They decide they'll try in the morning, early, before any of Neal's neighbors are likely to be up and about. David calls Robin; Robin already has Merry Men stashed away in trees and bushes across the street and in the alley, running constant surveillance, and he promises to have the entire block
covered by the time Emma and Henry set foot on it.

Killian decides to stay, and politely requests the use of Snow and David's pullout couch.

Emma helps Killian get everything set up, fluffing his pillows for him with a little more vigor than necessary. Killian watches her assault his bedding, but doesn't comment. He walks her to the foot of the stairs as if walking her to her front door, and when they reach them he stops her and pulls her tightly into his arms.

His presses his nose into her neck, and says, "Emma, if Neal hurts you tomorrow, there's nothing on this earth that will be able to stop me tearing him to pieces."

Emma balls her fists in the back of his shirt. "I know."
Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

Okay, I'm on Feb. vacation, so I should have the next chapter finished sometime this week! Enjoy!

It's early morning and the world is still and quiet, painted in muted hues of rose and gold and softening blue shadows. Emma's walking along the sidewalk next to Henry, wrapped in her invisibility spell, trying to imitate the tranquility surrounding her, both because she's uncomfortably tense and because she needs to be absolutely silent in order to pull this whole thing off.

Henry is dressed for running, which he says he was before and is again now to provide an explanation for how he managed to slip out of the loft unquestioned. His only sign of nervousness is the constant winding and unwinding of his earbuds cord around his index finger. He apologized that morning, just as they were leaving.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I talked to my dad," he said.

Emma was annoyed he had weaseled his way into going with them and putting himself in danger, but she wasn't upset that he went to see Neal without telling her.

"It's fine, Henry," she said. "I'm not mad. I understand why you did it."

"You do?"

"Yea. I still want you to tell me what he said, but we can talk about it later."

"Okay."

His shoulders sagged with relief, and they went on their way.

A reinforcement of Merry Men went ahead while it was still dark out and found places to hide alongside their already on-duty brothers, places with a clear line of sight and within bow range of Neal's front porch. Hopefully all of Neal's neighbors are late sleepers, otherwise they're going to find a horde of grown men in mismatched camouflage secreted away in their bushes and trees and garbage cans.

David and Killian are there as well, wedged between a house and a wooden fence diagonally across the street from Neal's house. Emma can't see them, but she can feel them with her weird magical sixth sense, feel their steady heartbeats, pounding out a comforting, reassuring rhythm nearby.

The Apprentice told her that, while the Darkness inside of Neal would be able to sense the Apprentice's magic, normal humans and Emma's light magic are beyond its scope.

Emma hopes he's right. She assumes he's right, given that Neal's surveillance team said Neal doesn't seem at all aware of their presence.

Two houses down from Gold's horrendously pink mansion, Emma leans in close to Henry and whispers, "If you sense that something's wrong, or if you feel like you're in danger, get out of there.
Don't worry about me, just run. I can handle myself."

"Okay," Henry mutters, barely moving his lips.

"I'll give you a signal when I'm out. Just keep him talking—and don't go inside."

Henry hums in acknowledgement. Emma slows, falling into step behind him, matching his stride, letting his heavier footfalls mask the sound of hers. She follows him down Neal's front walkway and up the steps onto the porch.

In her magical vision, the symbols scrawled on the door and its frame burn a fiery red, but the air around them is stained black. It makes her feel like there are ants crawling beneath her skin. She grits her teeth against the sensation, and curls her hands into fists, purposely digging her nails into her palms.

Henry, oblivious, reaches for the doorbell and rings it.

The tension inside of Emma tightens, like a cord suddenly pulled taut. The next few minutes have the potential to either solve a huge chunk of their Neal problem, or plunge them into even worse disaster.

Emma looks out over the lawn and across the street. She can sense Killian and her dad, and she can sense Robin and the Merry Men, but even though she knows exactly where they are, she can't see them.

Perfect.

Next to her, Henry's still winding and unwinding his earbuds cord around his fingers; Emma wishes she could give him a final few words of encouragement, but it's too risky, so she says them silently, then clamps down on the nasty feeling the ward on the door is giving her, and eases around Henry to stand beside the doorjamb, careful not to touch any of the glowing red symbols.

Just as she gets her feet settled, she hears movement behind the door, and a moment later the lock clicks and the door creaks open. The glowing symbols fade immediately, and Emma's skin stops crawling. Neal appears in the gap between door and frame, squinting.

"Henry," he says.

Emma notes his surprised tone in the same heartbeat she takes in his crocodile skin and his disheveled clothes and hair. He looks worse than he did the last time she saw him. If she didn't already know that Dark Ones don't need to sleep, she would say that Neal needs at least a week's worth.

"Hey," Henry says, with just the right amount of hesitation.

Neal opens the door the rest of the way and steps fully into the doorway. "I didn't think you'd come back."

Henry shrugs, but he's fiddling with his earbuds openly and with both hands now, the way he always does when he has something on his mind he's working up the courage to say out loud.

Neal wasn't around for long enough to have picked up on that, but he seems to understand anyway. His eyes flicker from Henry's hands and then back to his face.

"Is there something you want to talk about, buddy?" he asks. He moves to step out of the door and Emma stops breathing. Across the street Killian and David's heartbeats quicken.
This is it. This is her chance.

She doesn't wait for Henry to respond; as soon as Neal's shoes touch the doormat she slips past. It's a wide doorway, so Emma has no trouble getting by Neal without touching him—even so she holds her breath until she's several feet into the entrance hallway, where she stops.

Neal has his back to her. Emma watches him, watches for some flicker of awareness from the Darkness, some sign that it or Neal knows that Emma's there, but nothing stirs inside of Neal, and Neal's attention remains fixed on Henry.

She lets out the breath she's been holding, and turns into the house.

It's spacious but it's dark and gloomy and manages to simultaneously resemble every haunted house in every horror movie Emma's ever seen. There's dust everywhere, including floating in the shafts of weak sunlight slanting in from the mullioned windows, and everything is either paneled in dark wood or wallpapered.

To Emma's right is a staircase leading upwards, carpeted with a floral runner that matches the pink-and-green theme of the outside of the house; ahead of her is a kitchen; through several wide doorways to her left she sees a living room and a dining room and a hallway full of closed doors.

Calm settles over her like a warm blanket. She's searched countless perps' homes and hideouts before, most illegally, so all of this—even the danger—feels familiar. She smiles to herself and sets to work.

Emma moves swiftly but methodically, starting in the kitchen and moving to the dining room, checking two closets and the bathroom along the way. She uses both her eyes and her magic to look for the dagger. Emma could probably flood the whole house with her magic and locate the dagger instantly, but she can't risk alerting Neal to her presence, so she keeps it in a tight circle around her and uses it to probe all the places she can't inspect without opening or moving something.

As she searches, she keeps part of her attention fixed on Henry and Neal's conversation, not really listening to the words, just keeping an ear out for any sign that their conversation is ending or not going well.

The living room is her final stop on the first floor, and if it turns out to be as dagger-less as the rest of the house then she'll have to decide to take her search either upstairs or downstairs.

Standing on another horribly patterned rug in the center of the room, Emma plants her fists on her hips and frowns at her surroundings. It's clearly the most used room of the ones she's searched. There are dirty dishes and cups on every surface, bumping shoulders with antique lamps and an odd assortment of objects that look like they belong in the back room of the pawn shop.

Her eyes and her magic pass over porcelain statuettes, boxes of all shapes and sizes made from both wood and stone, thick leather-bound books, a giant purple crystal, a glass ashtray, and an engraved marble disc before finally landing on a black urn.

A shiver of recognition passes through her, raising goose bumps along her arms.

She saw that black urn in the storm cellar at the farm Neal was hiding at. It was in a locked cage. Neal said it was dangerous and had to be kept somewhere secure, but here it is just sitting on the coffee table next to a half-full glass of orange juice.

Emma looks to the front door, where Neal's back is just visible, then turns to face the urn and walks slowly over to it.
The air seems to grow colder as she draws near. When she reaches the coffee table she lowers her hand towards the urn until it's hovering an inch above its glossy black surface. More cold air meets her fingers, as if she thrust her hand into the freezer.

She hesitates, glances at Neal once more, then lays her fingertips fully on the urn.

In a flash, in her head, she has a vision.

There's darkness, rushing towards her; the sound of wings fills her ears, then feathers brush her against her face and hair, buffet her arms.

Emma gasps and snatchers her hand back, then quickly clamps it over her mouth.

The house is silent. Through the doorway into the hallway, she can see Neal standing on the front porch, head cocked towards her, one golden eye fixed in her direction.

"You know what, Henry, I've got something I have to do," Neal says. "Why don't we continue this later?"

Without waiting for Henry's reply, Neal steps back into the house and closes the door. Emma's heart starts pounding, but a quick check of her magic reveals that her invisibility spell is still in place. Neal starts towards the living room, and when he moves, so does Emma, more out of instinct than anything else, matching her strides with Neal's like she did with Henry's outside on the sidewalk.

When Neal stops, so does Emma. He's standing in the center of the room, in the exact same place she stood only moments before, predatory gaze sweeping the area. His eyes pass right over her but she still gets that ants-under-her-skin feeling again and shudders—it's not Neal in control anymore, it's the Darkness.

Emma slows her breathing, forcing her heart to take a chill pill so she can think. She needs to get to the front door and get the hell out.

She realizes immediately that she moved in the wrong direction; she backed up, farther into the house, and now she's against the wall with the entire living room and Neal in between her and the front door.

Focusing on breathing as quietly as possible, she watches Neal and weighs her options.

*Waiting* is definitely not an option. Emma got herself into this mess and she intends on getting herself out of it, too—she also knows that if she waits too long Killian's likely to bust in and stick his hook into whatever part of Neal he reaches first.

The hallway with the closets and the bathroom is just around the corner to her right. She can take the long way to the front door and knock on it from the inside to get Neal to come open it—if that fails she can always just try to sneak out the back door.

Emma's just stepping sideways towards the hallway when Neal speaks.

"I didn't hear anything."

Emma freezes, her right foot in midair. Neal's still standing in the center of the living room, staring at once of the walls.

"You must have imagined it," he says.
Emma doesn't hear a response to Neal's words, but Neal apparently does.

"Nobody's in here—how could anyone be in here? You're paranoid. And now we've probably driven Henry off for good."

Neal heaves a frustrated sigh and scrubs his hands furiously through his hair, then flops onto one of the couches. He lays his head back on the cushions, and after a moment sighs again.

"Yea, yea. I know," he says. "I'm just tired of waiting. I wish they'd hurry up."

Emma's skin prickles, and, in spite of herself, she takes two steps closer to Neal.

"Well, how long's it gonna take?"

Neal closes his eyes. Emma still can't hear anything, but she knows Neal's listening.

He snorts. "I don't know how fast mermaids can swim—that seem like something you should know, not me."

Cold horror fills Emma.

Neal knows about Ariel.

Neal knows they sent Ariel on an errand.

Only...if he knew and wanted to stop them, why didn't he?

Emma takes one more careful step closer. Neal's eyes open and Emma freezes again, but Neal only reaches behind one of the pillows and pulls out a box. This one's wooden, and he settles it in his lap. There are holes carved into one side, in a pattern vaguely resembling a flower, and the holes are pulsing with a red glow.

Emma's recognizes it—it's one of Regina's heart boxes.

What the fuck, she thinks.

Whose heart does Neal have? Is he controlling someone with it? How much worse can this whole situation really get?

It could be Killian's.

The thought instantly makes her feel sick, but she can't deny the possibility. Neal held Killian captive for nearly a whole day beneath the docks; he could have taken Killian's heart for insurance. Her stomach clenches, and bile rises up her throat.

Maybe Neal wanted Emma to rescue Killian. Neal could have been controlling Killian the entire time since then.

Lightning fast, Emma searches her memories.

No, she tells herself. She would have known. She would have felt that something was wrong, that Killian wasn't himself.

Neal could have been listening in on their every conversation, however, and that's equally sickening.

Emma creeps closer, ready to pounce and snatch that box if she has to. Revealing herself and
probably costing them the dagger forever is a price Emma's willing to pay if Neal has Killian's heart. She just needs proof.

"I'm sorry you can't be here."

An odd phrase to say to the ripped-out heart of your ex-girlfriend's new boyfriend whom you recently tried to murder.

Emma pauses, perched on her tiptoes.

"You should see Henry," Neal continues. "I mean, I know you saw him, the day you...well, I just mean you should be here too. Things would be different if you were. Then at least one of us would be with Henry. And maybe you could have convinced Emma to let me be with him too."

Emma feels her eyes pop as realization dawns.

It's Regina's heart. Neal's talking to Regina's heart.

Relief washes over Emma, only to be replaced immediately by confusion.

Regina's dead. How can her heart still be glowing?

The doorbell rings, the sound jolting through Emma like an electric shock. Neal stashes the box back behind the pillow and jumps to his feet. Emma reacts quickly, ignoring the thoughts and questions whirling in her head and letting instinct take hold once more. She follows Neal to the door, probably a little too close to be perfectly safe—if he stops or turns around she'll smack right into him.

Neal opens the front door, and over his shoulder Emma sees Henry on the front porch.

"One more thing," he says, loudly. His brow is drawn down furiously, but Emma hears the murmur of fear in his voice.

"What is it?" Neal asks.

Emma doesn't waste any more time. She ducks and turns sideways, scuttling like a crab and squeezing herself in between Neal and the doorway. She holds her breath again and sucks in her stomach for good measure. Her foot hits the doormat a little louder than she intended, but by some stroke of luck Henry's next words drown her out.

"Ian just had his dad at his birthday party for the first time ever," he says. "My birthday's August 14th. I'd like it if you could be there for the first time ever too."

Emma gets both feet onto the porch. She heads towards the stairs, giving Henry a gentle nudge as she slips by. He turns and follows, thundering down the stairs on her heels.

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They gather at the loft afterwards for a debriefing. Emma tells them everything, leaving out only the parts about the black urn she touched and Neal talking to Regina's heart. The former she intends to keep to herself for a while, but the latter she's only holding onto until she can tell Henry about it a bit more privately.

They're all seated at the kitchen table. Emma is on one side with Killian next to her, his chair practically on top of her own.

The moment she made herself visible again two blocks away from Neal's house Killian was there,
his arms wrapped around her, his face buried in her neck, his heart beating a rhythm against her chest
that matched her own, and he's still beside her now.

David told her that when Henry came off the porch that first time and they knew she wasn't with
him, David barely managed to keep Killian from running into the house after her—he almost ordered
Robin to put an arrow through Killian's foot.

"He's surprisingly strong," David said.

Emma gets why David's surprised: he's a few inches taller and much broader across his shoulders
and chest than Killian. The only thing that surprised Emma was that David did manage to restrain
Killian.

"Henry came up with the idea to just go knock on the door again," Killian explained. "The lad knew
if he could get Neal to open the door again that you'd be able to escape."

The rest of the table is filled by Emma's parents, Henry, Robin, and the Apprentice, all occupying an
assortment of chairs pulled from every corner of the loft. Everyone has a glass Snow's specially
prepared lemonade, except for Killian, who's drinking rum, and Emma, who's drinking hot cocoa.
Her hands still feel strangely cold after touching that urn, and if she closes her eyes she can feel the
touch of feathers on her face and arms.

Ian is in the living room area with Roland and Will. The Apprentice taught Emma how to thicken the
air to form a soundproof barrier, and she put one up in between the kitchen and where Ian is showing
off his latest Lego creations.

It was more difficult than it should have been. She's magically exhausted from that morning, the pool
of magic inside of her greatly diminished, but gradually replenishing. She's never used that much
magic and for that long before, and it apparently takes a toll.

Plus, her stomach's twisted into ten thousand anxious knots, and it's only through sheer willpower
that she's keeping herself from collapsing into a trembling heap of limbs on the floor.

Emma tightens her fingers around her mug. She doesn't have time to be a trembling heap of limbs on
the floor. The worst thing she expected to happen today was for her search to come up empty; what
she overheard in Neal's house changes things.

They thought they were being sneaky, but they weren't; they gave Neal too much freedom, and now
they're paying the price.

Emma should have started waging a war against him the moment he first showed himself to her. If
she had then Killian probably would never have gotten hurt, Ian would probably never have been
kidnapped, and Henry might have his dad back right now—and maybe even Regina. She has to fix
this. As fast as possible.

"I have to go back and try to get the dagger again," she says.

"No," Killian, David, and Snow answer together.

"But-"

"You can't, love," Killian says. He lays his hand gently over hers, but there's pure steel in his voice.
"It's too dangerous. We're fortunate you weren't found out this time."

"What are we going to do then? Neal knows what we sent Ariel to get. We can't just let him sit there
if there's a possibility he can stop us. And what if he hurts Ariel?"

"We're not just going to let him sit there," David says firmly. "But we need to regroup, first. We've got new information. We need to figure out what it means and what we're going to do about it."

Beside him, Robin nods sagely. Killian squeezes Emma's hand, communicating his agreement.

Henry straightens in his chair. "Wait, if he knows about Ariel and wants to stop us, then why didn't he stop us?"

"Because the Dark One doesn't want to stop us," the Apprentice replies simply.

He doesn't elaborate, so Killian growls, "I don't understand."

"The Dark One wants the same object we do, and just like us he needs Ariel to retrieve it and bring it to this realm."

"But why?" Henry says. "I thought the object Ariel's getting is for getting rid of the Darkness?"

"I never said that was the object's sole purpose, I only said it was capable of it."

"What else is the object capable of?" Killian asks, his irritation and his impatience obvious.

"The object has the power to alter reality and defy the cardinal laws of magic. It has the ability to strip Neal of the Darkness without harming him, but it is capable of so much more. The possibilities are endless, which is why the Sorcerer left it so heavily guarded."

"So Neal could want it for literally anything?" Emma says.

"It has to be for something he believes will bring you, him, and Henry together."

Emma removes her hands from her mug and drops her face into them.

God, she's so fucking tired—emotionally and physically. Nerves kept her up half the night, and Ian kept her up the other half with his bad dreams and his insistence that there was something in the corner by the stairs, watching them. Nothing she did could convince him that they were safe, that there was no monster hiding in the shadows; Emma thought his nightmares were getting better, but she was wrong about that, as well.

She returns her hands to her mug. She doesn't have time to be tired, any more than she has time to be a trembling heap of limbs on the floor.

"So what is this thing anyway?" she says. "I'm starting to get sick of saying 'object'."

The Apprentice smiles. "It's a hat."


"Yes. Merlin's hat."

"And Neal wants it...why, exactly?" Killian says. "For a disguise? Does he think Emma won't recognize him if he's wearing a hat?"

Emma elbows him.

"The hat is merely a receptacle for the power inside of it. My master could have contained it within
any object."

"So why did he pick a hat?" Henry asks.

The Apprentice shrugged. "He was wearing it at the time."

There are snorts and chuckles all around the table. Emma wishes she could laugh but she can't; she's too tense and everything's too terrible.

She takes a long sip of her hot cocoa, sets her mug back on the table with a loud thunk, and says, briskly, "Ok, supposedly I have really powerful light magic or something, right?"

She sees Killian smile but ignores him.

"Yes, you do," the Apprentice says.

"Can my light magic beat the Darkness?"

"In its present form, yes, I believe so."

"What do you mean, 'in its present form'?" Killian asks.

"Are you talking about Emma's magic?" David says.

The Apprentice shakes his head. "No, I was referring to the Darkness. The piece that Neal Cassidy's body plays host to is just that—a piece. It's a fraction of a much larger whole. It was torn from its original form centuries ago, and they've been separated ever since."

Instead of chuckles around the table, there are frowns and worried glances. For some reason the image of the black urn Emma touched floats across her mind, but she pushes it away.

"But I can beat it?" she insists, trying to find at least one positive thing in this otherwise ridiculously horrible day.

"In a contest of raw strength: yes. Your light magic could beat the Darkness."

There was that small comfort, at least.

Emma looks from the Apprentice to the others and finds David and Killian's gazes locked.

"We should have eyes on the water at all times," Killian says. "We need Merry Men anywhere Ariel might surface—beaches, docks, even up on the cliffs."

"We should assume Neal's also watching the water," David says, "and be prepared for a fight whenever Ariel returns."

"Do I have permission to pull my men from watching Neal's house?" Robin asks.

David nods. "I'll gather the rest of the guards and our soldiers. I've been trying to keep them out of this, but I don't think we have much choice anymore."

Robin grins. "My men will be disappointed that you think they're not capable of handling the job themselves."

"Tell your men I'm just trying to keep them alive," David says.
"I can ask Smee as well," Killian adds. "Sadly, he's the only remaining member of my crew."

"Do you trust him?" David asks. His tone isn't skeptical; he's just asking because he needs to know.

"I trust Mr. Smee with my life," Killian answers.

"Then Smee can be in charge of the men we station at the docks."

"I'd prefer to be in charge of the men at the docks."

"You're in charge of keeping Emma, Ian, and Henry safe."

Killian blinks in surprise, then inclines his head in acknowledgement. Emma's equally shocked—Prince Charming, supreme Papa Bear, just let another man be in charge of protecting his daughter and grandsons. It's probably the truest gesture of trust David could possibly give.

The mood in the room changes. Even with danger hanging over their heads, a sense of purpose and direction straightens spines and brightens smiles—which just makes Emma feel extra bad for what she's about to do.

"There's something else," she says.

Everyone around the table tenses.

Emma turns to Henry, and Henry looks back curiously. When he first came into her life, he used to remind her so much of Neal that it actually hurt sometimes. Now, she sees her parents when she looks at him. His brown hair and eyes may be inherited from his father, but the shape of his eyes is from Snow, and his nose, lips, and jaw line are David's.

She's never seen much of herself in his appearance, but it's never mattered. The only thing that's ever mattered is that she's his mom. And it's because she's Henry's mom that she has to tell him about Regina.

She has to put him and his happiness first.

"Neal has Regina's heart."

Several emotions flicker across Henry's face.

"Her heart?" Killian asks.

"Yea," Emma says.

"Why does Neal have Regina's heart?"

"She tried to remove it once, in the Enchanted Forest," Snow says. "I managed to convince her not to, but she must have done it anyway."

"No," Robin says. "She had her heart while we were together. I'm sure of it."

"Then she must have removed it while she was with Neal," David says.

Robin looks away, but not before Emma sees the tears welling in his eyes.

Henry's expression finally settles somewhere halfway between hope and resignation. "Was her heart, you know...alive?"
"It was glowing," Emma says.

"Does that mean she's not dead?"

Emma doesn't answer, only looks to the Apprentice.

His brow is furrowed and he's stroking his beard thoughtfully. "There's a possibility that the magic that extracted Regina's life in exchange for the Dark One's hasn't truly killed her since it never reached her heart. She may not be dead, just suspended in a state between life and death."

"So she's in, like, a magical coma right now?" Emma asks.

"It seems likely that that's the case."

"But if we put her heart back?" Henry asks.

The Apprentice's hand stills. "She would die, Henry. Completely."

Emma doesn't mind admitting to herself that she was actually pretty relieved when Regina died, because it meant there would be no battle over Henry, that she wouldn't have to watch somebody who emotionally abused her son try to pretend that it never happened, that Emma wouldn't have to face a reminder every day that Regina of all people was there for Henry when Emma wasn't.

But Henry has a far bigger heart and a thousand times more compassion than Emma does.

Henry wanted to give Regina a second chance seven years ago, and Emma knows he still would now, if he could.

The Apprentice is watching her, as if anticipating her next question.

Emma takes a deep breath. "Do you think there's any way to reverse what happened to Regina?" she asks.

Robin looks over sharply. Light enters Henry's eyes.

"Perhaps," the Apprentice says slowly. "I'll have to do some research."

"Can I help you?" Henry says quickly.

The Apprentice levels Henry with a hard stare. "You understand there's no guarantee we'll be able to find a way to revive Regina? Her case may be hopeless, and our only solution may be to return her heart to her body so that her soul may find eternal rest."

Henry nods. "I understand."

"Then as long as your mother says yes, I'm happy to have your assistance."

Emma happily gives her approval—as long as Henry's focused on fixing Regina he's not thinking about how much of a dickbag his dad is, and if he's with the Apprentice then Emma knows he's safe.

The loft empties shortly after that. Robin and David leave to assemble their men; Snow goes to the Mayor's Office to begin slowly spreading the word for everyone to be on red alert; the Apprentice and Henry go to the Apprentice's place to begin their research, and Emma and Killian are left with Ian.

"Do you want to play Legos?" Ian asks, grinning. He shows no obvious signs of having been up
most of the night, so Emma guesses he slept late.

"Why don't we go to the beach or something?" Emma suggests instead. She needs sun and fresh air and heat to make her forget what happened inside of Neal's house.

Ian's up the stairs to the top of the loft and back down again dressed in his Spiderman swim trunks in ten seconds flat.

"Can I bring Ruby?"

"Uh, no," Emma says.

"Why not?"

"Because Ruby's a fish."

"Exactly," Ian drawls. "Fish swim."

"You are not putting Ruby in the ocean."

"Why not?" Ian asks again.

"Ruby's a fresh water fish," Killian says. "The ocean is salt water. Ruby wouldn't survive."

"Oh." Ian sticks his hand into the pocket of his swim trunks and pulls out a little red fish.

"Ian!" Emma splutters. "Put him back in his tank!"

"UPSTAIRS! NOW!" Killian roars.

Ian leaps into action, spinning around and racing back the way he came. Emma and Killian run to the stairs and stand huddled together at its base, waiting.

"Did you do it?" Killian calls.

"Yea," Ian says.

"And?"

"Is he alive?" Emma asks.

Ian doesn't answer right away.

Emma leans into Killian. "Did you happen to see if there were any other fish at the pet store that looked exactly like Ruby? Just in case?" she whispers.

"Unfortunately, Swan, Ruby was the only red one," Killian whispers back. "Are there any other pet stores in town?"

"No."

Emma's just wondering how far away the next nearest town is when Ian appears at the top of the stairs.

"What happened?" Emma asks.

"He's okay."
"Is he swimming? Or...floating?"

"Swimming." Ian says.

Emma throws Killian a look, and Killian starts up the stairs. Ian descends past him. He stops on the bottom step, shoulders slumped, eyes averted. Killian returns to view a moment later and winks.

A knot inside of Emma loosens. Ruby's death is the last thing she needs today.

Killian jogs down the stairs and tugs Ian into a hug. Emma catches a glimpse of Ian's miserable frown before he buries his face in the fabric over Killian's hip.

"I'm sorry I yelled, lad," Killian says gently. "I was just worried about Ruby."

"I know," Ian says into Killian's shirt. "I'm sorry I almost killed him."

Killian tightens his arms around him. "Ruby's a fish. He needs water the same way you need air, otherwise he'll suffocate."

Ian nods, face still hidden.

"Why don't you go pick out some snacks for the beach? I'll fetch the cooler."

Ian peels away from Killian and trots off to the refrigerator. Killian's shoulders sag with relief.

"Thank the gods that fish has a strong will to live," he says.

Emma pats his arm sympathetically.

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At the beach, Emma can't bring herself to go into the water, knowing how cold it is, so she sits on a towel in the sand and basks instead. Killian divides his time between swimming with Ian and sitting with her.

"You don't have to stay here with me," she says, feeling him settle on the sand beside her.

"I want to."

Emma cracks an eye open and sees his roving up her body from ankles to collarbones, drinking in the sight of her bikini. When he sees her watching him he blushes but grins.

"You can't blame a man for looking, Swan," he says. "You're the most gorgeous woman in all the realm, let alone on this beach."

She snorts and closes her eyes again.

His fingers touch the side of her thigh and trail upwards, lingering at the top edge of her bikini bottoms before continuing along the curve of her waist.

She hums appreciatively. "That's nice, but I don't think this is that kind of beach."

"It was that kind of beach a few nights ago," he purrs.

"Yea, but it was night. It was dark and there were no people."

"You also weren't wearing these." His fingers touch the top edge of bikini bottoms again.
"I wasn't wearing *anything.*"

He chuckles, and withdraws his hand. Emma reaches out and snatches it back, settling it atop her stomach beneath her own.

"You can't tell me this is entirely appropriate," Killian says.

"I don't care if it's appropriate or not. It feels nice."

He inches his fingers lower and wiggles them suggestively.

She slaps his knuckles lightly. "Later," she promises.

He replaces his hand where she had it originally, though his thumb strokes back and forth against her ribs. Emma closes her eyes, and returns her attention to the sound of the waves. If she listens carefully, she can pick out Ian's voice amongst the other kids' voices.

"That was nice, what you did for Henry," Killian says.

Emma opens her eyes again. Killian's looking out at the water. Emma knows he's watching Ian, ensuring he's staying at a safe depth and not wandering out further.

"What do you mean?" she says.

"I mean you could have kept Regina's heart a secret."

"No, I couldn't have," she says. "I love him too much."

Emma sits up. Killian's hand falls away. She scoots along the towel until her hip is pressed against his, then grabs his hand again and cradles it in her lap. She follows Killian's line of sight until she sees Ian, splashing in knee-deep water with two boys that look to be of similar age.

When she looks back at Killian, he's smiling.

"What?" she asks.

He glances at her with eyes the same brilliant hue as the sky overhead before looks back at Ian. "In Neverland Pan tried to trick me," he says. "He told me that Neal was alive and on the island, hoping that I'd keep it a secret and that that secret would tear us apart."

"But you told us."

"Aye. I didn't want to—I didn't want Neal around vying for your affections—but I already loved you too much to keep a secret from you out of selfishness."

Emma blushes. She tilts her head to rest it on Killian's shoulder.

"I'm scared," she murmurs.

What if they can't stop Neal from getting Merlin's hat? What if they can't stop him from using it?

Killian turns to press a kiss to her hair. "I'm scared too, love. But we'll face this together. You're not alone. We'll do whatever we have to to stop Neal."

What if the only way to stop Neal is to destroy the Darkness, and Neal along with it?
Emma lifts her eyes to find Ian. She feels the weight of Killian's hand in hers, the warmth of his lips against her hair, the faint scratch of stubble on her forehead, and closes her eyes. Ian's laughter fills her ears.

To preserve *this*, Emma will do whatever's necessary.
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

And now, a weird little interlude. Also, I'm not sure what this weekend will bring, but I know next weekend will be busy, so it may be until the middle-ish of March before I update again. I'll try my best to make it happen sooner!

Killian wakes up to the sound of screaming. He lunges to his feet, pauses for only a moment to orient himself in his pitch-black cabin, then races below deck.

The rooms he seeks are close to his own. They used to be officers' quarters, centuries ago when the ship was the Jewel of the Realm, a royal navy vessel with a far larger crew than the one Killian commanded; as the Jolly Roger, the rooms held extraneous supplies, Killian's private stash of rum, and the occasional hostage. Now, they're the bedrooms of two boys.

Henry is standing in the narrow doorway to his room, blinking the sleep from his eyes and squinting in the light cast from the lamp hanging from the rafters overhead.

"How long?" Killian asks.

"I think he just started," Henry says.

Across the hallway from Henry's room is Ian's room, as indicated by the hand-drawn sign on the door that's decorated with dinosaur stickers and still smells pleasantly of the cherry and black licorice scented markers Ian used.

Another cry rends the air and Killian shoulders his way through the door.

Ian's on the floor, thrashing within a cocoon of his own blankets. Killian drops to his knees beside him and wrestles Ian free—it's slow and clumsy labor, as he's not wearing his hook and only has one hand and a blunted wrist to work with, but he manages.

Ian's eyes fly open just as Killian tosses the blankets aside.

"Shh, lad," Killian says. "I'm here. I've got you." He bundles Ian against his chest and wraps his arms snugly around the boy's trembling shoulders.

"The monster was ripping me apart," Ian whimpers, curling into Killian. "It hurt."

"It was just a dream, Ian. Nothing can hurt you now. It's just me and Henry here."

Killian holds Ian and rocks him gently from side to side until he stops shaking. He wishes he had thought to put a t-shirt on, or at least taken off Ian's sweat-soaked one. Emma tells him his skin runs hot, however, and Ian isn't shivering anymore, so he supposes it's fine.

"Is mom here?" Ian mumbles.

"No, lad. Your mother's at the loft." Ian's nightmares and her own anxiety have been keeping Emma up for the past several nights. On top of that, she's been spending extra time with the Apprentice,
working on everything from protection charms and magical homing beacons for the Merry Men to teleportation. Killian volunteered to have Ian sleepover on the Jolly Roger so that she might get at least one night's rest. "It's just us men tonight. Is that alright?"

Ian nods against his chest.

"Do you want to get back in bed?"

"No."

Ian tenses. Killian's arms tighten reflexively. He used to have nightmares as a boy; he remembers waking up in a stuffy cabin, crying out for his father and receiving no answer, calling out to Liam only to receive a grumbled "Go back to sleep, Killian," in reply, having to huddle alone in the dark, certain whatever nightmare he'd woken from still stalked him and was just waiting for him to close his eyes again...

Killian stands, shifting Ian's weight over to his hip on his hook side, leaving his hand free.

"Why don't we go up top for some fresh air instead, then?" he says.

"Ok." Ian's words come out as a relieved sigh.

"Want me to make some hot chocolate?" Henry asks from behind him.

"If you don't mind," Killian says. "We'll meet you in my cabin in a few minutes."

Stifling a yawn with his fist, Henry shuffles away down the hallway towards the galley. Emma helped Killian outfit the ship's kitchen with some modern equipment for his convenience, including a battery-powered coffee maker, a propane-fueled camp stove, and a cooler she and the Apprentice enchanted to remain cold so Killian could use it as a refrigerator.

She also taught him how to cook hot chocolate on the stove and ensured he had a full stock of cocoa powder, marshmallows, whipped cream, and cinnamon.

Killian turns the other way down the hallway and carries Ian up to the main deck. As he steps into the fresh air, he hears an owl hooting from the gangplank.

"All's well," he calls to the figure crouched there.

The figure rises from the shadows, and a bit of moonlight illuminates a head of sandy blonde hair.

"I heard yelling." It's their guard, one of Robin's men, a lad named Alec. "I came to check."

"Just the boy," Killian says.

"Ah."

Alec is no stranger to being woken up in the middle of the night by a screaming child—he has a one-month-old daughter at home. He showed Killian the photos on his phone of a pink-wrapped, pink-faced bundle with a pink bow on its head the night Robin and David first stationed him on the Jolly Roger's pier three days prior.

"I'll be at my post if you need me," Alec says.

"Goodnight," Killian says, but Alec's already disappeared back into the darkness. He likes the Merry Men for that reason—they know how to be unobtrusive.
Killian heads to the quarterdeck. The night's on the chillier side, with the sort of stillness that indicates a storm is approaching. Indeed, when he reaches the stern he sees a bank of thick black clouds gathering to the east, blotting out the stars along the horizon.

Killian drinks in the night air. Ian, relaxed in Killian's hold moments before, tightens his arms and legs.

"You're not cold, are you?" Killian asks.

"No. Aren't you?"

"No," Killian chuckles. He's only wearing a pair of thin flannel pajama pants, but the coldness of the wooden boards beneath his feet and the cool touch of the wind on his bare back and arms is more refreshing than uncomfortable. "Let me know when you want to go back inside."

Ian settles his head on Killian's shoulder, and, gradually, his limbs loosen.

"Cool," he murmurs, when a flicker of lightning appears in the distance, arcing between sea and sky.

"Mmm," Killian hums in agreement. "It will be here soon."

"How long?"

"Half hour. Maybe less."

Another bolt of lightning appears, this one already visibly closer. The storm's moving fast. Thunder rumbles mere minutes later, followed by a strong breeze that sets the rigging snapping, and Killian decides it's time to go back below deck.

"Have a care, Alec," Killian calls, knowing the young man will hear him. "A storm's approaching. Come aboard if you need to."

He sets Ian on his own two feet and follows him down the ladder into his cabin. Henry's already there, sitting at Killian's table with two lit lanterns and three steaming mugs of hot chocolate.

Killian puts on a t-shirt and helps Ian change out of his sweaty pajamas into clean, dry ones and then they sit too. Killian takes the chair beside Ian's, but no sooner has his rear touched the padding than Ian changes his mind and crawls into Killian's lap to straddle one of his legs as if it were a horse.

Killian settles his blunted arm around Ian's waist and subtly shifts so that that boy's butt bones aren't digging into his thigh.

Henry pushes two mugs across the table. Ian reaches for his and pulls it the rest of the way, scattering the markers that litter the table and causing several of them to roll to the floor.

"Oh," Ian says. "I forgot to pick those up."

"It's fine," Killian says. "We can do it tomorrow."

Killian's used to perfect order and cleanliness aboard his ship, and Ian's part-time residence is challenging that. Emma tells him it's just part of having a kid, that eventually Ian's possessions aboard the ship will outnumber his own.

It's only been a week and a half, but Killian's certain that's already happened.

The pantry in the galley contains more of the food that Ian eats than Killian does; the load of
undergarments he washed in a barrel that morning was half Ian's; there are Legos on the rug; Killian's books were pushed aside to make room for the ones he reads to Ian; and his dining table is now apparently an art table.

And that's not even accounting for what possessions Emma's left aboard.

It's an invasion, but Killian finds himself enjoying it. The ship feels full, fuller than it did even when a crew of rowdy men lived aboard.

He'd ask Emma to move in if he wasn't certain she needed a backyard with grass and a real flower bed to grow her herbs in. And windows. Emma Swan needed a house with windows to let the sunlight in.

Ian needs that too. He needs room to run, and sidewalks large enough to ride that monstrosity of a bicycle on.

"You forgot the marshmallows," Ian says.

"They're underneath the whipped cream," Henry replies patiently.

Ian inserts one finger into his whipped cream and pushes it aside to peer into his hot chocolate. "Oh."

"I didn't know if you wanted any," Henry says, jerking his chin in the direction of Killian's mug.

Killian does rather enjoy marshmallows, but he tries to be as neutral as possible about it—Ian is the only other one who likes them, and Henry, who treats marshmallows like an abomination, is always quick to preach the sanctity of marshmallow-less hot chocolate whenever Ian requests them.

"Do you want some?" Ian offers, the finger he just stuck into his hot chocolate now in his mouth.

"Erm..."

Henry's eyes, narrowed judgmentally, prick Killian's skin like daggers. His mug hovers inches in away from his lips, forgotten. Killian has no choice now but to pick a side.

"Aye, lad," he says to Ian. "I'd love some."

Ian grins.

"Hmph. Must be genetic," Henry mumbles darkly from behind his mug, while Ian fishes out three half-melted marshmallows and deposits them atop Killian's cinnamon-speckled whipped cream.

"Cheers," Killian says, lifting his mug and clinking it against Ian's. He then turns to Henry.

"Gross," Henry says, but he bumps Killian's proffered mug with his own.

They sip their hot chocolates in amiable silence. Thunder rumbles outside, growing louder and louder as the storm approaches. They douse the lamps, and watch the windows. Whenever lightning flashes Ian lets out a soft murmur of appreciation.

When Killian's mug is empty, he fishes his flask from his jacket, hanging over the back of one of the chairs, and pours a splash of rum over the dregs of his cinnamon and whipped cream.

As he's swishing the contents of his mug around, mixing them, Ian inhales audibly.

"That smells good. Can I try some?"
Killian considers it briefly—only to help the boy sleep—but he knows Emma would murder him, so he says, "Not until you're older," and downs the mixture in one long swallow.

The storm breaks suddenly overhead, pummeling the deck above them with what sounds like raindrops the size of squirrels. A peal of thunder that sounds like the sky is ripping apart follows. Ian jumps and presses back into Killian, his fingertips digging into the arm Killian has slung around his waist. Killian tightens that arm, and Ian relaxes.

After ten minutes, the rain lightens to a gentler, soothing patter. Through the windows Killian can see a strip of clear night sky on the horizon.

Ian is heavy and motionless against his chest. Killian catches Henry's eye, raises one brow, and tilts his head towards Ian.

"He's awake," Henry says. "Sorry."

"I don't want to go to sleep," Ian says.

"It's late, lad. You need to go to bed."

Ian shakes his head vigorously. "No."

"Ian-"

"No!"

Ian looks up at him, and even in the semi-darkness Killian can see the tears glimmering in his eyes.

"I can't go to sleep," he says, tremulously. "The monsters will get me."

A jagged pain lodges in Killian's chest, like a dull knife driven through his breastbone.

As Ian's father, it's his duty to protect the boy—but how can he protect the lad from his own dreams? And they've only gotten worse, despite his and Emma's efforts to shield Ian from what's going on around him, despite their constant assurances that everything's fine.

He bundles Ian into his arms once more. "The monsters in your nightmares aren't real, Ian. I promise you."

Ian's hands fist themselves into Killian's t-shirt. "Yes, they are!" he says. "The Shadow was real!"

Henry's watching, silent. Killian closes his eyes.

He can't deny that the Shadow was real, though he believes it only appeared in Ian's dreams at all because Ian saw it in real life first. Most of the other "monsters" and events Ian describes can also be traced back to real-life sources: a crocodile man that's obviously Neal; Blackbeard is the skeleton pirate with a peg leg that makes Ian walk the plank; his dreams of drowning and shark infested waters is from when he actually almost drowned.

Those aren't the only features of his dreams, but they're the most recurring. Killian suspects the other horrifying images Ian's brain conjures up are a result of trauma.

Killian's own childhood nightmares worsened significantly after his father abandoned him and his brother; what helped Killian then was Liam. Liam who started waking up when Killian cried out in the darkness for him, Liam who talked him through his terror, Liam who assured him that the monsters in Killian's dreams were only in his head.
Killian opens his eyes, and the first thing he sees is Ian's sketchbook, it's white pages eerily visible in
the dim cabin.

"Let's draw," he says.

"Huh?"

"Let's draw your monsters."

Ian pulls back from him and looks up. "Really?"

"Aye."

Killian relights the two lamps on the table, and Henry lights the various others hanging around the
room. Ian slips from Killian's leg to collect the markers from the floor, and returns to his perch with a
black marker already uncapped.

He starts drawing immediately, furiously fast. Killian and Henry observe without comment as the
Shadow comes to life before their eyes. The crocodile man comes next, and Ian abandons the black
marker in favor of a metallic gold crayon for the skin.

Both figures are recognizable but distorted. The Shadow's eyes glow red and his arms are much
longer and clawed; the crocodile man that Killian knows is based on Neal looks more beast than
human, with a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

Ian draws Blackbeard next, his skeletal form dripping with blood, his peg leg planted firmly in a pool
of it. The final figure wears a long black robe and a ruff around its neck that looks as if it's made of
spikes.

"Who's that?" Killian asks, laying his finger lightly on the drawing.

"That's the black feather lady," Ian says.

"Ah," Killian says. She's a rather new character, having only appeared three nights ago, the night
after Emma broke into Neal's house. "And what does she do in your dreams?"

Ian's hand stops. "She tries to rip me open," he says in a small voice. "She says there's something
inside of me she wants."

Killian remembers Ian's cries from earlier: *The monster was ripping me apart! It hurt!*

"Is that who you were dreaming of tonight?"

Ian nods, and then shivers. "I don't like her."

Killian picks up a marker, and puts it to the paper.

"What are you doing?" Ian asks.

"Helping," he says.

He wants to blot out the black feather lady, obliterate her from the paper and from his son's mind, but
instead he moves his hand over to the drawing of the Shadow and the crocodile man. Inexpertly, he
draws a large orange crab, claws poised to slice the Shadow in half.

"Roger?"
"Aye, lad. Didn't you know Roger could go into your dreams with you?"

"No," Ian says slowly.

"One-Eyed Jim can, too," Henry says. He leans across the table and picks up a red marker, then adds an octopus with its tentacles wrapped around the crocodile man's neck.

Ian frowns. "If they can go into my dreams with me, how come I've never seen them before?"

Henry blinks at Ian, then looks to Killian. Killian hesitates, then says, "Maybe they don't know they can do it either. Maybe you have to tell them."

Ian's frown deepens, and Killian holds his breath. After a long moment, Ian grabs his black marker, and gives Mr. Jim an eye patch and Roger a pair of angry eyebrows.

"They look like this," he says, and thankfully offers no further criticism of either Henry or Killian's drawing abilities.

They continue to add characters—a dog with a bone in its mouth to harass skeleton Blackbeard, a gang of dolphins with tattoos to beat up the sharks—until Ian's yawning. After he accidentally smears blue marker across his cheek when he's rubbing his eyes, Ian finally lets Killian pick him up and carry him across the room to the bed.

Killian gets Ian settled while Henry fetches Roger and One-Eyed Jim. They tuck the crab and octopus beneath each of Ian's arms.

"Go to sleep, lad. We're watching over you," Killian says, trailing his fingers over Ian's forehead. Ian's eyelids droop. "If you have a bad dream, call to Roger and Mr. Jim."

Killian doesn't know if it will actually work. He thinks he's convinced Ian that it will, and he hopes that's enough.

Ian nods, and closes his eyes. Killian stays with him and continues stroking his hair. The boy's asleep within a minute. Killian gives the blankets and pillows a final, totally unnecessary adjustment, and turns. He expects to find Henry on his way to bed, but instead he sees a chess board on the table and two fresh mugs of hot chocolate. Killian's flask is beside the mug on his side of the table.

Killian smiles. "Not tired, eh?"

"Nope," Henry says, grinning.

"Alright. Let me check on Alec first."

Killian finds Alec hunkered down in one of the sailboats on the opposite side of the pier beneath a tarp propped up like an A-frame tent. Alec spots him through the drizzle and gives him a cheerful wave. Killian waves back and returns to his cabin.

Henry graciously chose white for himself, and he's already made his first move. Killian sits down, considers the placement of Henry's pawn while he takes a swig of rum straight from his flask, then moves one of his black knights. He feels a sentimental attachment to the horse-shaped pieces that he didn't use to, purely because they're Ian's favorite. He thinks Henry knows, because Henry smirks and shakes his head.

While they play, Killian's eyes keep straying from the board to Ian's sketchbook, and then to Ian.
Henry sees, and says, "I used to have nightmares about Peter Pan."

Killian's eyes snap to Henry. "Really?"

"Yea. When I was in Boston." Henry scrunches his face at the board. "I didn't really understand them—I didn't have my memories—but they scared the shit out of me."

"What happened?"

Henry shrugs. "They faded eventually. My mom talked to me a lot about them."

Killian watches Henry move his bishop three spaces, and responds by moving his rook over one. He lets Henry absorb the new arrangement before asking, "Talking to your mother helped?"

"Yea." Henry leans back in his chair and folds his arms over his chest. He glares at his pieces and chews his lip. "She thought I was having bad dreams because I was stressed out about her being pregnant."

"What did she say to you?"

"Well, she didn't try to deny that things would change, which was nice. She just said that the baby would take up a lot of her time and attention, and that it would be tough for a while but that everything would be okay—she also said that some things wouldn't change, like how much she loved me." Henry smiles sheepishly.

"So she told you the truth?"

"Yea, basically—I mean, she left out the part about how he was going to scream like a banshee at 2am every night, and she never mentioned that his diapers would smell like something a dog pooped out and then ate and then pooped back out again, but yea. She told me the truth."

Killian nods to himself. Would some of Ian's subconscious anxiety be relieved if he better understood what was happening around him? He's too young to be told the whole story, but he's too old and too perceptive to be mollified by a simple, "Everything's fine."

Henry leans forward, props his elbows on the table, and rests his forehead against his knuckles. Eyes still on the board, he asks, "Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

Archie.

"No," Killian says.

It's a lie—sort of. He's not nervous about taking Ian to see the cricket, he's...apprehensive.

He looks back at Ian. The lad's face is half-buried in a pillow, but he looks peaceful. The idea of subjecting him to some sort of interrogation makes Killian uneasy. This man Archie doesn't know Ian. Emma and Killian know Ian. They should be talking to him. Together.

When Killian return his focus to the chess board, Henry's moved again—and so, apparently, has Killian.

"That's not where my rook was," he says.

Henry's expression is one of pure innocence. "You sure?"

Their game lasts another grueling hour. Henry asks to go another round afterwards, but Killian sends
him off to bed.

"You have a long day with the Apprentice ahead of you tomorrow, lad." Killian hasn't asked Henry how his newest research project is going; he understands that Henry will bring it up if and when he wants to talk about it. "Get some sleep."

Henry yawns out a goodnight, and trudges away. He was initially wary of the idea of having his own room aboard Killian's ship, but once he realized it offered a privacy the loft could not he practically begged to move in. In the past week, Henry's stayed over on the Jolly Roger more nights than he's slept at the loft.

Killian returns to the table, stows the chess set, returns the crayons and markers to their boxes, locates his phone and his flask, and sits down. He takes a swig of rum and checks the time. It's just after 3am. He's considering calling Emma to see if she's awake when her name lights up on the screen.

He quickly raises the phone to his ear. "Swan?" he says quietly.

"Hey, did I wake you?"

"No, love. I was already up. Is everything alright?"

"Yea, everything's fine." She's whispering, and her voice is soft around the edges, as if she's still half-asleep. "Are you up because of Ian?"

"Aye, but everything's alright now." Killian pauses, listens to her sigh. "Did you manage to get some sleep?"

"Yea, I crashed at like 8."

Killian closes his eyes. It makes him feel closer to her. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't been plagued by troubled dreams of his own ever since the ten terrifying minutes she was trapped inside Neal's house. "What woke you?" he asks.

"I think it's just habit at this point. I'm so used to Ian waking me up in the middle of the night that it's weird not waking up."

"How was your day?"

"It was good. We put the finishing touches on the protection charms. I think we can hand those out tomorrow. We're still working on the homing beacons though. That's gonna take some more time."

Emma decided that if the Merry Men are going to be constantly putting their lives at risk for her and her kids then she can at least try to provide them with some sort of magical armor. The "homing beacons", as she calls them, are an additional precaution to ensure any man on their Ariel-lookout squad gets the backup he needs as soon as he needs it.

Neither Emma nor Killian have forgotten what happened to Will Scarlet—or what would have happened to him if they hadn't gotten to him sooner.

"What about teleporting?" Killian asks.

Emma makes a sound of disgust. "I suck at it. I don't think I'll ever be able to do it."

"You will, love. I know you'll get it eventually."

"Yea, maybe."
"You will," he repeats. He knows she can do it; he's yet to see her fail.

Faintly, he hears her yawn.

"What time do you want to meet up tomorrow?" she asks. "Our appointment with Archie is at 10."

Killian looks over at Ian. "Aye, about that," he says.

"What is it?"

"I want to talk to Ian ourselves, Swan. I don't want to take him to see Archie."

Ian shifts in his sleep and frowns.

"Killian, we've been trying to talk to him-"

"Have we though?" Killian asks. "We haven't actually told him anything since Neal first appeared, and a lot's happened since then."

"We can't tell him the truth."

"I know that. But we have to tell him something. He doesn't need all the facts, he just needs an explanation that makes sense and doesn't frighten him any more than he already is."

He expects her to override him, to tell him it's her decision, but she doesn't.

"Ok."

"Really?"

"Yea. I think you're right. I think...I think this is something the three of us should face together."

Killian smiles and closes his eyes. "I love you, Swan."

"I love you, too."

When they hang up, Killian douses all of the lamps, checks the lock on the trapdoor, and gets in bed. Ian cracks an eye open and grumbles when Killian scoots him over on the mattress. As soon as Killian's settled Ian wriggles back and curls against his side. Killian gets an arm under Ian's head, tugs Roger out from where he's wedged beneath the small of his back, settles the crab on his stomach instead, and falls asleep.
Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Ok, one more surprisingly fast update! I found myself with some unexpected free time today and took advantage of it to write! Seriously though, it'll definitely be two weeks before the next chapter. Also, I loosely plotted out the remaining chapters through to the epilogue, and it looks like we're headed towards either 54 or 55, so we're almost at the end!

Emma falls asleep again right after she and Killian hang up, but she's awake with the dawn. The emptiness of her bed propels her out of it, and as quietly as she can she pads down the stairs and across the loft to the bathroom.

She fires off a text to Killian (You awake?) before she jumps in the shower, and when she gets out she sees he's responded with a photo of the sunrise that she recognizes as being taken from the stern of the Jolly Roger. She replies with the heart-eyes emoji, gets dressed, feeds Ruby, and sends another text: I'm on my way.

His answer is immediate: See you soon. I'll make coffee. The coffee cup emoji follows a minute later, as if it took him some time to locate it.

Emma walks the half mile to the docks, but only to practice teleporting. The sidewalk is strewn with puddles, and her route is littered with Merry Men that she's certain only make themselves visible out of politeness; they briefly bow their heads and touch their hands to their hearts before disappearing once more.

Every minute she stops and imagines herself a block ahead, but her magic stubbornly refuses to transport her there—poofing objects from one place to another is apparently not the same as poofing her own body.

The Apprentice told her that it's her own hesitation holding her back. Emma argued that of course she's hesitant—she has no idea what's gonna happen to her body between point A and point B. What if it hurts? What if she disappears but never reappears? What if she accidentally teleports to Florida? What if she gets stuck in some in-between place?

The Apprentice smiled when she finished her rant, shrugged, and said she'd just have to get over it—he can be surprisingly blunt when he wants to be.

The good news is that the protection charms worked out.

Emma slips her hand into the back pocket of her jean shorts and pulls out a small drawstring bag. Inside are the two dozen wooden discs that she and the Apprentice enchanted to act as a sort of shield against dark magic. They're not perfect, but as long as the Merry Men and the rest of their odd assortment of guards and lookouts keep the charms in contact with their skin, they won't get blown away by the first fireball Neal throws at them.

The weight of the bag is comforting, a reminder that she hasn't failed at everything she's tried lately—the debacle at Neal's house is a black stain on her conscience. She's been debating whether or not she
should try again, leaning more and more towards just friggin' doing it and not telling anyone. Killian and her parents would be upset, but it might be the only way, and if she can find the dagger then their anger and disappointment would be worth it; the thought of Neal with a magical object that would make him essentially omnipotent literally makes her shudder.

It takes another 10 minutes to reach Killian's pier. Emma spots him—standing on the quarterdeck facing the water—before he spots her. He cuts a striking silhouette against the early morning light, and even in his modern clothes no one in their right mind would mistake him for anything other than a pirate.

Emma stops. That's her pirate, her pirate that she's missing extra hard this morning because she woke up alone, and she wants to be next to him.

She closes her eyes, relaxes the muscles of her face, shoulders, and arms, and dips into her magic.

Her little reservoir of power has grown from what she pictured as a mountain spring into something more resembling a pond. The pool of her magic shimmers invitingly, and Emma draws on it, pulling out glittering threads which she then wraps around her body like a cocoon.

In her mind's eyes she sees Killian aboard the Jolly Roger, coffee mug in hand, hair mussed by the wind. If she concentrates, she can smell him, too. His scent changed since he moved back aboard his ship; he smells less like Granny's detergent and more strongly of the sea now, along with the warm, dry, woody smell of the Jolly Roger.

*There*, she tells her magic. *I want to go there. To him.*

She feels pressure on her bones, a tug—as if something hooked her behind the belly button and pulled—and then...

"Good morning, your highness."

Emma opens her eyes. Alec's standing there, looking as if he's kept upright by sense of duty alone.

"Hey," Emma says, forcing herself to smile. There's a prickle of unused magic beneath her skin, quickly fading but uncomfortable nonetheless. "How was your shift?"

"It was well, thank you."

Emma nods. "How's the baby?" she asks. As a rule, the Merry Men aren't a particularly chatty bunch —Will Scarlet is an anomaly—and the only time Alec's ever exhibited a personality is when he's talking about his wife or daughter.

"She's getting big," Alec says, a smile on his lips. "And speaking of, I should get going. It's almost time for her breakfast."

On the first day Alec was stationed at Killian's pier, Emma overheard him telling Robin that he felt so helpless when it came to the baby; Emma suggested he try taking a turn feeding her, and both men looked at her absolutely bewildered for a full minute before Emma realized she had to explain about breast pumps. Since then, Alec's asked her for advice several times, on everything from diaper rash to sleeping schedules.

He bows his head and starts to step around her.

"Wait, before you go-" Emma reaches into the drawstring bag and pull out one of the protection charms. The Apprentice hand-carved them from the wood of a rowan tree; the shape and size of each
disc is a little different, but they all have a buttercup on one side, and some sort of ancient rune on the other. She presses it into Alec's palm. "Wear it in contact with your skin and it should help keep you safe."

Alec curls his fingers around the wooden disc, raises his fist to his heart in that gesture the Merry Men are so fond of, and takes his leave.

Farther down the pier, close to the Jolly Roger, Emma finds Alec's dad, the burly guy with the ginger beard. His name is Henry, but he goes by Hal, and Emma gives him a charm too; she explains how it works, and he slips it into the bracer on his forearm between the leather and his skin.

Emma tucks the drawstring bag back into her pocket and heads to the ship.

Killian's waiting for her at the top of the gangplank, a welcoming grin on his face and the ruby in his ear winking in the sunlight. He's wearing a plain black fitted t-shirt, which is a new addition to his wardrobe that Emma's very appreciative of.

"Morning, love," he says. He holds out his hand and helps her hop down onto the main deck.

Emma steps into him the moment her feet touch the boards and goes up on her tiptoes for a kiss. He dips his head, mouth meeting hers in a warm rush. He tastes pleasantly of coffee, and he smells like the orange-and-clove-scented soap that he said he got from Agrabah and uses for literally everything—including laundry.

They part and make their way to the quarterdeck, ducking under a rope stretched taut between the masts that's hung with drying clothes. It's mainly shirts and underwear, Killian's subdued black, grey, and navy boxer briefs flapping in the wind beside Ian's superhero ones. What amuses Emma the most is that, considering how prudish Killian is about certain things, he's not embarrassed by having his unmentionables on full display.

There are two mugs of coffee sitting on the top rail of the balustrade along the stern; one is black and missing a few sips, one is filled to the brim and a creamy toffee color.

"Henry and Ian still sleeping?" Emma asks, lifting the mug for her to her nose and inhaling deeply before tasting it; it has just the right amount of sweetness.

"Aye. They went to bed for the second time rather late, so I'm sure they'll sleep for at least another two hours." His arm slips around her waist.

"Henry was up too?"

"The lad's screaming woke him."

"It was that bad?"

He pulls a folded wad of paper from the pocket of his jeans and hands it to her. She sets her mug back on the rail and opens the paper.

It's 3 pages folded together, and on them are drawn a blend of both nightmarish and comical images. She recognizes Ian's distinctive drawing style in some of the figures—the skeleton pirate, a golden-skinned crocodile man, Pan's Shadow—but someone else drew the giant One-Eyed Jim and Roger, the dogs gnawing on the pirate's peg and bone legs, and some of the tattooed dolphins.

"What is all this?" she says.
"Ian drew them—well, some of them. I thought drawing what he sees in his nightmares might help. And then..." He scrubs his knuckles along his forehead, gives his earlobe a tug.

"And then you made his monsters less scary," Emma murmurs. It's difficult to be frightened of Pan's Shadow when it's getting its butt pinched by Roger and anime tears are exploding from its eyes.

Emma shuffles through the pages. The last one shows only the black feather lady. A cold chill passes through her, settles in her stomach, and her fingertips prickle.

Killian's hand is back on her hip. "She's a frightening one," he says quietly.

"Yea..."

Emma doesn't know why, but it reminds her of what she saw and felt when she touched that urn. It might be the timing, the black feather lady having appeared in Ian's dreams the night Emma broke into Neal's house, or it could literally just be the feathers. Whatever the reason, it makes her uneasy.

She puts the pages back in order and refolds them. With the black feather lady out of sight, the air feels suddenly warmer again. Emma gives herself a mental shake, and lifts her eyes to Killian's.

"I think what you did was a good idea," she says, handing him back the drawings.

Killian grimaces. "I'm not certain it will make any difference."

"It might," she says. "What matters is that you were there for him when he needed you." She picks up her mug and cradles it, contemplating its contents, then adds, "Us talking to him will probably help things too."

Emma knows that part of what's troubling Ian's dreams is his run-in with the Shadow and Neal, part of it is Blackbeard and the trauma of being kidnapped and thrown off a cliff into the ocean, and part of it is being too perceptive to his surroundings.

They've been mostly successful at keeping him unaware of exactly what's going on—but that doesn't mean he doesn't understand something is going on, or sense everyone's tension.

"When do you want to talk to him, love?"

"Later. Let's take him around town for a bit, give him a few hours to forget the rough night he had."

She takes another sip of her coffee. "What made you change your mind about Archie?"

He looks at her for a moment and then looks away, towards the horizon. "I missed out on raising him for nearly his whole life," he says, "but I'm here now, and I'm not ready to outsource my responsibility to a third party—another man, no less." He blinks, then turns quickly to her, eyes wide. "I'm sorry, Swan. I'm not trying to imply-"

"I know."

Emma was 100% ready to outsource—not out of laziness, but out of the fear that she'd let Ian get so tangled up inside that any attempts made by her to fix things would only make them worse.

She's worried that she's too tangled up inside to be of any use.

Sometimes it's still her first instinct to react as if she's all on her own. She should have remembered Killian and trusted in him.

She reaches out and rests her hand on his wrist. He lifts his arm, bringing her knuckles to his lips and
They stand together by the stern and watch the sun climb slowly higher in the sky, chatting. Emma shows Killian the protection charms and gives him one with a hole drilled through it to add to the charms dangling around his neck. He asks about the homing beacons and Emma tells him only that they're coming along and then changes the subject—in order for the homing beacons to have any impact at all Emma's going to need to master not only teleporting herself, but teleporting groups of at least 2 to 3 people, and she really doesn't feel like discussing how much she sucks at teleporting.

Eventually, they go below deck to the galley, and Emma washes out their mugs in a basin while Killian starts mixing pancake batter. It's a much more cramped space than her parents' kitchen, but it's their fourth time cooking together on the ship and they're getting good at the maneuvers required to make it work.

Killian's just scooping his second batch of pancakes off the camp stove and onto a plate when first Henry and then Ian stumble sleepily into the galley.

"Hey, good morning," Emma says.

Henry's reply is a grunt, but Ian trots over and hugs her around the middle, his face pressed against her stomach.

Emma puts her arms around Ian's shoulders and brushes her fingers through his hair. "How did you sleep?" she asks. "Did you have any more bad dreams?"

"Yea, but it was okay," he pulls his head up and grins at her. "Roger and Mr. Jim were there. They scared the black feather lady away."

Killian and Henry exchange a meaningful glance and a smile.

Emma smiles too. "Why don't you guys go set the table really quick?" she says. "The pancakes are almost ready."

Henry pulls four of the heavy ceramic plates down from their shelf and thrusts them at Ian; Ian, hands full of the silverware he grabbed from the drying rack beside the wash basin, sticks his tongue out and flounces from the room with his chin in the air.

They eat in Killian's sundrenched cabin, with the windows cracked to let in fresh air. Cleared of a chess set and Ian's drawing materials, the table fits the four of them perfectly.

Emma looks around the room contentedly while she munches her pancakes and bacon, noting the changes. The shelves used to be full of leather-bound books and a collection of priceless, fragile objects, things Killian gathered from distant lands over the course of a century, but Ian's clearly taken over. His toys and books are everywhere, and Killian has several of his drawings pinned neatly to the wall over his bed.

She's glad Killian has his ship back and that he's sharing it with the boys, but Killian's space only makes her feel more sharply the need for her to get a space of her own.

The loft is crowded, the sleeping arrangements not ideal, and while her parents have never made her and the boys feel unwelcome or like an intrusion, Emma knows they need their privacy—yesterday she walked in on them singing a love song to each other from different rooms, and it was definitely more embarrassing for everyone involved than the time eight years ago when she and Henry came home from the grocery store and caught them in bed.
Emma knows she should start looking for an apartment—or maybe even a house—but something's holding her back.

It's not Boston.

Returning to Boston seems less and less likely of an option every day. As much as she wants a safe, normal life for Ian, Emma doesn't think they fit there anymore; she can't go back knowing what she knows now, knowing that her parents are here, knowing both she and Ian have magic, knowing how difficult of an adjustment it would be for Killian. They'd be leaving friends behind, and Henry's girlfriend.

And yet there's some resistance inside of her, one small part of her soul that was hurt a long, long time ago and never recovered that refuses to accept that this is her life now, that believes the happiness she feels (in spite of all the danger and magic and nonsense) can't last and is trying to protect itself.

As if sensing her thoughts, Killian slings his arm over the back of her chair. Immediately, she feels fingers in her hair, toying with the long strands of her ponytail. Warmth spreads through Emma's body, from her scalp all the way down to her toes. Killian catches her eye, winks, and then returns his attention to Ian's monologue about Pokémon GO and why Killian should download it to his phone.

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After they clean up breakfast, have a brief argument with Ian about hygiene and the necessity of putting on fresh underwear, and then squash Henry's subsequent smirk by telling him he needs to make his bed before he leaves, they part ways. Henry heads to the Apprentice's house, while Emma, Killian, and Ian start walking south, towards East Point beach.

Emma gave Henry a protection charm—which he tucked into his sock—and Emma attached another one to the chain Ian wears around his neck with Liam's ring on it. The rest they distribute. Each of the Merry Men they meet along their route to the beach gets to choose a wooden disc from the drawstring bag that Emma put Ian in charge of.

"Why do they need these?" Ian asks, giving the bag a little shake so that the protection charms rattle and clack together.

"To help keep them safe while they're waiting for Ariel."

"Oh." He doesn't ask any more questions, but she sees him file that information away, add it to the growing pile of evidence he must have that the adults in his life are hiding something from him.

Emma supposes she should start concocting a story to tell him, something that's going to reassure him but won't sound like a complete fable. She mulls it over as they continue their trek to the beach.

Despite the fact that it's a Tuesday and the sand is soggy from last night's storm, East Point is at capacity. Emma, Killian, and Ian thread their way through sandcastles, sunbathers, frolicking children, and two old men with metal detectors to the rickety wooden towers where the Merry Men are doing a pretty good job of pretending to be lifeguards.

Ian, naturally, volunteers to scamper up each tower to deliver the protection charms and Emma's instructions on how to use them while Emma and Killian wait patiently, shoes in hand, their bare feet warming in the sand. From below, Emma can see the longbows, quivers, and the occasional knife hidden on the underside of the towers, out of sight but within easy reach.
Little John and Robin are sharing the tower at the very center of the beach that looks less like a tall chair and more like a hut on stilts. There's a group of children gathered at its base, staring upwards in awe at Little John, who Emma has to admit currently looks like Hagrid in swim trunks and mirrored shades.

The three of them climb the ramp to the tower. Robin and Little John move aside to make room for them along the railing; Ian climbs up it and sits on the top board, feet dangling over the side.

"How's it going?" Emma asks.

"Can't complain," Robin says, throwing her a dazzling grin. "It's dull work, but at least we're all getting tans."

"Isn't that going to mess up your camouflage?" Emma still doesn't understand how they're so good at concealing themselves within whatever environment they're thrown into.

Robin chuckles. "No, I think it'll help, actually. Trees are brown, after all."

"Dirt's brown too," Ian adds, helpfully.

"That's right, lad," Robin says, ruffling Ian's hair. "So are some rocks."

Ian smirks suddenly, and Emma—knowing that when Ian's boy brain jumped to the next brown thing it could think of, that thing was poo—says, "Why don't you give Robin and Little John their protection charms?"

She's watching Ian fish out two more wooden discs when a figure coming towards them catches her eye—it's one of the Merry Men, bow tucked into the crook of his arm, hands gesturing wildly in what looks like some sort of sign language.

Beside her, Killian straightens. Robin goes still, eyes on the man running through the sand; Emma watches too, and notices he seems to be repeating the same message over and over.

"What he saying?" she asks.

"He says they spotted a mermaid," Robin says.

Emma sucks in a breath. "Where?"

"North."

Emma steps up onto the bottom board of the railing to gain a better vantage point. The beach is a crescent, and at the northern tip Emma can just make out two men with bows rushing towards the water. Emma follows their trajectory and sees someone fairly far out to sea swimming steadily inland. It's not until she sees the glitter of the sun on scales that she's certain it's Ariel.

It's been almost exactly two weeks since Ariel left. Emma hopes she's returning with Merlin's hat, and not to tell them that she couldn't find it.

Hopes swells inside of her, followed abruptly by a cold wave of terror.

If Ariel's here, Neal could be on his way.

"We need to move," she says briskly.

Killian grabs Ian around the waist and hoists him off the railing. Robin ducks into the little hut and
returns with an armful of weapons. He hands Little John a crossbow and quiver and slings a second quiver over his shoulder.

"Sorry, mate," he says, tossing Killian a knife. "It's all I've got."

"Good enough," Killian says, catching the knife. He has his hook arm around Ian's shoulders, and after he tucks the knife into his belt he looks at her, his eyes asking a clear question: Where's the boy going?

"Inside," she says, jerking her head towards the hut—but the moment the words leave her lips a high-pitched whistle pierces the air.

Emma jumps and looks around. The guard at the next tower over is standing atop his chair, waving his arms frantically over his head. Everyone on the beach is looking at him, but Emma looks past him, to where a plume of purple smoke hangs in the air.

Fuck.

Neal's there. Emma can't see him, but she knows he's there.

Twin bursts of fire erupt in midair—Emma doesn't understand what's happening until she sees the two Merry Men with their bows raised, and then sees two more bursts of fire: Neal's incinerating the arrows they're shooting at him.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Emma turns back to Killian and Ian. She has two options: she can shove Ian inside the hut and try to put a shield around it, hope Ian stays put and that Neal doesn't find him, or she can send him away.

There are screams in the distance. Robin and Little John take off, sprinting down the ramp and into the sand. The screaming grows louder as panic begins to spread along the beach. Emma's hands ball into fists. Ian, pale beneath his freckles, stares.

"Emma," Killian says urgently, his own wide eyes fixed to the north.

Taking a deep breath, Emma plunges a hand deep into her magic and grabs hold.

"I'm sending you to Henry and the Apprentice," she says to Ian.

His face falls. "No!"

"Tell them to call grandpa."

"Mom!"

Moving objects from one place to another is simple. Ian isn't an object, but right now it doesn't matter; all that matters is that Emma needs to get him to safety. She pulls out a rope of her magic and wraps it around Ian. In her mind, she sees the Apprentice's living room.

There, she thinks.

She pushes, pushes Ian out of this place and into another—only something resists. Suddenly, it feels as if she's trying to move a brick wall.

Ian lets out a growl, and a gust of wind hits Emma, knocking her sideways and nearly off of her feet.
When she's got her balance back, her jaw drops.

It's Ian's magic that's resisting—reacting to hers and shoving back. She can feel it now, simmering inside of him, the surface of the subterranean lake that's his well of power rippling and humming as if from some underwater vibration.

Only, Emma doesn't think he's aware of it.

"I'm sorry, kid," she says.

His scowl slips. "Huh?"

She overpowers his magic with her own, slipping it over and around the tiny wave of power he unconsciously thrust at her. She gets one final glimpse of his bewildered expression before he disappears.

"Swan?"

Emma turns to Killian and shakes her head. "Tell you later," she says shortly, and starts running.

Their journey across the beach is more difficult this time. They duck, swerve, and leap over obstacles, colliding occasionally with someone stumbling in the opposite direction. Killian has to pick Emma up off the ground twice.

As she runs she delves more deeply into her magic, lets it pour from her center outwards until it fills her. It feels like light flowing through her veins, like her skin is glowing. With her magic in her grasp, she can feel Neal's magic in the distance, like an oily black stain tainting the air.

As they draw closer, the crowd begins to thin, and Emma gets her first actual glimpse of Neal. He's surrounded by men with bows. As Emma watches, Neal waves his arm, and three of the Merry Men—the three standing in between Neal and the sea—fly sideways as if swatted by a gigantic, invisible hand.

Out in the water, Ariel's stopped swimming, but she's too close to shore to be safe.

Emma forces her legs to move faster, and curses the sand dragging at her heels. She keeps her eyes fixed on Neal, teeth gritted against the burning in her muscles and the sharp, stabbing pain in her ribs. She hears Killian panting beside her, and knows he's pushing himself equally hard.

The Merry Men stand their ground. They release another volley of arrows. A wave of Neal's arm turns them to ash, and a second wave of his arm sends a wall of fire racing across the sand. It engulfs two of Robin's men; they flinch, but it passes over them harmlessly.

Emma feels a swoop of triumph, only to remember that Robin and Little John don't have protection charms.

Neal raises his hand again, and panic bursts in Emma's chest.

*I have to get there!*

No sooner does she think it than she feels the hook around her belly button and the tug—she's there in an instant, crashing bodily into Neal and sending them both catapulting face-first into the water. Luckily, it's shallow.

Emma rolls instinctively and gets her feet under her. Neal's slower to rise, but not by much.
They face off for a moment, eyes locked, and then before Emma can decide if she's looking at Neal or the Dark One, he smirks and whips his arm out towards her.

Emma jumps sideways, but realizes immediately that Neal wasn't aiming for her—she twists around just in time to see a cylindrical box fly from Ariel's hands and start sailing through the air.

Emma reaches for it and looses a thread of her own magic, shaped like a lasso. She snags the box as it's passing, curls her fingers as if grasping a rope, and pulls. The box alters its course and sails into her hands instead, but the moment she touches it it's jerked from her grasp.

With a roar of frustration Emma lets loose another lasso—it catches the box again just before it gets to Neal, but this time when Emma pulls she doesn't move the box, she moves herself.

It happens too fast for her to stop. She smashes bodily into Neal once more. Her forehead collides solidly with something hard, and she falls backwards into the water. There's something heavy in her hands, and when she lands on her ass she tucks it protectively to her chest and gets her knees up to help shield it.

She opens her eyes, ready to defend herself and the box with everything she's got left, only to find Neal standing stock still.

At first she thinks he's frozen—that the Apprentice arrived and froze him with a spell, or that maybe one of the Merry Men managed to put an arrow in his back—but then she sees his eyes moving, flickering back and forth along the box in Emma's hands as if surveying something unpleasant.

With a snarl, he raises his eyes to her—and then vanishes in another plume of purple smoke.

Killian plunges through the violet cloud where Neal stood a second before, knife slashing the air. He lands and whirs, knife up, ready to attack or defend, but Neal's gone. He spins back around to face Emma and drops to his knees beside her.

"Emma, love, what happened?" His hands are on her shoulders and arms, touching her cheeks, smoothing her hair back. She starts to shiver. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she says. She's not fine. She's sitting waist deep in frigid water.

"Why did Neal leave? What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything. He just...left." She starts to stand. Killian gets to his feet first and then helps her up, holding her elbow because she won't let go of the box.

His brow creases in confusion. "I don't understand. What happened?" he repeats.

"I have no idea," she sighs, looking at the box in her hands and then to Ariel. "But I intend to find out."

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They go to Apprentice's house. Emma isn't sure how she managed to teleport, and she's too tired to try again, so they call David and take his pickup truck while he stays with Robin and his men.

Ariel declined to come along—or to stay another second in Storybrooke. She's pregnant, so Emma let her go after Ariel told them everything about how and where she found the box. It's definitely not a magical hat, but Ariel insisted it was the only thing at the site the Apprentice sent her to—just the box sitting in a gigantic square of dirt where a mansion used to be.
Emma can feel Killian's eyes on her while she drives, probing her, checking for injuries, trying to read her expression. Meanwhile, Emma's mind is playing the last seconds of her encounter with Neal on repeat.

*Why did Neal leave? Why did he stop fighting for the box?*

The only explanation she can think of is that the box has absolutely nothing to do with Merlin's hat.

When they get to the Apprentice's house, Henry opens the door for them. Emma expects him to be relieved to see them, but instead he just says, "You'd better get in here."

Emma and Killian hurry inside—and stop dead.

Ian's on the couch, hands clasped between his knees, looking as if he's trying to make himself as small as possible. The Apprentice stands over him with his arms crossed over his chest, glowering. Around them the entire living room is in shambles; furniture upended, books and papers scattered everywhere, lamps lying on the floor surrounded by broken glass—it looks like a tornado tore through the house.

"What happened?" Emma asks, stepping delicately into the room.

"*Ian* happened," the Apprentice says sternly. "His magic-" He catches sight of the box then, and his expression softens. "You succeeded!"

"This is it?" Emma asks, holding the box up. "This is Merlin's hat?"

The Apprentice crosses the room and takes the box from her gently. "Merlin's hat is inside," he says, staring down at it the way a father might gaze upon his newborn child.

"That doesn't make sense," Killian says, looking between the Apprentice and Emma. "If that is Merlin's hat, then why did Neal stop fighting for it? Why didn't he try to take it from Emma?"

Smiling, the Apprentice hands the box back to Emma. "The hat can be wielded by anyone who holds it, but the box...the box can only be opened with light magic."

"Neal needs Emma to open the box in order to get the hat," Killian says. He closes his eyes, tilts back his head, and sighs tiredly.

This time, when Emma takes the box, it feels a thousand times heavier.

"Fucking great", she huffs.
"What do you mean you forgot the hat was protected?" Neal snarls at his reflection.

He's in the hallway, shivering and dripping water onto one of his dad's antique rugs, staring at the antique mirror hanging on the wall over the antique console table, waiting for an answer he probably won't get and feeling a little bit like a crazy person—he could talk to the Darkness inside his head, but he has so little human interaction as it is that even hearing his own voice is better than nothing.

Frustrated, sore from the two times Emma threw her own body at him like a battering ram, Neal stalks to the couch and collapses onto it. The stupid urn on the coffee table rattles, as if it senses his presence. It's been curiously active for the past few days—ever since Henry visited—but whenever Neal asks the Darkness why or what even is it he gets the same silent treatment he's getting now.

The Darkness spoke about the urn only once, and that was just to say it's dangerous and he should stay the frick away from it.

Mechanically, Neal pulls Regina's heart box out from under the pillow he hides it beneath and sets it in his lap. As always, he's immediately comforted.

It was a surprise to find her heart in his dad's house when he first woke up after casting the Dark Curse; he thought the fact that it was glowing meant she was still alive, that even though he saw her collapse in the Enchanted Forest, somehow the Curse had saved her—but the new voice in his head, the voice like a snake slithering through dried leaves, was quick to assure him that Regina was dead, and returning her heart to her body would only complete her death.

Neal talks to her heart now as if it can hear him. It's just another desperate attempt to stave off the loneliness, since the Darkness only speaks to him nowadays when it needs something, and that's a pretty rare occurrence since it can apparently just take over his body whenever it wants.

Neal's fingers tighten on Regina's heart box. Those blackout periods when the Darkness takes over are not fun.

*You only have to deal with that for a little bit longer though*, he thinks.

Once he gets a hold of Merlin's hat, everything's going to change.

The Darkness gets a cut of the power, of course, but then Neal gets the rest. He smiles now, the fantasy of all he has planned unfurling in his mind like a grand tapestry.

He and Emma will be together. They'll be together with Henry—a family, like they were always meant to be. There will be no Hook and no other fucking kid getting in the way. Just Neal, Emma, and Henry.

He briefly considered using Merlin's hat to revive Regina until he realized that once he uses it for what he wants, it won't matter anyway.
None of this will matter, actually.

Which is why he can be patient for as long as it takes for Emma to open that box.

Killian, Emma, Henry, and Ian linger at the Apprentice's house only long enough for him to restore his wrecked living room to its original state, then they return to the loft to regroup. They leave the box containing Merlin's hat with the Apprentice—both for safekeeping and because he seems rather fond of it. Henry wants to stay behind and continue researching, but Emma orders him into the car. From the look on Henry's face Killian doesn't expect him to obey, but he does—albeit sullenly.

Ian's quiet on the way to the loft, and he clings to Killian like a barnacle the moment they step out of the car and onto the sidewalk.

The Apprentice told them—in short bursts as he directed his wand at one piece of ruined furniture and then another—what happened after Ian appeared in his living room: Ian's magic, in reaction to impending danger or emotional stress or both, rose up and broke loose. Unequipped to deal with his magic, Ian was overwhelmed by it, and, uncontrolled, it created a windstorm that shredded everything in its path.

The Apprentice was able to shield himself and Henry, and contain the damage to the living room. Ian himself is unharmed, but they don't know for how long his magic will remain active this time. The Apprentice said it could go back into hibernation within a day, as it did before, or it could be active permanently.

Ian listened, wide-eyed and uncharacteristically silent.

The fact that he hasn't asked a thousand questions truly worries Killian; he wonders if it's the revelation of his magic or what he witnessed at the beach that's upsetting Ian.

It's likely both, Killian thinks.

He wishes—suddenly and absurdly—that he could ask Captain Nemo for advice. The man certainly has experience comforting troubled little souls. Killian hasn't seen Nemo since Emma's parents showed her Misthaven House, however, and he doesn't know how he would even approach the man with such a request.

No, Killian and Emma are on their own in this.

They're on their own and they've run out of time. They need to speak with Ian and try to explain what's been going on. Killian has no clue what exactly they're going to tell Ian, but they have to tell him something.

Killian, with Ian stuck to his side, follows Emma and Henry into the building and up the stairs to the loft. Emma opens the front door right into something solid and bulky that grunts in surprise when it takes the sharp edge of the door right to its elbow.

"Oh, crap," Emma says. "Sorry."

It's Hal she assaulted. "My fault for not hearing you approach," he replies gruffly, rubbing his injured elbow. He shuffles aside, allowing the four of them to sidle through the narrow gap between him and the next green-clad man.

The entire loft is packed to the rafters with Merry Men. Killian, Ian, Emma, and Henry thread their way through the crowd until they reach an open space around the kitchen table where David, Robin,
and Ruby sit.

Henry takes one of the empty chairs, but Emma remains standing, so Killian does as well; Ian is in front of him, his feet practically right on top of Killian's, leaning into his legs with his full body weight. Killian slips his arm over Ian's shoulder and presses his hand to the boy's chest, over his heart, and Ian melts into him further.

He regrets not suggesting they just take Ian straight to the Jolly Roger and confer with her parents via text or phone call instead of in person. Killian's about to whisk the boy upstairs where it's quiet when David speaks.

"Do you have the hat?" he asks. He's at the head of the table, with Robin to his right and Ruby to his left.

"We left it with the Apprentice," Emma says.

"Is it safe there? The Apprentice said himself that he's no real match for the Dark One. What if Neal-" He stops himself, eyes flickering briefly to Ian. Killian's ready to cover the boy's ears if needed, but so far no one's said anything out loud that Ian hasn't already heard today.

"The hat's fine," Emma sighs. "Turns out it's locked inside a box that can only be opened with light magic."

"Oh."

"Right. So as long as I don't open the box, Merlin's hat is safe. Where's mom?"

"The office. There's an emergency town meeting in twenty minutes."

Robin drums his fingertips on the table, once. "Word of what took place on the beach today spread faster than the plague," he says.

"Everyone who's not cowering inside their house is at city hall demanding answers," Ruby adds.

"Should we go?" Emma asks.

Killian barely resists shouting NO at the top of his lungs, but the effort makes his entire body spasm. David's the only one who notices. His pale blue eyes flick from Killian and then back to Emma.

"Your mother's handling it," he says smoothly.

Emma nods. "Ok. What about you?"

"Robin and I are going to take the Merry Men to Neal's neighborhood and start quietly evacuating his neighbors. I don't really think they're in any danger, but at least they'll feel like they're safer."

"We can help-"

"We're fine. You should rest."

It's really a rather impressive bit of acting, which Killian would not have expected from someone so upright.

Emma, thankfully, is convinced—either that or she no longer possesses the energy required to argue.
"Alright," she says. "We should have someone at the station though. Someone who knows how to answer a phone and be reassuring."

"Will Scarlet's already on it," Robin says. Killian can't help the eyebrow that twitches upwards skeptically; Emma's face must mirror his own, for Robin smiles lopsidedly and adds, "I know what you're thinking, but he wanted to be useful and that's the least dangerous thing I could think of for him to do."

"What about me?" Henry asks.

"You're staying with us," Emma says.

"But I wanna help-"

"Your mother's right," David interjects, voice loud and stern yet calm. "You should stay here where it's safe."

Henry's hands curl into fists when David says 'safe'.

David smiles gently. "Consider the bigger picture, Henry," he says. "Ne—uh, the Dark One—needs your mother to open the box and release Merlin's hat. He might do something rash to try and force her to do it."

"Something like kidnap you," Robin says pointedly.

Henry, brows knit, looks up at Emma.

"They're right," she says tiredly. "Neal might be desperate enough to believe kidnapping you is worth it to get the hat."

"But if he wants us all to be together or whatever why would he do something stupid like kidnap me? I'd never forgive him if he did that."

"We don't know exactly what he plans to do with it. He could erase our memories or brainwash us or something. Then he could do literally anything to us and we'd never remember."

Killian feels Ian trembling before he notices the wind. Too late, he realizes he should have covered the boy's ears.

A breeze flutters through the loft, ruffling papers and curtains and Merry Men. A ripple of movement follows as heads turn and bodies shift. Eyes dart to Emma, but it's not her calling up the wind—it's Ian.

Beneath the hand he has pressed to Ian's chest, Killian feels the boy's heart pounding and his bones shaking.

Another gust of air, this one stronger, swirls around them, starting at their feet and rising upwards. Ian's hair is blown back off his forehead and he leans harder into Killian.

Killian does the only thing he can think of and engulfs Ian in his arms, just as he did last night when Ian awoke from a nightmare. "It's alright, lad," he says quietly in Ian's ear. "It's alright. I'm here. You're safe. Just relax."

Ian's hands clutch at his shirt. The wind grows in intensity, and a burst of it forces the Merry Men closest to them a step back.
Emma's kneeling in front of them in an instant. "Ian, hey, it's okay."

A second blast of air sends her hair whipping wildly around her head, but she doesn't flinch away.

"Ian, I know you're scared—but that thing inside of you? You can control it. You have to grab hold of it and tell it to stop."

Two of the three lights hanging from cords over the island countertop crash into each other and break, sending a cascade of glass shards to the floor.

Killian squeezes Ian tighter. "You can do it, lad."

Killian feels Ian tense. There are more thumps and clattering from around the loft, and several shouts from the Merry Men. For a moment, the wind churning around them becomes visible, whirling eddies of ghostly white light—and then it disappears.

Ian lets out a breath, almost a whimper, and slumps bonelessly in Killian's arms. Emma stands and steps close, her hands cupping Ian's cheeks.

"Let's go put him in bed," she murmurs.

Killian gives a minute shake of his head. "I think we should take him somewhere a bit more private," he says. He can feel the stares of the Merry Men and of David, Ruby, and Robin. He can't see their expressions in order to analyze their reactions, but instinct has him using his body as a shield, just in case.

Emma's eyes meet his, and she nods. "I'll go upstairs and get some of this things."

"No need. I have plenty of his things aboard the Jolly Roger."

"I want to bring Ruby," Ian says. It's the first he's spoken since they found him sitting hunched over guiltily on the Apprentice's couch.

The sound of his voice sends a warm jolt through Killian, and he and Emma exchange smiles.

"I suppose Ruby can come," Killian says. "As long as he's in his tank and not your pocket."

At the table, Ruby cocks her head. "Last time I checked I'm a 'she'. And I don't have a tank."

Killian's grateful she's at least pretending to be unfazed by Ian's magic. Across from her, Robin looks thoughtful, and David just looks surprised.

"Ian meant his fish," Killian clarifies, then he smirks as an idea strikes him and adds cheerfully, "Ah. Ruby, you haven't met your namesake yet, have you?"

Ruby arches one perfect eyebrow. "No, I haven't," she says drily, then she smiles and looks at Ian. "You know, it's kind of rude to name a fish after me and then not even introduce us." Ian doesn't respond, so Ruby stands up, walks over, and holds out her hand. "C'mon cutie, let's go get your fish."

Killian nudges Ian encouragingly. Reluctantly, Ian peels away from Emma and Killian, takes Ruby's hand, and allows her to lead him up the stairs to the top of the loft.

"So, what color is Ruby?" Ruby asks.

"Red," Ian replies.
"Mmm. Is that why you named him Ruby?"

"Yea."

"Who do you think is cooler, me or your fish?"

"My fish," Ian says, and Killian hears a faint hint of the boy's usual mischief in his voice.

Ruby lets out a gasp of indignation. "Your fish is cooler than me? What next? Are you going to tell me your fish is prettier than me, too?"

Ian actually giggles, and the fist that's been gripping Killian's heart since Emma disappeared from his side at the beach and reappeared in front of Neal loosens a fraction.

When Ian and Ruby are out of sight and their voices are indistinguishable murmurs, David grins and says, "Ian has magic."

"Yes, it's—we'll explain later," Emma says, then sighs. "After we explain it to Ian."

Ian's clinginess returns as soon as they leave the loft, so Killian sits in the backseat with Ian in his lap and Ruby's tank in Ian's lap while Emma drives them to the Jolly Roger. She checks on them constantly in the rearview mirror. Slowly, Ian's expression—alight briefly after the five minutes he spent with Ruby Lucas—closes once more.

Henry excuses himself to his room the moment they step aboard Killian's ship. Killian looks to Emma, one eyebrow raised questioningly, but Emma shakes her head.

Henry will talk when he's ready. Whatever's brewing in his mind needs more time.

Right now, their priority is Ian.

In unspoken agreement, they take Ian directly to the quarterdeck. Emma eases Ruby's tank out of Ian's hands, and Killian lifts Ian onto the stern railing. Ian swings one leg over the railing so he's straddling the broad plank, and leans into the arm Killian circles around his waist. Emma sets Ruby in the shade beside the massive steering wheel and joins them.

Hours ago she and Killian stood in this same spot, drinking coffee and discussing how they would do exactly what they're about to do. They never came to a definitive conclusion or concocted any sort of plan, so she guesses they're just winging it.

Which, really, is sort of her expertise at this point anyway.

She rests one elbow on the railing and takes Ian's hands in hers. His skin is cold, and when she touches him she sees that underground cavern and the lake that's his magic in her head—only this time she's not alone in there; this time Ian's there too.

The poor kid's treading water, his face inches from slipping entirely below the surface.

Emma adjusts her focus, from inside to outside. With her real eyes, Emma sees the magic leaking from Ian in glowing white tendrils—some trail upwards and mix with the air, others slither over the railing and down into the waves.

Ian's hunched in on himself, frowning, his brow all scrunched up, looking at his hands in hers but clearly not really seeing them.
Emma knows he's stuck inside, in that lake, in that cavern, alone and probably confused as hell.

*Just hang in there, kid.*

She squeezes Ian's hands, gently, and strokes her thumbs over his knuckles, drawing him out, forcing him to focus on her warmth, on her skin touching his.

After a long few seconds his eyelids flutter, then he blinks and looks up at her.

Emma smiles. "Talk to me."

Ian's fingers curl around her palms. "Do I really have magic?" he whispers.

"Yea, you do." She smiles wider, wrinkling her nose. "It feels kind of weird, huh?"

Ian nods. Killian's chin drops onto the top of Ian's head.

Emma loves those moments, when Ian's face is so close to Killian's, when she can directly compare the cobalt blue of Ian's eyes to the blue of Killian's, when she can see side-by-side the identical lines of their mouths and the shapes of their ears.

Ian truly is Killian in miniature.

Okay, *blonde* miniature. The sunlight is turning Ian's hair platinum, and weeks of exposure to it has also brought out the splash of golden freckles on his nose. He looks like a kid that's been enjoying a summer spent outdoors.

Emma's thumbs continue to stroke soothingly back and forth along Ian's knuckles. This next part is going to be tricky.

"When I use my magic, it's like I have to go somewhere deep inside myself, and when I get there there's a pool of water—like that little pond we saw in the woods at Acadia last summer. Do you remember?"

"Yea."

"It's like that, only there's a waterfall and the water's kinda sparkly. When I stick my hands into the water, I feel my magic fill up my entire body—like when we went ice skating at the Frog Pond and it was really cold, so we got hot chocolate afterwards and it made our tummies nice and warm. Remember?"

"Yea," he says—eagerly this time. Emma's got him hooked.

"My magic makes my *whole body* feel nice and warm like that, and then when I tell my magic what I want it to do, it does it." Emma pauses, lets what she said sink in, gives Ian a chance to understand, and when she sees in his eyes that he does, she asks, "What's it like when you use your magic?"

He frowns, attention turning inwards again.

"It's...it's like I'm swimming," he says.

"Yea?"

Ian's eyes fall shut. "Yea. The water's cold, like the water here, but it's dark. And there's rocks. It's like a cave."
Emma sees Killian's forehead crease, so she shoots him what she hopes is a reassuring smile, then she closes her eyes too.

"I can see it," she tells Ian. "I can see where you are."

"You can?"

"Yea. That's a pretty big cave you've got there, kid."

It's true; Emma can't see the boundaries of the cavern, only the water and the ceiling, their edges fading into a darkness that feels vast.

Ian's silent for a moment, and then he says, "I'm scared."

Emma would be too, for obvious reasons, but she asks, "Why?"

"I don't know how to get out of the water."

"Find the shore."

"I don't know where it is."

Emma feels him shudder. Inside his cave, the water starts to glow from below with tiny, pulsating lights that drift lazily just beneath the surface. It looks like a horde of iridescent jellyfish throwing a slow-motion rave. In reality, his magic pours out, the tendrils thickening and becoming visible, bright swirls of shimmering white that make the air all around them start humming.

Killian's eyes widen and his lips part. A gust of wind tears past them, upsetting the rigging and the laundry hanging from the clothesline. The waves lapping against the hull grow more insistent; water washes over the pier and over the decks of some of the smaller sailboats moored across from them. The Jolly Roger itself tilts hard to the left, and then the right.

Killian tightens his arm around Ian and Emma clenches her teeth. She has two choices now: try to calm Ian down again and start all over, or just get him out of his magic as fast as possible.

"Ian, you've got to swim," she says. "Swim to shore."

He shakes his head. "I don't know which way it is."

"It's right in front of you. Just swim straight ahead and you'll find it."

She doesn't necessarily know that that's true, but she knows what Ian doesn't know: he can make it true if he believes it hard enough.

"But-" he says.

"You can do it, kid. I taught you how to swim last summer, remember?"

"Yea..."

"I see you swim at the beach all the time. It's just like that. Just pick a direction and start moving."

"We're right here, lad," Killian says, his voice a low, deep rumble, his cheek pressed to Ian's temple. "We've got you. Just do what your mother says, and start swimming."

Ian's mouth thins to a long, straight line as he presses his lips together. Inside his cave, he starts
swimming—it's a doggy paddle, but it's a grimly determined doggy paddle. The little lights floating in the water part for him as he swims, and when he passes them, they wink out. The shore—a narrow spit of sand and gravel—appears out of the darkness, and Ian's paddling turns furious.

Killian can't see what Emma sees, but she's certain he feels the lessening of the wind and the gradual return of the Jolly Roger to its normal, gentle sway. Finally, Ian reaches the shore, and when he climbs out, the image of the cavern and the lake vanishes from Emma's mind.

She opens her eyes. Ian's staring back. He's pale beneath his freckles, and it looks like Killian's support is the only thing keeping him from collapsing, but he's smiling.

"Feel better?" Emma asks.

"Yea."

Emma moves her hands to Ian's shoulders and pulls him into a hug. "Whenever you're in that cave again and you want to get out, swim for shore like you did today, okay?"

He nods into her shoulder. Emma tightens her arms around his back.

"You'll get used to it, kid," she says. "And then it won't feel so overwhelming. I'm going to help you learn how to control it."

Ian nods again, and then says, in a small voice, "I wrecked Dumbledore's house."

Over Ian's head, Emma sees Killian grin. She moves to step on his foot and he lets her do it, but he keeps grinning.

"It was an accident," Emma says. "It's okay. Dumble—the Apprentice fixed it."

"He was really mad."

"He was, but he won't be as mad tomorrow. We can visit him and apologize. Maybe you can draw him a nice picture, too."

"Do you think he likes Spiderman?"

"Actually," Killian says, "I heard that he prefers the Incredible Hulk."

Emma rolls her eyes. Killian just enjoys the massive, muscled green blobs with purple shorts and angry faces that Ian makes.

"Can I draw him the Hulk and Spiderman?"

"I think that would probably be fine," Emma says.

"Can I do it now?"

"Sure, kid."

---

After Ian draws a picture of the Hulk and Spiderman with 'I'm sorry' scrawled across the top, he passes out on Killian's bed. Emma checks on his magic after he's fallen asleep, and is relieved to find that it's still and silent.
Hopefully, it'll stay that way.

While Ian naps, Emma and Killian go back up top to talk. Emma knocks on Henry's door and invites him to join them, but he tells her to go away, so she does. She doesn't bother barking at him not to talk to her that way—he'll feel bad about it later, and that'll be punishment enough.

Ian sleeps less than an hour, and when he wakes up they feed him lunch, then they take him for a walk into town to get ice cream, and while they do they tell him a story—a story called *What the Fuck is Happening in this Crazy Fucking Town*.

The tale they constructed while Ian was napping is *somewhat* similar to reality: Henry's dad and Henry's other mom Regina cast a curse to bring them all here because they missed Henry. To cast the curse, Neal—Henry's dad—had to let a bad magic thing into his body, and that bad magic thing is making Henry's dad do bad things.

"It's sort of like how in the first Harry Potter movie Voldemort was sharing Professor Quirrell's body and making Professor Quirrell do a bunch of bad things," Emma says.

"Oh," Ian says slowly. He's in between Emma and Killian, one hand in Emma's and his other holding Killian's hook. He makes a face at the sidewalk, then looks up at Emma. "But...I thought Henry's dad was already a bad guy? That's what Henry said."

Emma never actually *told* Henry that his dad was a bad guy—he made that determination himself when Emma had to tell him how Neal left her to take the fall for his crime and how that landed her in jail when she was seventeen and pregnant. She didn't, however, try to sway him from making that determination, and right now she sort of wishes she had, because it probably would have saved her from saying what she's about to say.

"Neal's not a bad guy." Emma stops walking. She tugs on Ian's hand and stops him too, then she kneels in front of him so their eyes are on level. "He did something bad that hurt me and Henry a long time ago, but he's not a bad guy."

Her and Killian's story so far has been mostly half-truths and a few lies, but *that* lie is the most difficult.

It hurts her—*fuck*, it cuts her to the core—but she bears it, because she doesn't want to risk planting feelings in Ian towards Neal that affect Ian's love for Henry. It's not likely that would ever happen, but she's not taking any chances.

Even so, she's careful not to say *Neal changed*, or *Neal's better now*, because she refuses to draw comparisons between Killian's journey and Neal's.

First of all, it would be yet another lie—Neal hasn't changed, he's the same selfish shitbag he always was—and second of all she just fucking *won't*; if Neal wants redemption he's going to have to earn it, and the only help Emma's going to give him is the gift of not outright murdering him for everything he's done so far.

Emma catches Killian's eye, sees him nod, then turns her attention back to Ian. She has to take a mental deep breath in order to calm herself before saying, "We're trying to get the bad magic thing out of Neal so he can be normal again and so he won't hurt anyone anymore. Make sense?"

Ian frowns. "Why did he want to hurt Ariel?"

"He didn't want to hurt her. He just wanted the box she brought for us."
"The box with the hat."

She's not surprised Ian's been absorbing all the conversations going on around him today. "Yea," she says. "The hat's going to help us get the bad magic out of Neal." She takes Ian's hands and squeezes them gently. "I'm sorry we didn't tell you sooner, kid. We didn't want you to be scared."

Ian sucks his lower lip into his mouth, bite it, and stares at her for a long moment, then he says, "I don't want Henry's dad to hurt you."

Killian's hand appears on Ian's shoulder. "He won't, lad. I won't let him."

Emma smiles and squeezes Ian's hands again. "Your dad's right. I've got him protecting me, I've got grandpa David protecting me, and I've got Robin and all the Merry Men protecting me."

"And your magic," Ian reminds her.

"Right, and my magic."

Ian doesn't ask about the Shadow—he hasn't made the connection between Neal and the Shadow or Neal and Blackbeard, and Emma's going to keep it that way. He may hate them for all this one day—one day in the future when he discovers the whole truth about what took place here this summer—but Emma's not worried about that, she's only worried about Ian and what she and Killian need to do for him now.

And right now they need to tell him comforting lies, hug him, fill him with ice cream, and help him scour the sidewalk for interesting bugs to bring back for Henry.

She and Killian settle Ian between them, hand-in-hand and hand-in-hook, and continue on their way to Ava's.

Ava sends Killian, Emma, and Ian back to the Jolly Roger with a pint of maple walnut ice cream for Henry, but Henry shows only mild interest in it when they present it to him in the galley before dinner.

Worse, he's also not impressed by the gargantuan cicada Ian caught.

Ian, understandably, is offended, and refuses to acknowledge Henry's existence for the rest of the meal, choosing instead to forcefully and methodically introduce every pea on his plate to his fork one by one, which prompts Killian to talk Ian into releasing the cicada directly after dinner, lest the cicada somehow find its way into Henry's bed.

As soon as he's finished helping clean up, Henry returns to his room to continue ignoring them. When Killian asks if they should go talk to him, Emma says, "When he decides he wants to talk to us, he'll come talk to us."

Killian nods, the fact that she said us not lost on him, still new, still precious. He hopes never to take it for granted. He hopes to be included in her life for the rest of his.

They trade little touches for the rest of the evening as they play games with Ian in his cabin; it's comforting just to be near her, to know she's beside him, to be able to brush his fingers along her arm, to feel her hand on his hip or his wrist or resting on his hook.

He didn't know he craved physical contact this much, so accustomed was he to having so little of it. He's becoming like Ian, he realizes—or perhaps he and Ian have always been the same, and Killian's
only now learning something that Ian's been aware of his entire life.

After the sun sets, Emma puts her laptop on Killian's table, Killian and Ian arrange Killian's pillows so that his bed resembles a couch, and the three of them squish together on his bunk and watch Spiderman.

Ian falls asleep almost immediately, before he's even eaten any popcorn.

"Is he alright, love?" Killian asks with concern. Ian's rear is firmly planted on the mattress, but from the waist up his body is curved into a tight arch that ends with his head in Killian's lap.

"He's fine. He's just exhausted from using his magic. The sleep will do him some good." She considers Ian's current composition, then adds, "Let's put him in his bed though. That doesn't look comfortable."

"I'll do it, love. You stay here."

Killian eases himself to the floor, hoists Ian into his arms, and carries the lad to his room.

Ruby's tank is on the bedside table beside Ian's bunk, the tiny light that illuminates the tank the only light in the room. Ruby puffs himself up and glares at Killian as Killian approaches and lays Ian on the bed.

"I feed you, you ungrateful bastard," Killian mutters.

And I've kept you from dying at least once.

Killian turns his back on Ruby's posturing and tucks Ian in. He hears Henry's door opening, and after he finishes situating Ian's blankets and fitting one crab and one octopus beneath either of Ian's arms, he straightens and finds Henry in the doorway.

"Can we talk?" Henry asks.

"Aye, lad. I'll be right there."

Henry nods and steps out of the doorway. Killian presses a kiss to the Ian's forehead and runs his hand through the boy's hair, then joins Henry in the hallway, closing Ian's door behind him.

"What's on your mind?" he asks.

Taking a deep breath, Henry stuffs his hands into his pockets and hunches his shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me Ian has magic?"

Ah.

Killian tucks his thumb into his belt loop. "It seemed unfair that everyone should know Ian has magic except for Ian," he answers, then sighs and raises his hook to scratch behind his ear. "Truthfully, we were hoping we'd have more time before it showed itself."

Henry gives him a hard look. "Are you afraid of his magic?"

"No," Killian answers.

Henry knows him well enough by now to know that he's not lying. His shoulders relax. "But you don't like magic," he says.
It's not a question, it's a statement, and Killian has to wonder how much of his past Henry is aware of—how much of his history Henry may have read in that story book of his.

"The things I've seen magic do in my past have nothing to do with Ian's magic," Killian says firmly. "What I fear is that Ian's not ready for the responsibility of having magic. He's just a child."

Henry's eyes flicker downwards.

"What is it?" Killian asks.

Henry opens his mouth. Closes it. Shakes his head.

"You can tell me, lad."

Henry lets out a soft but derisive snort. "It's just..." He lifts his head. He looks angry, but Killian doesn't think it's him Henry's angry with. "It's just that Ian has the life I wish I had when I was ten."

Killian's eyebrows jump upwards so fast Killian's surprised they're still attached.

Henry drops his head again and says, "Ian has mom. He has his dad. He has magic. I'm just—I'm not mad at Ian. I'm just mad at the universe."

Killian reaches out and lays his hand on Henry's shoulder. "Henry, you may not have magic, but you have something more important than magic." Henry doesn't look up, but Killian knows he's listening. "You have your mother. You have a little brother that thinks you're the most amazing person in the world. You have your grandparents. And hopefully soon you'll also have your father."

Henry's stiffens, and Killian's surprised to see the lad's ear flame red. "I hate him," Henry hisses. "I hate what he did to my mom. I hate what he's doing now. I-"

Abruptly, Killian hugs him. He steps forward, gets his arm around Henry's shoulders, and pulls him in roughly. Henry's rigid for a moment, then Killian feels the lad's forehead hit his shoulder.

"Don't give up," Killian says. "This isn't over. Things may still work out. Your mother and I are going to try our best to make certain they do. You know she'd do anything for you, right?"

"Yea."

Killian doesn't add I would too—he doesn't think Henry's ready for that—but he thinks it.

He lets Henry be the one to break their hug, and when he does Killian gives his shoulder a squeeze before taking a respectful step backwards.

"Get some rest, lad," he says. "We have a sparring session in the morning. You've been slacking."

Henry grins, ducks his head, and retreats to his room.

Killian turns down the lantern hanging from the ceiling and opens Ian's door a crack before he returns to his cabin. Emma already has her laptop stowed, the bed reassembled, and all the lanterns extinguished save one. She's standing in the center of the thin woven rug in between his bunk and the table.

"Watch out," Killian warns, gesturing at the rug. "I stepped on one of Ian's Legos the other day wearing just my socks. I thought I'd have to amputate my entire foot."

Emma snorts. "Yea, those things can be pretty deadly."
They share a smile from across the room, then Killian moves to check the lock on the trapdoor.

"Can you lock the other one, too?" Emma asks.

Killian freezes.

They're alone, he realizes. For the first time since that morning, they're completely alone.

Today has felt like several days all rolled into one, and it's finally over.

A multitude of sensations hits Killian all at once, relief being the first and most powerful one.

They survived Ian finding out about his magic. They survived telling Ian that Henry's dad is currently a villain. They have Merlin's hat—Neal wants it and wants to do something horrible with it, but at least they have it and they're one step closer to their goal.

He looks at Emma. She flung herself into danger today without hesitation. Watching her battle Neal was breathtaking—but also terrifying. Killian knows she's both fearless and fierce, but he worries.

He worries that she'll be hurt, and he worries that he won't be able to control himself if it's Neal that hurts her.

He knows he won't be able to control himself if Neal hurts her.

Earlier, when he saw Neal standing over Emma, Killian was ready to put his knife through Neal's heart. Consequences didn't matter—all that mattered was protecting Emma.

Better for Killian to have Neal's blood on his hands than for Henry and Ian to lose their mother, and in spite of what Killian just told Henry about he and Emma doing their best to ensure he gets his father back, Killian will not hesitate to obliterate Neal if he hurts Emma.

Killian needs her now, he needs to assure himself that she's okay, he needs to physically connect with her and drown himself in her body.

Her eyes are hot on his, and Killian knows she's thinking the same thing.

He sheds his hook and his shirt in one fluid movement and stalks across the cabin to gather her into his arms. Their bodies crush together, their lips melding even as they help each other out of the rest of their clothing.

Clothes on the floor at their feet, they stand and touch each other, mapping skin with fingers and then lips. Emma touches his wrist and Killian sucks in a sharp breath. The scars there are ridiculously sensitive, and sometimes when she touches them it's ticklish, other times it's soothing, and now it sends a pleasant jolt straight to his cock.

He doesn't realizing his own hand's stopped moving until she takes it by the wrist and guides it between her legs.

"As you wish, Swan," he purrs.

He strokes her how he knows she likes it, strokes her until she's dripping wet and her eyelids flutter shut and her fingernails dig into his shoulder, then he walks her backwards to the bed.

She turns when they reach his bunk and braces her hands on the mattress, so he takes her from behind. Her skin is silk, but inside she's like velvet. Killian enjoys this position, enjoys the view, enjoys having his hand free to wander, to dip between her legs or stroke her back or tangle in her
hair. He takes his time, experimenting with angle and depth. Emma turns her head so she's looking at him over her shoulder, and he can see enough of her expression to understand what she's feeling, what she likes best, and he focuses on that.

Suddenly, she lets out a shivery gasp, and her whole body starts to quiver. She's only come this way with him twice before, and he thinks this time it surprised her. Her climax pushes Killian over the edge and their bodies tremble together, his hand gripping her hip, tethering himself to her, to that moment.

Afterwards, they clean up, put their pajamas on, and get in bed. They settle into the only position that works, lying on their sides, his chest fitted to her back. He tucks his face into her neck, inhales the scent of her hair, and exhales happily. He feels centered again.

"I love you," he says, so soft it's almost a sigh.

Her fingers tangle with his, and she moves his hand from her belly to her heart. "I love you too, Killian. Goodnight."
Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

Okay, I had to split what I had planned for this chapter into two chapter because there were just...too many little things to try and squish into one. So, that puts the ultimate chapter count at 55? Also, just to clarify because I just realized that something that was obvious to me was probably not obvious to anyone else, but: a few of the things introduced in this fic, especially things introduced quite recently, will spill over into the sequel. The BIG problem will be resolved, but a few other things will lead into our next little adventure. Anyway, enjoy!!!

It's early—too early for Emma to be conscious, but late enough that Killian's awake.

The gray light seeping in through the stern windows provides just enough illumination for him to see the details of Emma's features, her long dark lashes against her pale cheeks, her golden hair—the brightest thing in the room—pooled beneath her head and spreading in waves over his pillows, her mouth pressed into a worried frown...

Even in her sleep she looks troubled. He clutches her more tightly to his chest, kisses her brow, and nuzzles his face into her hair, just behind her ear.

Her lips part, and she makes a small, sleepy sound, but doesn't wake.

For awhile it feels as though time is standing still. Killian could fall asleep again, but he stays awake; he wants to hold onto this moment of stillness and calm for as long as possible, because he knows once the day starts in earnest he and Emma will have to face reality once again, so Killian savors it, savors lying here with Emma in his arms, in his cabin where he spent nearly seven years longing for the day he'd see her again.

Emma sleeps through the sunrise, but she wakes when, driven by certain physical reactions caused by the proximity of her rear end to his genitals, Killian's hand begins wandering.

"Ian's not here, is he?" she mumbles.

"I think you would know if he was, Swan."

"Nnn, oh yea."

His bunk is hardly large enough to fit the two of them, let alone them plus Ian. Killian wonders if there's a carpenter in Storybrooke that could remedy that...

"Can you keep doing that thing you were just doing?" she asks.

"This?" He runs his fingers along her ribs again until he reaches her breast, caresses the underside, her nipple, and then cups it, covering it completely with his hand and massaging.

"Yea, that," she breathes.

The empty nights and lonely mornings Killian spent in this cabin were the worst. Sometimes he'd slip
his hand into his trousers and relieve the ache between his legs, but the ache in his chest remained, always. It's since disappeared, erased by Emma's smile, by Ian's. He feels reborn, in a way, from darkness into light, from misery into a joy he never knew was possible. That this is his life now never ceases to astound him.

Emma gasps and moans as he strokes her, from collarbone to navel. When he reaches her hip she turns it towards him, encouraging his hand to skim lower along her belly.

"What do you want me to do, Swan?" he murmurs in her ear. He partially wants to be certain his early morning advances are truly desired, and partially wants to hear her say the words.

"I want you to touch me."

Fire heats his blood, sparks beneath his skin. His hand dips below the waistband of her shorts, fingers skimming first through soft fuzz before finding sensitive skin. She's wet, and her back arcs when he touches her core.

"God, Killian..."

His own hips jump, pressing into her, riding the wave of her body until she relaxes against him once more. He keeps his touches feather light and teasing, kisses her ear and her neck, not in a rush, not in any hurry to end this.

Her hand in his pajama bottoms is a surprise, her skin cool against his throbbing flesh, the sensation so intense he has to pause for a moment as arousal floods his body. He almost soaks his skivvies right then, like a teenager, but manages to clamp down and push back the tide rising inside of him.

She takes the lead, and he follows, his fingers mimicking the pace of her hand. It must be an awkward angle for her, but luckily at this point he doesn't need much—the first sign of her climax is all the invitation his body needs to release.

After, she rolls onto her back and says, "We should clean up."

He tucks his face between her neck and shoulder and hums his agreement—his stomach is moist and decidedly sticky. He can practically feel the trail of hair both above and below his navel congealing.

"You're not moving," she says, pointedly.

"No, I'm not."

"Are you going to?"

"Eventually."

She laughs and turns her head to kiss his hair, then wriggles until she's more comfortably curled into him. They lay together for a few minutes, just breathing, allowing their bodies to relax and their hearts to return to their normal rhythms. Eventually, they rise from the bed, clean themselves up, and get dressed.

"Did you talk to Henry last night?" Emma asks, balling up the shorts and t-shirt she slept in and tossing them into the corner atop Killian's soiled pajama pants.

Killian pulls fresh underwear on—slowly, because he knows Emma's watching—and says, "Aye, Swan, I did. How did you know?"
She shrugs. "You left to put Ian in bed and you were gone for a while. I sort of figured it was you Henry wanted to talk to and he was just waiting for a chance to get you alone."

She shimmies a pair of jean shorts up her legs, the longer ones that reach nearly to her knee but cling tightly to her thighs. A loose, sleeveless white shirt and a ponytail follow. The outfit shows off her calves and biceps as well as her long, graceful neck and the freckles on her shoulders.

Killian finds himself staring. He adores modern clothing—at least where Emma is concerned. He hasn't seen a single outfit on her that he hasn't enjoyed.

His own clothing is...adequate.

The zipper is easier for him than laces were, though the belt is apparently more of an accessory than a necessity; the t-shirt is more comfortable than long sleeves, but it makes the fact that one of his arms ends in a hook more obvious. He misses his linen blouses for that reason, but he knows he'd look like a fool if he were to wear one now. Better to blend in.

And, perhaps he didn't mind having Emma's eyes glued to his chest and arms, either.

Emma finishes adjusting her ponytail, then turns to him. "Was Henry upset about what I think he was upset about?"

"That depends on what you think he was upset about," Killian answers delicately, keeping his attention fixed on the belt he's threading through the loops on his jeans. He wants to be open and honest with Emma, but he also wants to preserve the trust Henry has in him.

Emma steps closer and reaches over his shoulder to tuck the tag back into his collar. Her hand trails down his chest and comes to rest against his heart.

"When Henry was younger he wanted to have magic," she says. "I hadn't really thought yet about how Ian having magic would affect him."

Her eyes are on her hand. Killian abandons his belt to place his own hand over hers.

"Henry will be fine. He's as tough as you are, Emma, and clever. He knows he has no reason to be jealous of his brother, it's just that-"

"It's just that literally everything else in his life sucks right now?" Emma suggests. "And from his perspective, Ian's got it good?"

"Not everything in his life sucks, Swan," Killian says, thinking of Ava and Emma's parents of the time he's spent with the lad. "But aye, seeing his younger brother with many of the things he wishes he had himself is a bit difficult."

Emma takes another step forward, into him, and her forehead joins her hand. "Henry's the only reason I don't wish Neal would just drop dead," she says into his shirt. "Though sometimes I do think things would be easier—even for Henry—if Neal was gone."

Killian wraps his arms around her. He agrees—fiercely—but he keeps that particular opinion to himself.

"I'm going to take Henry to the warehouse to spar," he says. "Do you want to join us?"

"No, I think it would be nice for Henry if it was just him and you. Ian can stay here with me." She lifts her head. "Will you take him for the day?"
"Who? Ian?"

"Yea."

"Of course, love."

"Ok, good. I think he needs to go back to some sort of routine."

Killian dips his head to kiss her nose. "And what will you do today, Swan?"

"Talk to my dad and Robin and the Apprentice. We need to come up with a plan for Merlin's hat."

There's the dose of reality Killian was dreading. His arms tighten around her waist instinctively, protectively. "You won't do anything without me, will you?" he asks.

"No, of course not." A crease appears between her brows, and she frowns. "Killian, I'm not trying to exclude you, I would just rather Ian be with you than with Ruby and Belle or Will."

"I know, love. I know."

"Neal might try to hurt you or Ian to get me to open the box."

"I know that, too."

Killian expects it, actually. Neal won't wait forever; if he suspects they won't open the box on their own, he and the Darkness will likely attempt to force them, so the sooner they can come up with a plan, the more of an advantage they'll have.

His thoughts churn as he makes his way below deck. His first stop is the galley to set the coffee maker brewing, then he knocks on Henry's door.

"I'm awake," he hears Henry grumble.

"You have five minutes," Killian says, then goes to Ian's room. The lad is mercifully still asleep. One of his bare legs is hanging off the bed, toes nearly touching the floor. Killian creeps inside and tucks Ian's leg back onto the bunk beneath the covers, sprinkles a few flakes of fish food into Ruby's tank, and leaves as quietly as he came.

He's just closed Ian's door when Henry's opens and Henry steps into the hallway, disheveled but fully dressed.

"Can I eat something really quick first-"

The deck creaks over their heads and Killian's hand snaps up to cover Henry's mouth. Someone just stepped onto his ship, someone with too heavy a tread to be Alec or Hal. Could Neal be making his move already?

Hand still over Henry's mouth, Killian uses his hook to guide Henry aside, then reaches through the doorway to his room and up, removing one of his pistols from its hidey-hole over the lintel.

Henry gapes. "Was that there the whole time?" he whispers.

"Yes," Killian mutters. "Now be quiet, and get ready to wake up your brother and run."

Henry shrinks against Ian's door, his hand on the knob, and Killian moves to stand below the trapdoor. He waits, listening.
The footsteps move closer, towards Killian and away from his cabin, where Emma is, probably completely unaware that someone else is aboard.

"Hello?"

Killian huffs out a breath. It's David.

He lowers his arm and calls, "Down here!"

The trapdoor slides open. David's crouched in the opening, squinting. After a moment, he grins and says, "Hey. Alec let me on board."

Killian has no doubt that the man above him is the real David, but he says, "What's my son's middle name?"

David's smile turns puzzled. "What?"

"What is my son's middle name?" Killian repeats.

"David. Ian's middle name is David. Why are you asking?"

"Just making sure you're you, mate."

"I didn't think of that," David says, frowning. "Shit, now I have to go yell at Alec."

He sounds rather disappointed at the prospect. Definitely David, then.

Killian tucks the pistol into his belt and claps Henry on the shoulder. "Finished getting ready, lad. We'll meet you up top."

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At the warehouse by the docks, Killian and David take turns running Henry through his drills.

Killian doesn't go all out, but he doesn't go easy on Henry, either; often he delivers a blow to Henry's hand, ribs, or knees, just to remind him that it isn't a game, that Henry requested to be taught how to fight in order to defend himself, and this is Killian teaching him just that.

Robin's there as well, observing from his seat on a stack of dock pilings. Killian doesn't understand the man's presence until Ava shows up at the end of their session with two coffees and some donuts from Granny's, walks Henry out, and Robin tails them.

"Personal bodyguard," David explains with a wink. "Now that we don't need the Merry Men to cover the water, I've got them stationed all over town keeping an eye out."

"Well hidden, I'm assuming," Killian says.

"Naturally."

Killian and David stow the practice swords and walk together back along the docks to the Jolly Roger. It's a long walk, but there's a crisp breeze off the water that cools the sweat on Killian's skin and clears his head. Within minutes he feels revitalized.

When the Jolly Roger finally comes into view, David breaks their companionable silence and asks, "Are you going to ask Emma to move in with you?"
Killian glances at him before returning his eyes to the horizon. "No," he says. "I think you know as well as I do that she needs a house of her own with a yard for Ian."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees David smiling, and his cheeks flush.

"This is temporary," he adds, turning his face further away, speaking more to the sea than to David. The man's approval still feels strange, overwhelming. David reminds him a bit of Liam.

As they near the Jolly Roger's pier, Ian spots them from the prow and bellows what Killian can only presume is a greeting, then he flings both arms into the arm and waves them frantically back and forth, as if there's a chance Killian and David might not have noticed him yet.

"He seems to really like living on your ship," David says, as both he and Killian lift their hands and wave back.

"Aye," Killian agrees quietly. "He does. The lad's a true sailor at heart."

"Like you."

Killian's footsteps falter and he nearly tumbles off the pier.

"What?" David asks.

"Nothing," Killian says. "It's just that that sounded extraordinarily like a compliment, and I was more so expecting a jab about me being a pirate."

David presses his lips together in a rueful smile. "My wife tells me that sometimes my jokes can come off a little harsher than I intend them to. She said I should try being a little nicer."

"To me?"

"To—yes, to you."

Ian's waiting for them at the top of the gangplank, bouncing on his toes. His feet are bare, probably because Henry told him that that's how sailors used to walk about on wooden ships before the invention of rubber soles, and Killian hasn't taken the time yet to explain that that isn't entirely true.

"Grandpa!" Ian grabs David's hand and hauls him the rest of the way onto the ship. "Do you want to see my room?"

"You bet I do!"

Killian, apparently, is metaphorical chopped liver. He watches Ian lead David to the trapdoor and down the ladder ("Watch your head, grandpa.") then turns to look for Emma.

She's sitting in the shade beside a collection of plates and cups—the remains of her and Ian's breakfast, judging by the bits of pancake leftover on one of the plates.

"That kid needs a bath," she says, smiling up at him.

Killian chuckles and lowers himself to the deck to sit beside her.

"Think we can dunk him in one of these barrels later?" she asks, nodding towards the old rum casks Killian uses to launder his clothes in.

"Aye, love. That or the sea."
"What, just soap him up and toss him in?"

"Something like that," Killian says with a grin. "I took many a bath that way when I was his age."

"Well, if you tell Ian that he'll probably jump right in himself."

Killian slips him arm around her waist and she scoots closer, so that her thigh is pressed against his. They can hear voices drifting up from below deck, Ian's loud, rapid chatter and David's slower, deeper, more even responses.

"I feel sort of bad," Emma says, leaning her head onto Killian's shoulder. "I think my parents probably miss having me and the boys at the loft."

"Emma, if you'd rather stay there, I won't-"

"No," she says quickly. "We're going stay here. Ian likes it. I like it. I mean, the bathroom situation isn't ideal, but..." She finds his hand and slides her fingers though his. "We should have dinner with them tonight, just so they don't think we forgot about them."

"Would you like to have them here for dinner?"

"Can we do that?"

Killian shrugs. "It will be a tight fit, but I think we can manage."

"Thank you."

"Why are you thanking me, love?"

It's Emma's turn to shrug. "I just don't want them to feel like I'm out of reach or something now that I've been staying here, with you."

"Ah," Killian says. "You're worried they think I'm being territorial."

"Yea, sort of."

Killian will admit—internally, to himself and no one else—that a certain possessive part of him was pleased to have Emma and the boys staying aboard, but he never intended to make Snow and David feel cut out of Emma's life.

Killian turns his head to kiss Emma's brow. "Your parents should feel welcome here, Swan," he says. "They are welcome here."

When Emma invites David and Snow for dinner, David grins and says, "You can cook on this thing?"

Emma rolls her eyes. "Dad."

Killian remembers what David said earlier about his jokes, and doesn't get offended.

"We'd be happy to come for dinner," David says. "We'll bring dessert."

"Ice cream?" Ian asks hopefully.

"No, booger pie," David says. He, Ian, and Emma giggle.
The four of them leave the Jolly Roger together, but part ways in the parking lot. Emma gives Killian a good-bye kiss that's perhaps a touch too long and doesn't go unnoticed by either Ian or David—David pretends not to notice, while Ian observes mutely and as if he's only just realizing how this sort of thing might embarrass him in the future.

"Call me right away if there's any trouble with his magic," Emma whispers, then she and David get into the Bug and drive away.

Killian doesn't want to take Ian to the beach, not after what happened yesterday, so they pick up the boy's monstrosity of a bike from the loft and go to the park. There's a concrete path circling the pond there that's relatively safe for Ian to ride around on, as it's usually deserted—no wayward toddlers or elderly couples out for a stroll for Ian to run over.

Killian sits on a bench with a book (Henry rented *The Hobbit* for him from the library) and tries not to cringe every time Ian takes one of the turns too fast, or veers a little too close to the edge of the pond.

The ducks and the geese seem to sense danger, and stay securely in the water.

Sound effects accompany Ian's wild ride, noises that seem to consist mostly of *vroom*, *pew pew pew*, and something that sounds like a crash or an explosion.

After a full hour, Ian skids to a screeching halt in front of Killian's bench. He's streaming sweat and panting, and his toes barely reach the ground in order to hold the bike up.

"Hey, do you know how to ride a bike?" he asks.

"No, I don't."

"Oh. Do you want to try?"

"No thank you, lad." If Killian's ass never touches a bicycle seat he'll be the happiest man alive. "Why don't you sit down and take a break?"

Ian hops off his bike, a maneuver that involves leaping to one side while flinging the bike to the ground in the opposite direction, a maneuver that gives Killian several heart attacks and has him wishing that Emma had let David buy Ian a pony.

Ian clambers onto the bench beside him and Killian lifts his arm, knowing Ian will tuck himself beneath it.

"What were you playing?" he asks.

"Hm?"

"When you were riding your bike," Killian says, smoothing his hand along the front of Ian's hair, pushing his sweaty bangs to the side. "I heard all your sound effects. What were you imagining?"

"Oh!" Ian grins, revealing his two front teeth that are still amusingly oversized. "I was pretending I was Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star!"

"Ah," Killian says, even though he has no clue what any of those words mean. "And did you, erm, succeed?"

"Yea! And guess what?"
"What?"

"I want to get a ramp so I can jump my bike off of it and it'll feel like I'm flying!"

Killian doesn't say no, but he thinks it very, very hard—screams it silently, in fact, hoping the universe will somehow hear him and grant him one small mercy.

Ian sighs happily and settles more firmly against Killian's side, then pulls out his spyglass.

Killian stares. He can't even begin to guess where the boy was keeping it this whole time. He opens his mouth to inquire, but closes it quickly—he very likely wouldn't appreciate the answer.

Ian opens the spyglass, puts it to his eye, and tilts his head back. "Do you think when I'm older I can use my magic like mom does? To fight dragons and bad guys and stuff?" he asks.

"I think that's exactly what you'll do," Killian says quietly. He tilts his head back too. The sky is a brilliant shade of blue with huge, puffy white clouds. "Can you feel it now? Your magic?"

"No." Ian's spyglass drifts slowly to the right, tracking, Killian suspects, a cloud that looks remarkably like a dolphin.

Killian follows the same cloud for a moment, then closes his eyes. He's no expert, but the place where Emma described her magic residing sounded loads more pleasant than the one Ian described. He would prefer the boy not have to go back there until he's ready.

Killian keeps his eyes closed and his head tilted back, letting the sun warm his face, until he feels Ian shift position. Now the spyglass is fixed on the trees.

"What do you see?" Killian asks.

"A cardinal."

Killian spots it too, a splash of red nestled amidst the faded green needles of a white pine.

"Hey!" Ian drops his hands and the spyglass into his lap and fixes Killian with wide, excited blue eyes. "Do you want to play 'I Spy'?"

"What's that, lad?"

Ian explains and they play. The lad is worse at I Spy than he is at Monopoly, and everything within sight is either green or brown or the sky, but it doesn't diminish Ian's enthusiasm, even when Killian picks something difficult like the reflection of the clouds in the pond—that one just makes Ian search harder for something to stump Killian with.

They're just leaving the park on their way find a solid lunch when Killian phone buzzes with a text from Emma.

We sort of have a plan, it says. I want your opinion. Can you come to the station?

Ian? Killian texts back.

Bring him. Roland's here.

Be there soon. Need to feed Ian first.

Good idea :)
Killian and Ian eat a quick lunch at a little cafe close to the park that sells sandwiches, then head to the station. Inside, Emma takes Ian to the break room, where Roland is already situated with Ian's spare Legos that Emma summoned magically from the loft.

In the office, David, Robin, Will, and the Apprentice are perched in various chairs or standing.

"Who's with Henry?" Killian asks Robin.

"Gilbert Whitehand," Robin answers.

"Who?"

"Big, ugly bloke," Will clarifies. "Hands like a little girl though-"

Lightning fast, Robin's hand darts out and smacks Will's arm.

Will winces and clutches his stomach. "Watch it, I'm injured," he whines.

"An hour ago you were trying to convince me you were uninjured enough to have your knives back."

"Injured or not, a fellow should be allowed the means to defend himself."

Smiling to himself, Killian takes a seat on the corner of Emma's desk, one leg braced on the floor and the other dangling. Emma returns and sits on her rolling chair beside him.

"So," Killian says, "what's your plan?"

Everyone exchanges glances, and then looks to Emma, who takes a deep breath.

"We're going to put Neal in the cage the dwarves built, and then I'm going to open the box and use Merlin's hat on him."

Killian nods slowly. "That's wise, Swan. If he's inside that cage before you open the box, then there's no risk of him taking it from us and using it for himself. We can extract the Darkness while he's safely locked away, and then release him when he's back to normal."

"Yea," Emma says, and lets out the breath she was holding. "Ok, next problem."

David crosses his arms over his chest. "The next problem is figuring out how to get Neal in the cage."

"I don't suppose there's any point in just asking politely, is there?" Will asks.

Emma snorts. "Probably not. I still think-"

"No!" David thunders, making both Will and Killian jump.

Killian blinks, then looks down at Emma. "You're not thinking of sneaking into Neal's house again, are you Swan?"

A wave of nervousness flutters through him at the thought.

"No," Emma says, folding her hands over her stomach primly. "As you can see I was vetoed."
David stares at her icily for a long minute, as if ensuring she's not about to bolt off to Neal's house to do exactly what he just ordered her not to. Emma swings the seat of her chair from side to side and stares back innocently.

Finally, David lifts his eyes to Killian's, and says, "Squid ink would work. That's how we originally got Rumple into the first cage, but-"

"But we don't have any," Emma finishes.

"Well, can we get some?"

"We'd have to go to the Enchanted Forest to do that," Robin says.

"What about Gold's Shop?"

David shakes his head. "We searched it top to bottom looking for Ariel's bracelet and I didn't see any."

Ariel.

Killian sighs. "Too bad we've no way to contact Ariel again," he says. "Extracting squid ink would be a simple task for a mermaid."

"I think I may be able to help with that," says a deep voice.

Everyone turns. Nemo is standing in the doorway, dressed impeccably in a crisp powder blue dress shirt and navy pants. Killian slides off the desk and to his feet. When his eyes meet Nemo's he feels that heavy thing that sits between them, tugging at his heart as though an anchor's tied to it.

"Nemo," David says.

Nemo pulls his eyes from Killian and looks at David. "I apologize, old friend. I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

"That's okay," David says with a smile, then gestures Nemo into the office. "Come on in. Sit down."

Nemo does as David bid, but remains standing. His gaze slides around the room, sizing up the men and Emma—the habits of a soldier, Killian knows.

"So, what can we do for you?" Emma asks.

Nemo reaches into his pants pocket and pulls out a tiny, clear bottle with a cork stopper. There's a bit of water inside, water that shimmers, and Killian recognizes it immediately.

"A message in a bottle," he says. Emma raises her eyebrows at him.

"I was going to use it," Nemo says, "but I think perhaps you need it more."

Killian takes the bottle carefully from Nemo and tilts it so that the water sloshes from one end to the other, catching the light and glinting like a prism.

Emma leans close. "What is it?" she asks.

It's the Apprentice that answers. "It's quite a handy bit of magic," he says. "Just whisper a message and the name of the person you want to receive that message into the bottle, drop it into the water, and it will transport itself to the desired recipient."
"Huh," Emma says, frowning at the bottle. "And this thing can get a message to the Enchanted Forest?"

"I believe so," Nemo says. "That is, if the rumor I heard was true."

"What's the rumor?"

"I was told that a mermaid visited, and that she travelled to the Enchanted Forest and back. I came to ask if it's true. If it is, then communication between the realms is possible, and you can use this bottle to get a message to your mermaid again."

"Who are you trying to contact?" David asks.


Killian's gut clenches painfully.

Emma straightens and plants her hands on her hips. "Well, it's true," she says. "A mermaid did travel between the realms, so that bottle should work."

"Then it's yours," Nemo says.

"But what about your son?"

"I'll find another way."

Killian passes Emma the bottle, and she wraps both hands around it. "We owe you," she says.

Nemo smiles and bows his head. "All I ask is that when your mermaid arrives, I be allowed to speak with her. I have a favor to ask."

"Done," Emma says. She turns and hands the bottle to David. "Can you bring that to mom? I think she has more of a chance of convincing Ariel to help us again than I do."

David takes the bottle. "I'll be back." He shakes Nemo's hand, thanks him, then jogs from the office.

"I'm gonna check on Ian and Roland," Emma says. She squeezes Killian's arm, just over his brace, then slips past Robin and the Apprentice and into the hallway that leads to the break room.

Without Emma beside him, Killian's forced to look at Nemo, the man's presence pulling at him the way the moon pulls at the tides.

"May I have a word?" Nemo asks.

Killian tries to resist, tries to drag himself in any other direction, but it's futile. His feet follow Nemo's, out of the office and out of the station. Nemo stops when they reach the shade of the decorative trees to either side of the front walkway, and Killian halts beside him.

Nemo looks him over, from head to toe. Killian stands stock still, eyes averted, jaw clenched, instinct wavering between fighting and fleeing.

"We haven't had a chance to talk," Nemo says evenly.

"No," Killian replies brusquely.
"Have you been avoiding me?"

"Yes."

Nemo smiles, and Killian suddenly remembers why the man annoyed him so much. He looks at the man then.

"You're trying to contact Liam."

"Aye. He's captain of the Nautilus, now."

"Are you going to bring him here?"

_Fight_, something whispers inside of him. _Kill._

If Liam comes to Storybrooke, it will mean Killian's ruin. Everything he's been building, with Emma, with Ian, will crumble and turn to ash. He feels his hand begin to tremble, and wishes he had a cutlass or a pistol or a flask of rum to steady it.

Nemo doesn't answer Killian's question, instead he says, "It's not too late for the two of you to reconcile."

Killian looks away again. "I wouldn't be so certain," he snarls. Killian burnt that bridge, burnt it to the ground before he even properly met the man—_boy_, he reminds himself. _Liam was a boy when you orphaned him._

Nemo presses his lips together, neither accepting Killian's words nor disputing them. "You're a father now yourself."

Killian feels a growl clawing its way up his throat. _Is Nemo threatening Ian?_

"I'm glad for you. You finally found your family."

Words from long ago echo in Killian's mind.

_The one thing missing in your life...family._

And just like that, the violence rising inside of Killian is extinguished.

"Thank you," he hears himself say.

The station door flies open and Ian springs out.

"Dad!"

The word rings out and hits Killian like a physical blow. His head jerks up.

"Yes, lad?"

Ian races down the sidewalk and crashes into Killian's side, flinging his arms around Killian's waist to stay upright.

"Me and Roland are gonna play dinosaur pirates," he says breathlessly. "Will you play with us? You do the dinosaurs good."

"Aye, of course I will."
Ian's grin slips. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Go back inside. I'll be right there."

Ian tightens his arms around Killian's waist, as if he doesn't believe him. "Dad..."

This time the word burrows inside of Killian, deep in his chest, warm and liquid, like a drop of sunshine. He takes a deep breath, and smiles.

"I'm fine, lad. Really. Please go back inside. I'm right behind you."

Ian obeys, sliding his arms slowly off of Killian and stepping back; he eyeballs Nemo distrustfully before turning on his heel and marching back to the door, though he looks back over his shoulder several times.

Nemo watches him go, eyes twinkling.

"Don't be a stranger, Killian."

Killian grunts something unintelligible in response. Nemo takes his leave, passing from shade into sunlight and disappearing down the sidewalk.

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A strange feeling sits inside of Killian all evening, a fear of sorts. He knows Liam will come; not tomorrow or even within the next month, but eventually. He tries to bury it, but after dinner, after Emma's parents leave and Ian's bathed and he and Henry are in bed, Emma asks, "When all of this is over, will you tell what the thing with you and Nemo is?"

Hand on his belt, Killian freezes.

Emma's already in her pajamas. She sees him go rigid, and walks over. Gently, she bats his hand and hook to the side, undoes his belt, and slides it off.

"I get that whatever it is is something, you know, big, but..."

She moves away to hang up his belt, then returns to strip him of his brace, loosening the straps and carefully detaching the leather from his skin. His hook goes next to his belt; Emma rummages in a drawer and produces a baby wipe, which she uses to clean his stump before taking it in both her hands and massaging it.

Killian nearly groans out loud.

Sometimes when he wears his hook it's as if the hand he no longer has is clenched in a fist, especially if he's tense or angry or both. When Emma kneads the poor, abused tendons at the end of his arm, the muscles loosen all the way from blunted wrist to shoulder—the invisible fist unclenches.

Yet another thing newly discovered. Before he assumed his forearm ached purely due to the original injury.

"Killian?"

He opens his eyes—he didn't even realize that he closed them—and looks at her.

"I already told you that I'm going to choose to see the best in you, no matter what," she says. "So whatever it is...it's okay. I can handle it."
Killian can only hope that's true. He slides his arms around her waist and drops his head onto her shoulder, tucking his face into her neck. She smells like his soap, which isn't surprising given that Ian was rather splashy in the barrel they stuffed him into to bathe.

"It's almost over, love," he says.

"I know." She pauses, and he hears the smile in her voice as she adds, "I don't know what we're going to do when our lives aren't in danger all the time though."

Killian grins. "Well, that's when the real fun begins, Swan."
Chapter Notes

A quick little update for you guys! The next chapter will definitely take me at least two weeks (I have a hockey tournament next weekend). There's also a bit of a medical thing going on with my almost-husband's family that could be okay, could be bad, so...if you don't hear from me for a while, that's why :)

It's been 24 hours since Snow used the message in a bottle Nemo gave them to contact Ariel. Emma's cleaning the top of the loft to stop herself from thinking—she's been on edge since that morning, ever since they all met to plan and the plan made her realize this is it, this is happening.

They've got their magical prison cell, they've got their magical hat, and now all they need is their magical squid ink.

Ready or not, here we come.

And Emma's sort of...not ready.

Too much of their plan hinges on the word if:

If they get the squid ink, if they can make Neal touch the squid ink, if Emma can teleport him once he's immobilized, if the cage holds, if she can actually open the box, if Merlin's hat is capable of everything the Apprentice says it is.

And they still don't know if they'll be able to reverse Regina's whole coma thing. Henry and the Apprentice are still researching—there's another slew of if's Emma doesn't want to think about: what if they don't find an answer in time? What if they lose their chance to revive Regina? What if Henry loses her a second (third?) time?

Emma realizes she's being a little too aggressive with a Lysol wipe, and drops it. Hopefully the top of the dresser had that little bubbly patch in the laminate before Emma scrubbed it.

She's going to pretend it did.

She walks to the bed and moves a shoebox off the mattress and into her lap so she can sit. The box is full of Ian’s treasures. Emma knew he had one at home but she didn't realize he made one here, too. She found it hidden underneath Henry's bed; she only glanced inside before, but she opens it again now and takes a closer look.

It's filled with little things, things that seem random to her but must have significance for Ian: interesting rocks, seashells and bits of beach glass, leftover candy Emma recognizes from Ian's birthday piñata, a rumpled dollar bill, some Pokémon cards, the gold coin the Apprentice gave him, and, at the very bottom, something silvery.

Emma pushes the other objects aside with a finger and finds a necklace with a snowflake on the end.

The Wishing Star.
That little punk.

Ian must have taken it out of Killian's room the day he was missing and they were in there searching for clues.

Emma shakes her head and tucks the Wishing Star into her shorts pocket. She doesn't know if Killian wants it back, but she knows Ian probably shouldn't have it.

"Emma, are you hungry?" Snow's voice drifts up from the kitchen, accompanied by the smell of butter and brown sugar. She's down there stress baking twelve different kinds of homemade pop tarts.

Or it might actually be rage baking.

David tried to forbid her from going with them to capture Neal, and they had a bit of an argument.

Emma understands both sides.

Snow's a mom, and she's not going to let her daughter face off against the Dark One alone—Emma's not alone, of course, but that's not the point.

Her dad's her dad. He feels like he needs to watch out for everyone—not just Emma and Snow and Henry and Ian, but Killian, Robin, and all the Merry Men. He knows he can't stop Emma—and therefore can't stop Killian, he knows he can't stop Henry and that Henry might actually be necessary, and he needs the Merry Men, so he tried to keep safe the only person left for him to keep safe.

Eventually, Emma's parents compromised: Snow's going with, and David's going to pretend that he's not upset about it.

Stubbornness, it seems, is something Emma inherited from her mom.

"Yea, I'm coming," she calls. She closes Ian's treasure box, sets it back on the bed, and goes downstairs.

Snow's at the countertop, rolling out another fresh batch of dough, dusted with flour all the way to her elbows. The kitchen table is piled with plates full of pop tarts, some square, some rectangular, and some heart-shaped.

Emma picks up a heart-shaped one that oozing strawberry jam out of the corner, but before she can take a bite she spots something else on the table. It's a newspaper, and not only has Emma never seen anyone in this house reading a newspaper before, it's also opened conspicuously to the real estate listings.

Emma snorts. "Seriously?"

Snow glances up, smiles. "I was just thinking maybe you'd be interested, that's all. It doesn't hurt to be thinking about the future, you know?"

Emma tries to give her a look but Snow's glowering at her rolling pin so the look is wasted.

In spite of herself, she sits down. It's definitely a setup. The newspaper is placed perfectly in front of her chair, and there's a pen and a highlighter and a notepad within reach.

"Has Killian asked you to move in?"
Emma doesn't answer—which, she guesses, is answer enough.

Killian hasn't asked her to move in, and Emma doesn't expect him to. The Jolly Roger isn't a permanent solution, the Jolly Roger just happens to be a place where Ian feels safe, where Henry has a door that he can lock, and where Emma and Killian have some privacy.

Currently, it's great.

Can Emma see herself living there forever? Absolutely not.

It has nothing to do with Killian—he's done his best to make them comfortable, and all the extra makeout time it's afforded them is amazing—it's just that there's no shower and the closest bathroom is a boat across the pier that she has to break into every time she has to pee.

Plus, if Emma's honest with herself, she wants a house.

Emma Swan wants to live in a fucking house.

A house with a yard and somewhere she can plant flowers—she's never really done that before but she thinks she could like it—somewhere with a big goddamn kitchen and a bay window to show off her Christmas tree in and a porch to decorate for Halloween.

Is that possible? Can she have that?

She picks up another pop tart, a square one that has actual sprinkles and frosting on it, and starts reading.

There are three houses available in Robin and Ruby's neighborhood, two for sale, one for rent. A handful of apartments on or just off of Main Street. Something Emma's pretty sure is actually a lighthouse. A cabin in the woods. Some farms. A few properties that are just acres of emptiness, all potential. Several old mansions in the vicinity of Gold's puke-colored manor. And, finally, a scattering of newer-looking houses that have that modern New England look, all north of town.

One in particular catches her eye—it's not a lightning strike moment, but Emma definitely feels something when she sees it.

It's within walking distance of one of the smaller, quieter beaches up north, not too close to the woods, not too far from the school; it has a white picket fence, a couple of huge, shady trees, and what looks like a side yard.

It's huge and grey, trimmed in white; the corner is rounded, like a tower; it has three floors (oh my God), and an enormous porch that spans the front and wraps around the side.

Emma can see herself there. Henry and Ian would love it—a real fucking house. Killian would like how close it is to the sea; he and Ian could walk to the beach whenever they wanted. Emma bets there's a park nearby, too.

Excitement skitters through her, expands in her chest, but she pushes it down.

She hasn't even seen the inside yet. She might hate the inside. And it's a lot of money—definitely not as much as it should be (maybe no one here has figured out property value?), but still a lot.

"See anything you like?"

Killian's deep voice sends a shiver down her spine and she jumps. When did Killian get here?
She looks up. He's standing behind her chair, one arm braced on the table, leaning past her to peer at the newspaper. His necklace with the skull and sword charms has escaped his t-shirt and is dangling in midair.

"What's so special about this one?" he asks.

Emma follows the line of his arm down to his finger, pointing at the listing for the house she was just daydreaming about.

Which she circled.

Emma fucking circled it. When did she circle it?

Probably around the same time she picked the pen up without realizing it.

She sets the pen down now and starts closing the newspaper. "Uh, nothing," she says. "I was just passing the time."

Her cheeks are warm and she's pretty sure her mom is watching, which only makes her flush more. She's not sure why she's so embarrassed—she was just looking, it doesn't mean anything.

Except that, you know, it means she's planning on staying in Storybrooke, because she can't see a life for herself and the boys anywhere else. It means she's planning on staying here, with Killian. It means she's planning on...

She's planning on pursuing a future with him.

It's a big feeling.

It's a big scary feeling.

And the scariest part is how much she wants that future.

Killian moves his hand to cover one of hers. He's wearing a soft look, and Emma knows he's cataloguing her expression, her flustered reaction. A smile tugs at one corner of his lips.

"I don't know what we're going to do when our lives aren't in danger all the time though."

"Well, that's when the real fun begins, Swan."

The panic inside of Emma goes still.

Everything could go wrong. A month from now, a year...

But maybe that's okay? Maybe it's okay to risk the hurt that would cause because there's also a chance everything will be fine, that she'll be happy?

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees movement.

"One at a time," she says instantly, the words flying out of her mouth out of pure reflex even before she turns her head fully.

Ian, standing on the other side of the table, a pop tart in each hand, pushes his lower lip out in a pout.

"I didn't say you can't have two," Emma says. "I just said eat one first, and if you're still hungry after, you can eat another one."
Ian puts one heart-shaped pop tart back, slowly and with a lot of deliberate, sulky eye contact.

"Did you wash your hands?"

Ian opens his mouth, hesitates.

"Gimme the pop tart you touched."

"Why?" Ian asks, indignantly.

"You know why."

Ian snatches up the pop tart he just put down, marches around the table, and slaps it into her waiting palm.

"Thank you," she says.

"You're welcome," he huffs, his manners as much of a reflex for him as her mom radar is for her.

"Ian, honey," Snow says. "Why don't you go wash your hands and then come help me finish this next batch of pop tarts? I'll let you pick the filling."

Ian's eyes light up. "Can we make a booger one for grandpa?"

"I don't see why not."

Ian starts for the kitchen, has the words "Hands!" yelled at him by three people simultaneously, changes direction, and trots off to the bathroom with his pop tart clutched in his teeth and half hanging out of his mouth.

Killian chuckles. Emma waits until she hears running water, then leans her head back until it touches her chair. Killian tilts his own head down and smiles at her. He looks tired; Emma knows anxiety is eating away at him just as much as it's gnawing at her—they barely slept last night, and not in the good way.

"How was your day?" she asks.

His fingers brush her cheek, lightly. "It was very nice, Swan."

"What did you guys do?"

"We went to the warehouse and played around with the wooden swords a bit. I had one of them cut down to Ian's size so he can handle it better."

Emma cocks an eyebrow. "You told me I wasn't allowed to call it playing around; you said it's called sparring."

"Ian's six, love. It's mostly just playing around at this point." His fingers travel from her cheek and into her hair. "You haven't asked me for the password yet."

Emma barely refrains from rolling her eyes. Since only yesterday, her dad created an elaborate system of passwords, code phrases, and handshakes to ensure that Neal can't use a magical disguise to infiltrate their ranks and steal their secrets. Emma can't remember half the things her dad came up with, and she really doesn't expect something so cloak-and-dagger from Neal.

"Kiss me," she says.
Killian's eyebrows dart upwards in surprise. "Pardon?"

"Kiss me. I know how you kiss. I'll know if it's you or not."

"You can't remember the password, can you love?"

"Nope."

Grinning, Killian leans the rest of the way down and presses his lips gently to hers. His necklace tickles her ear, his fingers buries themselves deeper into the hair at the base of her neck. The feel of his skin against hers sends a flood of warmth through her and has her longing for the privacy of his cabin—Ian's footsteps patter across the floor, from the bathroom to the kitchen, reminding them that they are not, in fact, alone, and Killian pulls away. He takes the chair besides her, and takes Ian's pop tart from her hand.

"Killian, I wouldn't."

"No point in wasting food, love," he says. "Besides, I made him wash his hands after he touched that crab."

"He touched a crab?"

"Aye. We were trying to save it from a seagull."

"Did you succeed?"

Killian tilts his head thoughtfully from side to side. "Temporarily, at least. I fear we may have only bought the crab a few extra hours."

"You didn't tell Ian that, did you?"

"No. I told him the crab is now living happily ever after under the sea with his crab wife and ten crab children." He grins and bites the pop tart in half.

In the kitchen, Ian has conned his way into sitting on the countertop, and he and Snow are mixing something in a bowl that has Ian giggling. Emma's eyes stray to the newspaper.

It doesn't hurt to be thinking about the future, you know.

Sometimes it is difficult to remember that there will be a future past all this Neal bullshit, that normal life will eventually resume. Henry will go away to college, Ian will start school again, there will be homework and sports and play dates with other kids, family dinners and holidays. She'll be the Sheriff, hopefully with nothing more on her plate to worry about than the usual small town troubles, and Killian will...

Well, Emma doesn't actually know what Killian will do. He's been surviving on a stash of gold coins, but she knows it's probably not as endless a supply as it seems. He'll probably need a job, and not just for the money, but to find purpose, too; a place in this town. He won't be content to just hang around all day, not once Ian's back in school.

Maybe he can find work at the docks? Give sailing lessons?

It's hard to imagine him being anything other than a pirate, but pillaging and plundering isn't exactly a viable job option in Storybrooke. Will it be difficult for him, adjusting to something so...domestic? Will he eventually grow restless?
That big, scary feeling fills her up again.

"What's on your mind, love?"

Emma quickly jerks herself out of her thoughts and wipes the frown off her face. She glances at her mom and Ian and then looks back at Killian. "Nothing."

It's not exactly convincing, even to Emma's ears.

Killian's eyebrows pinch together, creasing his forehead. "Do you want to take a walk, Swan?" he asks quietly.

She hesitates. Her instincts are telling her to say no, to put a wall up and hide her fears and insecurities behind a lot of bravado, but yesterday night she asked Killian to share something he clearly considers a deep, dark secret, and if she wants to keep his trust in order for him to feel safe telling her that secret one day, then she probably shouldn't hide things from him.

"Yea, can we?" she says.

Killian holds out his hand, and Emma takes it.

Luckily Ian's so engrossed in whatever he and Snow are concocting that he doesn't ask to go with them, so Emma and Killian are able to slip out of the loft and down to the street alone.

Its late afternoon, the heat of the day still intense but beginning its slow decline into evening coolness. They walk hand-in-hand along the sidewalk, slow and meandering, not really headed anywhere. Killian remains silent, waiting for her to speak first, his hand warm and solid and reassuring around hers.

Emma gathers her courage gradually. There are other people out enjoying the sunshine, eating at the cafes, shopping at the stores. It still feels a bit unreal sometimes, that people are living their normal lives all around them, that the world hasn't just totally stopped because of Neal.

She guesses she should take that as an encouraging sign.

They turn a corner off of Main Street and head towards the harbor, towards the bench where they shared many an early morning conversation, where there's a clear, unobstructed view of the horizon, the line where the pale blue of the sky meets the deeper blue of the water.

As soon as they sit down, Emma finds her voice.

"I was looking at houses," she says.

"Oh?"

"Yea."

"And?"

"And I sort of found one I like."

"Go on, Swan." Killian settles his hook arm along the back of the bench, just behind her shoulders.

"It just...it got me thinking."

"About what?"
"About the future." She swallows hard and looks out at the sea; it's easier that way. "I was kind of wondering about you."

"What do you mean, love?"

"I mean...are you going to be okay with all this? Once everything settles down and it's just...normal life?" She looks at him then. "Won't you get restless?"

His eyebrows twitch upwards. "Is that all you're worried about?" he asks, half-smiling.

She blinks. "Yes?"

He turns his body to face her. "Emma, I'll never want anything more than this for as long as I live." His hand is still on hers, somehow managed to never leave it, thumb stroking back and forth along her knuckles. "You and Ian are my home."

Home.

Emma didn't know what that word meant until Henry and Ian.

She looks at Killian, his eyes steady on hers. She wants him to be her home, too.

Her phone vibrates suddenly in her pocket, startling her and forcing her bolt upright in order to dig it out of her pocket.

It's a text from David.

Emma stands up from the bench, her phone cradled in both hands. "It's my dad," she says. "They have the squid ink."

She feels his body heat against her side, and his voice is close to her ear when he says, "That was quick."

"Yea."

"Are you ready?"

"Not really, but...I want this all to end."

She turns into him. His arms engulf her and his chin touches the top of her head. She feels safe there.

"Whatever we're about to face Swan, I'm by your side."

Emma nods into his chest.

She knows.

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When they return to the loft, Henry and the Apprentice are there, sitting at the kitchen table. Emma can only see Henry's back, but she can tell by the stiff set of his shoulders and the Apprentice's solemn expression that something's up.

Snow and Ian are still in the kitchen, bent over a baking tray, and Ian has something green and gooey smeared on his cheek that Emma really, really hopes is not actual snot.
"Dad?" Emma asks her mom.

"Not home yet," Snow answers, then tilts her head pointedly in Henry's direction before turning back to Ian.

Emma takes the chair across from Henry. "What's going on, kid?"

Henry’s eyes stay fixed on the table but shift right, towards the Apprentice.

The Apprentice looks at Henry for a long moment before he says, "We believe we've found a way to use Merlin's hat to bring Regina back."


"Once we extract the Darkness from Neal, we can use the hat again to reverse the one-for-one trade that ended Regina's life in the first place."

"Oh," Emma says slowly. Why didn't she consider using the hat in the first place? "Wait, can't we just—you said the hat can break the laws of magic, so can't we just use the hat to bring Regina back without having to do a trade?"

"The hat is capable of much, but it does have limits. Breaking the Darkness the first time nearly destroyed it. It took centuries of hibernation for it to regain full strength."

"So..."

"So removing the Darkness from Neal Cassidy will once more strain it to its limits."

"Will it..." She bites her lip, glances at Henry. "Are you even certain it will have enough power leftover to bring Regina back?"

"No."

Killian's standing behind her. His hand slips onto her shoulder, and he asks, "There's something else, isn't there?"

The Apprentice sighs. "Yes. Even if the hat has enough magic leftover and we are able to revive Regina—"

"More ifs, Emma thinks."

"-there will be a price."

"What do you mean?"

"Magic always comes with a price, Swan," Killian says. Emma remembers him saying that, back when they first found out about Ian's magic. "The question is, who will be paying it this time?"

"Not Henry, Emma thinks. Please not Henry."

"Regina," the Apprentice says. "Coming to Storybrooke violated the price of the spell she cast that saved the town from Peter Pan's curse. In order to remain in Storybrooke, she will have to pay that price again. She'll have to lose the thing she loves the most."

"Okay, but the thing Regina loves most is Henry," Emma says. "And just so we're clear, we're not killing Henry."
She realizes that's probably not his plan, but she doesn't really see where he's going with this.

"Regina has to lose her memories of me," Henry clarifies in a dull voice.

_Ah, fuck._

Killian's fingers squeeze her shoulder, gently. "I'm assuming it's too much to hope that the hat will also have enough magic leftover to prevent Regina from losing her memories of Henry?"

The Apprentice nods sadly.

"What about her other memories? Of Robin, for instance? From what I understand, the two were quite close."

Henry looks up quickly, a spark of hope in his eyes.

_Oh my God, Killian you're a genius._

"She'll remember everything exactly as it was, except for Henry."

"So, there's still a chance that she could be happy?" Henry asks.

All the wrinkles on the Apprentice's face crinkle into one giant, kind smile. "Yes, Henry."

Emma slips her hand up to her shoulder and laces her fingers through Killian's. "Are you okay with that, kid?" she asks.

Henry shrugs, presses his lips together in something that almost resembles a smile. "It's better than letting her stay the way she is," he says.

"Hey, Henry—look!"

Everyone cranes around. Ian's on the countertop, holding up hands covered in bright green goo.

"Boogers," he says, wiggling his fingers.

"It's marshmallow fluff," Snow says. "And some food coloring."

Ian grins, wrinkling his nose. "We're making them for grandpa. Want some?"

"We could use some help filling this last batch of pop tarts," Snow adds.

Henry pushes himself out of his chair and goes into the kitchen. Ian offers Henry his sticky hand and Henry picks a wad of green marshmallow off of it and pops it into his mouth.

The door opens, and David enters. He's halfway to the kitchen table when Snow clears her throat and says, "David?"

He halts and turns to look at her. She lifts her chin, one eyebrow arched. "What's the password?"

David's eyes widen slightly. Emma braces for impact—but instead of reigniting their argument from earlier, David strides purposefully around the island countertop and takes Snow into his arms. They kiss, and, faces glued to together, David moves one arm to the small of Snow's back and dips her.

"Ew," Ian says.

"Yea," Henry agrees. "Ew."
David and Snow's lips separate with an audible smacking pop that's going to haunt Emma's dreams—even Killian makes a strange sound in his throat that sounds like dismay.

Emma keeps her eyes averted as David walks over. She hears a little clink, cautiously raises her eyes, and sees a small vial of pitch black liquid on the table.

"That's it?" she asks. She reaches for it, but Killian's hand darts in and grabs her wrist.

"Careful, love," he warns. "Squid ink paralyzes magical beings—meaning you."

Emma draws her hand back. "Ariel brought it?"

"No, it was another mermaid," David says. "After what happened last time, Ariel and Eric thought it was safer for her to stay home."

Emma nods.

"And Nemo?" Killian asks. "Did he-?"

"Yea, I called him once Robin called me. He's talking to the mermaid now."

"Hopefully she'll feel like doing us one more favor," Emma says.

"He," David says. "It was a male mermaid."

Emma feels Killian's grin on the back of her head. "Don't."

Killian heaves a dramatic, long-suffering sigh. "Fine, Swan."

Emma's hands twist together in her lap as she stares at the squid ink.

*This is it, she thinks. This is happening.*

Sensing her thoughts, Killian's hand appears on her shoulder again.

*I'm right beside you, love,* it says.
Chapter 51

Ok, um, 1) I'm dumb and didn't clarify in the previous chapter that Regina is only losing her memories of Henry AS HER SON, and not her memories of Henry in general. Exact details to be discussed in a later chapter, 2) I'm rewriting the Dark One lore a bit, hope you guys don't mind, and 3) Next update will probably take awhile. George is coming home today after having been gone for 5 weeks, and I have all my big annual art show stuff this week and next week. So, thank you in advance for your patience, and enjoy!!!

Everything seems to happen in an instant, though in fact several hours pass.

Conversations are had—discreetly—and it's decided that they'll make their move at midnight. The Apprentice excuses himself to prepare for whatever elaborate spell is required to revive Regina and leaves muttering something about magic circles, salt, and a funnel. David and Snow make hushed phone calls in remote corners of the loft—Killian imagines that the entirety of Storybrooke beyond the loft is in a frenzy—and Emma arranges for Ian to have a "sleepover" with Roland at Robin's house under the protection of Will Scarlett and Granny.

Despite all the activity, the atmosphere in the loft remains rather tranquil. Killian's able to remain calm, to delay the mental preparation and visualization that usually happens before a fight and focus on the here and now, to drink in the final moments before they face down the Darkness.

Henry's been distracting Ian with a game of Legos on the coffee table in the living room area, so while Emma's helping Snow pack up a container of pop tarts to bring to Robin's, Killian wanders over and takes a seat on the couch beside where Ian's kneeling on the rug.

"What's all this then?" he asks, eyeing what is undoubtedly some sort of castle in the making, surrounded by a motley crew of knights on horseback, pirate ships—a few of which Killian recognizes as ones he and Ian built together in Boston—and plastic dinosaurs.

"It's a battle," Ian says, and grins broadly at him before returning his attention to the miniature cannon he's affixing to the prow of the lead ship. Perched behind the cannon is a knight on horseback.

Killian touches the knight's silver helm with a finger. "Who's this?"

"That's me."

"You're a knight and a pirate?"

"Yea. I wanted to be both."

"Mm. And which one's Henry?"

Henry takes one hand from the turret he's building and taps another knight, this one on the ground beside a figure with long blonde hair in a car that doesn't quite look like the Bug but is yellow and has wheels.
"Ah," Killian says, then surveys the rest of the battlefield. He spots a figure in black missing a hand aboard one of the other ships—at least the lad gave him command of his own vessel—a pile of figures in green with bows and quivers, a wizard, and, standing side-by-side atop the castle gatehouse are two crowned pieces dressed in red with ermine capes.

Emma appears on the other side of the coffee table, hands on her hips. "All this is going to be cleaned up by dinner time, right?"

Henry and Ian freeze and exchange glances.

"Um...yea," Henry says. "You know, probably."

Emma snorts. "Okay. You guys have about an hour before I'm ordering a pizza."

Henry and Ian begin building in a frenzy, hands knocking together as they reach for pieces. Ian giggles, and Henry smiles.

The news regarding Regina is grim, but Killian's proud of the way Henry's handling it. Still, the hole Regina left in his life will ache like a wound every time Regina looks at him and doesn't remember that he was her son for a decade; Emma and Henry will have to help him heal, help him learn how to move on.

Over Henry and Ian's heads, Emma's eyes meet Killian's. He expects to find her expression closed, her battle armor on, but instead she just looks vulnerable—yet that somehow makes her appear even stronger.

Heat hits Killian's gut hard, followed by a wave of butterflies that nearly cause him to squirm in place.

That this woman—that Emma—is his still dumbfounds him. That they share a son together is even more amazing still.

He wishes he could convince her once and for all of the enormity and the depth of his love for her, convince her that what he said earlier—that she and Ian are his home and always will be—is true, but it's not that easy. It's something he's going to have to work at to convince her of every single day.

And Killian's fine with that.

He knows Emma, he knows she's been hurt and that there's still that little lost girl inside of her that's afraid of rejection—but Killian also knows he can change that, because he's seen what six years of loving their son has done to her.

He wants to be the one to break down the remainder of her walls, to draw her out fully, and he's willing to wait another six year or a decade or longer for that to happen.

Something in his own expression must reveal his thoughts, for she smiles and walks around the coffee table to join him on the couch. He wants to take her in his arms, draw her into his lap and bury his face against her neck, but he settles for her thigh pressed along the length of his and her hand on his knee.

They sit in silence for a while and watch the boys play. Their game is difficult to follow, as Henry and Ian seem to have a language of their own and a variety of inside jokes that go entirely over Killian's head.

He forgets, just for that short time, that this isn't a normal day, and loses himself in the boys' voices,
in Emma's quiet laughs and her indulgent smile.

*This is what you're fighting for,* he tells himself. *This is what you must protect.*

Eventually the pizza is ordered, and when it arrives they have a family dinner, Killian, Emma, her parents, and the boys, all crammed together at the kitchen table.

At sunset, Emma and Killian drive Ian to Robin's and hand their son off to Will. Granny's there already, setting up a board game with Roland on the coffee table in the living room. Killian spies several knives hidden on Will's person, and he knows that even though he can't see Granny's crossbow, it's likely within easy reach.

Emma hugs Ian tightly before they leave, and Killian does as well.

*This isn't goodbye. You'll see him again.*

And yet instead of releasing Ian, he clutches the boy closer. He smells of the docks, where they spent the morning together, and of Snow's pastries.

He feels so small in Killian's arms. It's an effort to step back, to let go. "See you tomorrow morning, lad," he says.

Ian flashes him a smile—the smile that reminds Killian of Emma—and bolts across the room to join Granny and Roland and shake the tin of pop tarts beneath their noses.

Outside, in the dark, Emma's hand finds his.

"Will and Granny know what's on the line," she says. "If something goes wrong tonight, they'll keep Ian safe."

"Aye," Killian grunts, but the sense of calm he's been clinging to shatters.

There's no doubt in Killian's mind—or anyone else's, for that matter—that Neal intends to use the power within Merlin's hat to somehow bring him, Emma, and Henry together as a family. In order for that to work, Emma and Henry would have to lose their memories of Ian and likely most of their lives.

Killian suspects Neal would keep him alive purely to torture him, but if Emma and Killian fail and Neal succeeds, what would become of Ian?

Ian would be all alone.

Killian can't let that happen, he can't let Ian experience what he experienced, what Emma experienced.

His mind races while Emma drives them back to the loft. They need a plan in case Neal puts Emma and Henry under some sort of spell and Killian is incapacitated.

Killian doubts Neal would leave Emma's parents or the Apprentice in any condition to rescue her, which leaves Robin and the Merry Men, Ruby and Belle, Will and Granny, and Smee—all of whom combined are capable of protecting Ian, but are no match for the Dark One.

They need backup, someone with powers, someone to tip the scales in their favor.

*But who?*
Ian can't control his magic, Regina is basically dead, Killian has seen neither hide nor hair of the Blue Fairy since he came to Storybrooke...

The answer strikes him in the form of a memory, a cold press of lips against his cheek and words whispered in his ear.

"If Emma ever needs help, call me."

Sarah Fisher.

Emma's neighbor who's also Ingrid, the Lost Princess of Arendelle.

Sarah Fisher has magic, and—even better—she's outside of Storybrooke. Any spell or curse that Neal might cast over the entire town wouldn't affect her.

Killian doesn't know the extent of Sarah's powers, doesn't know if the woman could truly make a difference if he and Emma were to fail tonight, but he does know he'll do anything and everything within his power to ensure that his son doesn't grow up alone.

When they return to the loft, Killian goes to the bathroom under the pretense of having to relieve himself, pulls out his phone, and starts texting.

He doesn't tell Emma. He doesn't want to burden her further—between capturing Neal and wielding Merlin's hat, she has enough to worry about.

Two minutes after he sends a 500 word long explanation and plea for aid, Sarah responds. Killian reads her message, and feels a grin spreading across his face.

At 11o'clock they go to the mines.

Henry stays outside, which Emma totally gets and is actually a little relieved by, and Robin stays with him. Emma, Killian, and her parents walk the half mile to the prison cell the dwarves built. It looks exactly the same as it did before, only now on the floor in the open space in front of the cell are two elaborate circles drawn in salt that intersect like a Venn diagram.

In one of the circles is Regina's body.

"Oh," Emma says. Somehow she wasn't expecting that, but she guesses she should have.

The torches on the walls are casting flickering shadows over Regina's face that make her look...less dead. Emma's suddenly extra glad Henry decided not to come. She tries not to stare too hard or in horror and instead studies the circles.

The lines are thin and delicate, the overall design similar to something you might make with a Spirograph, with tiny symbols threaded throughout.

Emma steps carefully closer, keeping the toes of her sneakers a respectful three inches from the outer circle. "So, uh, how exactly does this work?" she asks.

The Apprentice, crouched on the floor with a kitchen funnel full of salt, glances up and chuckles. "Don't worry. All you need to do is stand in the circle opposite Regina and use Merlin's hat to extract the Darkness from Neal Cassidy. I will guide the transference spell from outside the circle."

"Oh," Emma says again, relieved. She's beginning to understand her own light magic, how to draw upon the source of her power and shape it, but potions and spells that involve multiple steps and
timing and archaic symbols drawn in salt are way beyond her.

The Apprentice stands, slowly and in a way that makes Emma wince internally for his poor elderly joints, and says, "We'll need Regina's heart, as well."

Emma nods. "We can get that after we get Neal."

*And after we get the dagger.*

She hopes it's in the house. If it turns out that he hid it elsewhere then they'll either have to waste valuable time searching for it or continue without it—which is possible but has risks.

Emma continues along the edge of the circle until she reaches the cell. She stands as close as she dares, but the jagged, spiked bars are not only repulsive, they're oozing magic. It's not light magic, and it's not the brand of magic the Apprentice uses, it's something else, something not totally unpleasant but completely foreign—she swears she smells flowers, that sickly sweet, cloying scent of overripe lilies, and faintly she hears bells.

Without meaning to, she folds her arms over her stomach and hugs herself.

"Emma, you alright?"

Killian's voice sounds far away.

"Yea, yea. I'm fine," she says, and gives herself a little shake.

She needs to concentrate. She has to teleport Neal to this cell, and in order to pull that off she's going to need a clear picture of it in her mind.

"Emma?"

Killian's voice is right behind her now. She feels his heat at her back, like the warmth from a fireplace on a cold winter's day. He touches her arm, hesitantly.

"I'm okay," she reassures him, moving her hand from her elbow to her bicep to cover his fingers. "It's just...the magic feels weird."

"Fairy dust," the Apprentice says. "Do you smell flowers?"

"Yea."

Killian sniffs, and then shakes his head. "I don't smell anything."

"That's because *you* don't have magic," the Apprentice mutters.

Killian stiffens, and Emma pats his hand sympathetically. The Apprentice's bluntness takes getting used to.

She scrutinizes the cell for another few minutes, cataloging the hue and texture of the floor and walls, the way it's lit by the dancing orange glow of the torches, the bars that don't run from top to bottom but instead end somewhere in the middle, and the horizontal bands of iron that span the entire mouth of the cell and hold it all together.

It still feels like a shitty place to put a human being, but at this point it's their only option.

*And it'll only be for a few minutes.*
Anticipation mounts rapidly in her chest, so fast she tenses every muscle in her abdomen and her fingers tighten on Killian's.

She just wants to get this over with.

She wants Neal back to his normal, stupid self, Henry happy, and Killian and Ian safe. She wants to spend the rest of the summer at the beach with the boys during the day and fucking Killian in his cabin at night, and she wants to look at houses that are way out of her price range.

She turns on her heel to face her parents, keeping her hand on top of Killian's and making him turn with her so that his arm ends up wrapped around her back, and says, "I'm ready."

---

They troop out of the mines. The Apprentice remains behind to wait for Neal and to watch over Regina's body. Emma and Killian are at the back of the group, and when they're nearing the exit, Emma grabs Killian's arm and pulls him back a step.

He looks at her, one eyebrow raised. "What is it, Swan?"

Really she just wants a second alone with him, but she finds herself digging in her shorts pocket. When she touches metal, she draws it out, and offers the Wishing Star to Killian cradled in her palm. Even in the darkness, it glitters as if caught in the moonlight.

"I found this in Ian's treasure box under the bed earlier," she says. "I thought you might want it back."

Killian smiles at it, then reaches out and gently closes her fingers over the necklace.

"Keep it, love," he says, voice low. "It brought Ian and I together, so perhaps it's good luck."

He leans down then, the tip of his nose brushing against her cheek until his lips find hers. Emma presses into him, seeking the comforting solidness of his body, his warmth. It's the last moment of softness she'll allow herself before she has to put her battle armor on and focus—when she steps back she bundles up that feeling and tucks it away, deeply, where it warms her but doesn't distract her, where it fuels her but is safe, protected.

Killian's expression is different as well, set in hard lines, closer to her memories of Captain Hook than to the man who sat beside her that afternoon and told her that she's his future—that spot of warmth inside of her quivers pleasantly and Emma has to tell it firmly to chill the fuck out; she can think about that later, right now she has a job to do.

Killian tilts his head in the direction of the exit and starts walking. Emma joins him, their pinky fingers curling together, her shoulder bumping his, and slides the Wishing Star back into her pocket.

---

It's not quite midnight when they arrive at Neal's house, but it's close enough.

They approach the manor from all directions, slipping through alleys and backyards and creeping along the fronts of houses until it's surrounded. To Emma's surprise, there are no lights on in any window—it's completely, ominously dark, blending into the night, a hulking mass silhouetted against the deep navy of the sky.

Crouched across the street from Neal's house in a pool of shadow cast by a large, decorative
evergreen bush, Emma frowns. "Maybe he's not home?" she whispers. That would be just her luck: everything's set up and ready to go only Neal's not where he's supposed to be.

"He's there," Robin says from somewhere behind her. "My men have been watching the house for weeks. They say he never turns the lights on, but they've seen him moving about in the dark before."

"I don't know if that's scary or just sad."

"We can take the time to feel bad for him later, love," Killian reminds her. He's right beside her, cutlass drawn.

"Yea," Emma says. She takes a slow, deep breath, feels it fill her chest, holds it, lets it out, then repeats the process.

Henry is with Little John hiding behind another house farther down the block; Little John has orders to keep Henry out of the way until they have Neal safely teleported to the mines. David is on Emma's other side, holding a box that is a duplicate of the real box containing Merlin's hat.

They discussed for hours how to get Neal with the squid ink, and in the end they came up with a plan that in about ten minutes will either prove to be genius or absolutely idiotic: they coated a magical replica of the box with squid ink, and they're going to just toss the box to Neal.

Emma's counting on Neal's reflexes to catch the box before it hits the ground and before he has time to consider why the fuck they're throwing it at him in the first place.

If they time it right, it could work.

It has to work.

They really only have one shot at this—well, two if you count the few drops of leftover squid ink in the squirt gun in Snow's pocket, but if Neal doesn't fall for their first plan then she doesn't really expect him to fall for their backup plan.

The saving grace on their backup plan is that Neal will probably suspect Snow the least; Emma would have had her mom throw the box at him too, only David's original Curse identity was apparently a slow-pitch softball champ.

Emma takes one final deep breath, and, in her mind, Emma conjures the image of the cell.

"Ok, let's go."

She stands and feels several bodies stand with her. Silently, in loose formation, they jog across the lawn, over the sidewalk, and into the street. When they reach the other side, Emma slows to a walk and delves into her magic.

Neal's house lights up a fiery red in her vision—evidently he increased the wards from just around the door to the entire house, which is probably her fault for almost getting caught sneaking in.

The wards aren't really a problem—they're not going in, they're bringing Neal out to them.

Emma balls one hand into a fist, then punches it forward, towards Neal's front door. She releases her magic into the air and the air obeys, slamming into the door with the force of a battering ram and producing a sound like cannon fire that echoes throughout what Emma hopes at this point is a completely empty neighborhood.
They don't stop, they keep moving.

Emma's pretty sure she's stopped breathing but her legs still seem to work.

The timing couldn't be more perfect—the door flies open and Neal appears just as they reach the bottom of the steps.

"What the hell is this?" he snarls.

Emma doesn't even have the time to be annoyed by Neal's face—David darts past her, says, "Here, catch!" and lobs the duplicate box in a high arc towards Neal's chest.

"What the fu-"

Neal reacts as Emma hoped he would, and flings his hands out to catch the box. As soon as his fingers touch it, he freezes.

Emma and the others freeze as well, and wait.

A heartbeat, two, three.

Neal doesn't move. Faintly Emma sees shimmering, not the normal glint of the Dark One's scaly green-gold skin, but a gleaming and rippling of the air as if Neal's whole body is encased in an iridescent net.

Emma's lungs suddenly remember how to do their job and she lets out the breath she's been holding.

"I think it worked," she says.

Killian shifts and his arm touches hers. "Do it now then, love."

Emma takes one step up the stairs, and raises both hands.

*Just like you did with Ian.*

The little spring of magic at her center is eager and jumps into her grasp immediately. She hauls up as much as she can manage, picturing it as a glowing white rope as thick as a column, and wraps it around Neal.

The image of the mines is ready as well, waiting.

*There!* she tells her magic, and pushes with all of her strength.

Emma expects resistance, but there is none—one moment Neal's there, then Emma blinks, and he's gone.

"Swan, you did it!"

Strength leaves her body in a rush, and she sags towards the steps. A hand appears on either of her arms to catch her just before she dents her kneecaps.

"Emma?"

"Emma, are you alright?"

As quickly as the fatigue appeared, it disappears. "I'm okay," she says. The hands hold her steady...
until she gets her feet back beneath her. "Someone call the Apprentice, make sure Neal's there."

One hand withdraws, and the other moves to the small of her back. Emma turns her head and Killian's stubble scratches her forehead.

"You sure you're alright, love?" he murmurs. The sound of his voice goes straight to that warm spot inside of her.

"I'm good. I just overdid it with my magic a bit."

She sees him nod, feels his hand press firmly into her back for a moment before vanishing and before he takes a step back.

Emma gets it. This isn't over yet. It isn't time to relax.

She turns to her dad, standing two steps below with his cell phone pressed to his ear and a crease between his brows.

"Did he answer?" she asks.

"No, not yet -"

As if summoned, the Apprentice appears on the sidewalk, trailing wisps of blue smoke. Everyone whirls, weapons raised. The Apprentice takes a step forward, sees two bows, two swords, and a pair of glowing hands pointed at him, and screws his face up in thought for a moment before saying, "Fizzing Whizbee."

Weapons are lowered. Ian came up with that particular password—Henry wanted 'You shall not pass' but Ian objected, loudly and with a lot of whining, so David gave in.

"Neal?" Emma asks.

"Contained," the Apprentice responds. "Still immobilized for now, but likely not for much longer. We should move fast."

"Let's go then."

With the front door hanging wide open the wards are broken. Several Merry Men, including Little John and Henry, materialize from the shadows and from behind parked cars and bushes and join them. Inside the house, everyone splits up.

"I'll check upstairs," Snow says. Two Merry Men tail her to the second floor. David watches her go until she's out of sight, then he and Robin head towards the basement. The rest of the Merry Men flood the first floor, filtering into the rooms and clearing the area of possible threats.

Henry halts in the entryway, feet glued to the rug but eyes roving, taking in the decor, the dust that covers everything, the cups and glasses in the living room. Emma wishes the house painted a nicer picture of Neal's existence here, but bleak is pretty much the only word that sums it up.

Emma puts a hand gently on his shoulder. "You okay, kid?"

"I'm fine, mom." He rips his gaze from the ceiling and looks at her. His brown eyes are steady.

"Where's Regina's heart?"

Emma leads Killian, Henry, and the Apprentice directly to the couch where she saw Neal remove Regina's heart from beneath a pillow. The rectangular box with the glowing red window is still there.
Emma picks it up delicately. "Here." She turns to give it to the Apprentice, but he's staring at something else.

*The urn.*

Emma feels a cold shiver pass through her. "What is it?" she asks him. Is he feeling what she felt when she was near the urn before?

"After all this time..." he mutters. "This is where you've been."

*Oh, fuck.*

Emma does *not* like the sound of that.

Her fingertips start prickling, then her scalp.

Killian glances between her and the Apprentice. "What's going on?"

The Apprentice jerks, as if startled, then his expression contracts, tightens into a stern scowl. "This urn contains the Black Fairy."

"The who?" Killian asks.

"The Black Fairy. She's the source of *all* Darkness, the original from which the piece inside Neal Cassidy was hewn. This urn is her prison."

"I thought Merlin *destroyed* her?" Henry asks. "Like, centuries ago?" When Emma looks at him sharply, he shrugs and says, "I read it in a book back when Belle and I started researching how to save my dad."

"You're partially correct: Merlin *attempted* to destroy the Black Fairy using the magic contained within his hat, but it wasn't enough and he was only able to break her power and trap the majority of her being inside this urn." The Apprentice shakes his head dismissively. "It's a story for another time. For now we just need to ensure no one touches this urn. We can't risk waking her up."

Emma swallows hard, pushing down the lump forming in her throat. "There's, um...we may have a bit of a problem."

Three pale faces swivel towards her in the dark.

Emma grips the box in her hands tighter. The corners dig into her fingertips, and she focuses on that pain, on that tiny bit of reality.

"When I was in here before looking for the dagger, I touched the urn."

Silence follows her statement. The ceiling over her head creaks—Snow, still looking for the dagger. If Emma strains she can hear her dad and Robin's voices faintly from below. The Merry Men are quiet as ghosts, as usual, but she knows they're around.

Finally, the Apprentice asks, "Did anything happen when you touched it?"

"No, just—I saw something. In my head, like a vision."

"What did you see?"
"Nothing. It was just dark. But I heard wings, and I felt feathers touching me." Emma shakes her head. "That's it."

"The black feather lady," Killian says.

"Yea," Emma admits. "It was the same day Ian started having those nightmares."

_Fuck._

What the fuck did she do?

Why didn't she say something right away?

There's a cry of triumph from above, and Snow yells, "I found the dagger!"

Emma looks at the Apprentice. "I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. You didn't know."

"What do we do now?"

"Right now we can do nothing but ensure she remains inside the urn. No one, under any circumstances, should touch it. We can worry about the rest afterwards."

Snow returns then, carrying the dagger as if it were a poisonous snake trying to bite her. Both of Emma's parents look at her quizzically when the Apprentice asks to station some of the Merry Men (including Hal, which is one of the few Merry Men Emma can recognize on sight) inside the house to guard the urn.

"Long story," she says. "I'll explain later."

They leave with the dagger and Regina's heart, though Killian lingers for a moment to glare menacingly at the urn, and Emma's certain if the Apprentice hadn't said no one should touch it that he would have reached in and tried to strangle the Black Fairy—or at least kicked the urn across the room.

The car ride and then the walk through the woods back to the mines seems to take forever. Emma has a thousand questions, but they have to wait. They're going to fix Neal first and then they can discuss whether or not she triggered the apocalypse.

They return to the prison cell. Neal's inside. He's moving, so the squid ink must have worn off already, but luckily the cell seems to be doing its job.

He's leaning against the bars, face pressed between two of them, arms dangling through, relaxed. His eyes follow Emma as she approaches.

"Hey," she says lamely.

"Hey," he returns.

It feels like everything's been building up to this, and it's just as horrible as she imagined. She keeps her distance from the cell, not wanting to get too close to Neal or to the choking scent of the fairy dust.

"Do you know why you're here?"
He just gazes back impassively for a long moment before his eyes flicker past her. Emma knows he's looking at Henry. She wishes Henry didn't have to witness this, but she thinks maybe it's important for him that he does. Emma wanted to keep him out of things, to have all of Neal's anger directed at her and not at Henry, but he asked Snow for the dagger, and there he is now, standing a few feet behind her with it clutched in his hand; it's held loosely at his side, but it's in plain view and Emma knows Neal sees it.

She steps closer, making sure she sways a little to the side and blocks Neal's view of Henry—and Neal's view of Killian standing protectively at Henry's shoulder.

"We're going to use Merlin's hat to get the Darkness out of you," she says.

"And then?" he asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean are you and I-"

"No."

Anger flickers over Neal's face, but she doesn't care. He's an adult man, she's not gonna coddle him.

"You and I are done, Neal," she says. "But you and Henry still have a chance."

Neal straightens and pushes back from the bars. "That's not good enough, Emma."

"That's the best I can do."

And it's still more than you deserve.

He snorts derisively.

Fury sparks beneath her skin, and she turns away. She needs to do this before she changes her mind and decides Neal isn't worth saving after all. She locks eyes with Killian. He gives her a subtle nod, and some of her tension eases.

This is for Henry, she tells herself.

The Apprentice hands her Merlin's box—the real one—and she steps into the circle on the right, lifting her feet cautiously over the salt lines and settling them in a clear space right at the very center. To her left, just out of the corner of her eye, she can see Regina's body.

Emma cups the box in two hands. She realizes it's kind of silly to keep calling it a 'box' when it's a cylinder. It reminds her of Killian's rum barrels, only the studs on the hoops are jewels instead of nails, and the top is black and patterned with stars.

"Ok, how do I do this?"

"Just use your magic and ask it to open for you," the Apprentice says. He and the others are gathered around the perimeter of the circle.

"What if it says no?"

"It won't."

"How do you know I'm the one who's supposed to do this? I'm not exactly the only person that's
ever been born with light magic."

"Correct, but none have been born with light magic as powerful as yours—at least, none have been born before you with light magic as powerful as yours."

Emma throws him a sideways look, not misunderstanding the meaning of that.

Ian.

Ian has—or will have—magic as powerful as hers.

She returns her attention to the box, and reaches into her magic—as soon as she does the stars on the top of the box begin glowing, not the glow-in-the-dark stickers sort of glow, they're glowing as if they're cutouts and something inside the box is glowing.

Could it really be that easy?

The box responds to her silent question: the stars begin rotating, and as they turn the box begins to dissolve; it changes in her hands, the hard surfacing softening, expanding.

The glow becomes overpowering, and she closes her eyes against it—when she opens them again she's holding a hat. It's tall and conical and blue, somehow solid and see-through at the same time, and floating within is what looks like a miniature galaxy, all swirling purple and purple, speckled with tiny white stars.

"Holy shit," she mutters.

"Bloody hell."

She can feel the power inside the hat, humming, thrumming against her fingers. Her magic is bubbling and fizzing inside of her, a pleasant tickle.

"Ok, now what do I-"

All of a sudden there's movement, a blur of light and shadow. She looks up, and sees Neal standing on the edge of the circle.

"How did you-"

The hat vanishes from her hands, and appears in Neal's.

"NO!" she shouts.

Neal's lips curl into a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm gonna fix this, Emma," he says, then looks at Henry. "I'm gonna make us a family, the way we were always supposed to be."

He lifts the hat, and Emma jumps—she doesn't think, she just leaps out of the circle and into Neal. Light explodes from the hat, hitting her like a physical force, but she reaches through it, reaches for the hat, for Neal, for anything. Just as she feels her fingers bump against something solid, there's the touch of cool metal circling her other wrist, and then she's falling.

Ian wakes up sweaty and scared. It takes him a second of staring at the night light that looks like a mini campfire to remember that he's in Roland's room.
Roland's in his bed, sleeping. Ian slides out of his sleeping bag, steps over the comic book he and Roland were reading and the flashlight they were reading it with, and slips through the crack in the door and into the hallway.

He follows the sound of the television into the living room, where Granny and Will are sitting on the couch watching a Law & Order rerun Ian hasn't seen before.

Will turns his head as Ian approaches, his big caterpillar eyebrows jumping up.

"What's wrong, lad?"

Ian likes it when he says lad. It reminds him of his dad and makes him feel safe like his dad makes him feel safe. He goes and stands against Will's knees—his mom told him to be careful of Will's tummy because he's got stitches, but Ian's pretty sure his knees are okay.

"She said she's coming," he whispers. He says it quietly because Granny's sleeping.

"What?"

"She said she's coming," he says, a little bit louder.

Now Will's caterpillar eyebrows go down and get all scrunched up. "Who's coming?"

"The black feather lady," Ian clarifies. He dreamt about her again, only this time she didn't try to rip him apart, she just laughed at him and said she'd see him soon. "She's coming."

Hal stands facing the door with his back to the urn he was ordered to guard. He swears the thing is giving off cold like a block of ice, but he tries to ignore it. Whatever the urn is isn't his business; his business is making sure no one touches it.

"Can you hear that?"

He twists around to look at Allan, his comrade for the evening. "Hear what?" he asks.

"That voice." Allan's gawking at the urn.

"There is no voice," Hal says firmly. He's turning back to the door when Allan takes a step towards the urn.

"There is," he says. "I can hear it."

Hal's about to protest again when the urn rattles. Hal stares, certain he imagined it, but then the urn rattles again—he actually sees the lid move.

Allan's grinning now, his eyes lit up fervently. "See? I told you. She just wants to get out."

"Who's sh—ALLAN STOP!"

But it's too late. Allan reaches for the urn, and before Hal can stop him he removes the lid.

Black liquid gushes out, and Allan starts screaming.

Killian doesn't remember thinking any actual thoughts when he raced after Emma, he just remembers searing panic propelling him across the cave faster than he knew his legs could go. He lunges and
just manages to get his hook around her wrist before he's lifted off the ground and thrown what feels like a thousand feet into the air.

He falls, hits the ground hard, and for a moment he thinks he might be dead, until he realizes he's lying face down in damp grass.

He opens his eyes. Everything is green and black and smells wet. "Emma?"

"Here," she groans, from somewhere to his left.

He gets carefully to his knees and looks around. They're in some sort of park, but Killian realizes immediately that it isn't the park in Storybrooke.

"Emma, where are we?"

Emma's sitting up a few feet away, staring up at what looks like a giant concrete Lego tower full of cars. "We're in Portland," she says.

"Where's that?"

She's about to answer, and then her face drains of color and her mouth drops open.

"What is it, love?"

"We're in the past."

"What?"

She turns wide, frightened green eyes on him. "I think Neal brought us to the past. I think this is the night he abandoned me."

Killian's misses a beat, and his mouth goes dry.

"Emma..."

"Killian, Neal's trying to change the future."
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Surprise update! I apparently have tendinitis in both of my ankles so I've been home from work most of the week. I really hope you guys enjoy this chapter because I have A LOT of fun writing it. Enjoy!

Emma can't believe what she's seeing. It's nighttime, but the parking garage is lit up in orange as if by a spotlight, and Emma can't help but feel as if it's specifically for her.

"Remember where?" Neal asked.

"Yes," she answered in an excited hiss.

"The parking structure by the tracks," Neal said. "9 o'clock sharp."

This is where Neal told her to wait for him.

This is where Emma got arrested, right in the garage driveway by that yellow-striped wall.

She's not sure if the electric buzzing from the ancient canopy lights is in her ears or in her memory.

"Are you certain we're in the past, love?"

Killian's voice drags her out of that dark place inside her mind where she usually keeps all this stuff locked away. She refocuses on reality—which, at the moment, isn't actually feeling totally realistic.

"Yea, I'm sure," she says.

She doesn't know how to explain it, but she knows.

Maybe it's her internal clock or that circadian rhythm thing telling her that time just got dialed back nearly 20 years. Maybe it's the fact that it's clearly not summer anymore, or that the cars parked in the street are all older models and in outdated colors—she forgot how many people used to own red cars. Christ, there's even a green one. And not lime green either, but that deep forest green that she hasn't seen around for literally a decade.

If Emma was in a better mood, if she wasn't exhausted and terrified and pissed, she might find it sort of amusing.

"C'mon," she sighs. "We gotta get out of here."

"Do you know how to get back to Storybrooke?"

"No, I mean we need to get out of this park. Before someone sees us."

Before I see us...

Killian springs to his feet first and reaches down to help her up. She doesn't know how he can be so agile right now; she feels like someone put her in an industrial-sized dryer with a bunch of boulders
for a few hours.

As they cross the park, Emma pulls her phone from her pocket and checks the time. The screen says it's 12:37, but she doesn't know if it's stuck in Storybrooke time or if that's really the time here—she really hopes not, because if it is then they might be too late. Everything might have already changed forever.

Everything might have already been fucked up forever.

"I'm gonna fix this, Emma. I'm gonna make us a family, the way we were always supposed to be."

What an idiot.

What a goddamn fucking idiot.

Fury propels her, burning in her belly like jet fuel. She takes a sharp turn and cuts across the street in a diagonal, heading for the familiar, comforting glow of a 7/11 sign visible two blocks down.

"Where are we going, love?" Killian huffs from behind her. Emma's shorter than him, but she knows how to lengthen her stride when she needs to get somewhere fast—a skill she developed chasing perps as a bail-bondsperson. Killian must be jogging right now to keep up.

"We need to find a newspaper," she says. "And I need a snack. You hungry?"

"I could eat," he says mildly.

They make it another half-block before he hooks her around the wrist and forces her to stop.

"Emma, wait."

The feel of cold metal on her skin cools the fire in her belly. She turns, her eyes meeting a pair of worried blue ones.

"Slow down, Swan," Killian says, in that calm, even tone Emma's heard him use with Ian when Ian gets a little too worked up over Minecraft or a drawing he can't get quite right. "We've been in dire straits before; there's no reason to be antsy now. We have our wits. We just have to focus on being constructive."

Emma nods, and pulls in a lungful of crisp fall air. She slips her wrist out of the circle of Killian's hook and wraps her fingers around it, steps closer until the toes of her gym shoes bump his boots.

"Better?" he asks, a smile lifting one corner of his lips.

"Yea," she says, though without fury keeping her warm, she's suddenly shivering. She moves closer to Killian, into the cloak of his body heat—luckily she put a sweater on before they left the loft, and luckily this is Portland and not Minnesota, otherwise she would have found herself in a foot of snow wearing shorts.

Killian's hand appears on her waist and he lifts his eyes from hers to glance around. "So, any ideas how to get back?"


The words fly out of her mouth before her two functioning brain cells have a chance to realize that it's a reference way beyond Killian's current, limited grasp of pop culture.
"Marty Mc who?" he asks, and the bewildered look on his face is actually so adorable that she grins.

"You know," she teases. "The kid. With the lightning and the Delorian and then they went back in time and-"

"Is he some sort of wizard?"

"Marty McFly isn't a wizard, he's..."

Emma pauses. She realizes she can't feel her magic—not really, anyway. It's like before, when she left Storybrooke to get Killian out of jail in Boston: her magic is there, but it's the faintest flicker, buried somewhere that feels out of reach.

Which means—and this is the important part—Neal must be here without the Dark One's magic. He's a regular human being again, probably as helpless as they are.

Well, not completely helpless, as he does have one advantage over them: he was clearly planning this, so he probably has an actual plan.

"Emma?"

She blinks, meets Killian's gaze once more. "We need a plan."

"That's what I've been trying to say, love-"

"We need a plan for stopping Neal."

Killian's silent for a moment, eyes steady on hers, reading her like an open book. "This is the night then?"

"I need to check a newspaper to be certain, but yea...I'm pretty sure this is it."

Something changes in his face, hardens and sharpens at the same time. "What would you have me do, Swan?"

"Not, you know, kill him or anything. We just can't let him get to his past self and change the future."

"You think that's what he'll do?"

"I think he's going to stop his past self from leaving me, yea."

*I'm gonna fix this, Emma. I'm gonna make us a family, the way we were always supposed to be.*

"You don't think he'll try to take his past self's place?"

"I think 17-year-old me would notice," Emma says. "He really wasn't that good-looking to begin with, and the past twenty years haven't exactly improved things."

Killian's eyebrows leap upwards, and he presses his lips together quickly, but Emma hears the laugh he chokes down. It breaks the tension, snaps her out of panicked flight mode and into hunker-down-and-get-shit-done mode.

They can do this. The two of them together can do this.
They walk the remaining block and a half to the 7/11. Judging by the clerk's disinterest, this is not one of the dozen or so 7/11's she and Neal shoplifted from, so Emma checks the time (7:16) and then she and Killian buy a bottle of water, a hot chocolate and a coffee, a 2-pack of Little Debbie chocolate cupcakes, a bag of Sour Patch Kids, and, without looking at the date, a newspaper.

Killian, impressively, manages to keep his hook hidden from view the entire time.

They sit on the bench outside the door. Killian lays his jacket over her lap to keep her warm, and they split the water, the hot chocolate, the coffee, and the cupcakes. It doesn't get weird until Killian opens the Sour Patch Kids. Emma feels like a 12-year-old that was given a ten-dollar bill from their parent and told to go wild.

When she's finally hydrated, caffeinated, and sugared up, Emma takes the newspaper that she placed face-down on the bench and flips it over.

She's not really all that surprised to see the date: November 22nd, 2000.

It's the day before Thanksgiving.

And it's also the day Neal left her.

No, saying he left her is a lie. He didn't just leave her—that would have been almost merciful, compared to what he did do.

And what he did do was frame her.

Neal called the cops, told them to check the surveillance footage from the train station where Emma picked up the case of stolen watches, and then he told them exactly where to find her.

Neal could have just disappeared, run away to Canada like he said he was gonna do—Emma didn't need to get arrested to fulfill her destiny as the Savior, Neal just needed to take the heat off of himself, so he could run as fast and as far away from his father as possible.

Emma spent a really long time hating Neal. He hurt her. He almost broke her.

But in the end, Emma's actually thankful.

Thankful that he left her when he did, thankful that he saved her from what could have been years of being in a relationship with him, of not knowing any better; thankful that she was able to keep Henry out of that situation—Regina wasn't great, and she didn't love him like Emma would have loved him, but Henry had safety and stability growing up with her. He wouldn't have had that with Emma and Neal.

Killian's hand covers hers where it still rests on the newspaper, just below the date.

"What are you thinking, love?"

Emma takes a deep breath, and tells him. She opens up that dark place in her mind and pours out its contents, lays everything bare, lets Killian see.

He listens, offering her a sip of water when her mouth goes dry, or a handful of Sour Patch Kids—the yellow ones he knows she likes the best—when he sees that she needs a moment to gather herself.

"So you're not thinking of letting Neal go through with it?"
"No." She wrinkles her nose. "Did you think I was?"

"I thought perhaps you might be considering changing the future for Henry's sake—so he can grow up with you as his mother, the way Ian did."

Emma presses her bare legs into his jeaned ones, and leans into him so she can lay her head on his shoulder. "I don't think having an 18-year-old high-school dropout for a mom would have been that great for him."

"You made things work these past seven years, Swan, and from what I understand the circumstances were hardly ideal."

"That's me now, not me back then. Back then I was sleeping in a car and stealing most of my meals from convenience stores like this one—" She jerks her head backwards towards the 7/11. "I was barely able to take care of myself. I couldn't have supported a baby."

Killian lays his cheek atop her head, his stubble scratching her brow. "You were very brave, Swan."

"Don't," she says.

"Pardon?"

She feels his head lift slightly off of hers.

"What I did wasn't brave. I made the easy choice. The brave thing to do would have been to get out of jail and turn my life around to prove to social services that I was fit to be a mother."

The weight of his cheek and its warmth returns to her brow.

"I'm not saying I regret it," she continues. "I definitely think I did the right thing back then. I'm just not going to pretend I was brave." She sighs. "Besides, changing something in this time might stop Ian from ever being born."

Killian stiffens. "I...I hadn't thought that far ahead."

Emma squeezes his hand.

She's never been one to believe in grand destinies or predeterminism, but she thinks that, no matter what, she and Killian would have found each other—differently than they did originally, maybe, but it would have eventually worked out.

The problem is that a million, trillion variables all aligned in just the right way to produce Ian, and she can't guarantee that some tiny variation in the timeline caused by her, Killian, or Neal right here and right now won't alter—or erase—Ian.

And there's no way in hell Emma's losing Ian.

"So what's the plan, Swan?"

"We have to find Neal."

"Which one?"

"Past Neal. If we find him, we'll find the other Neal too."

Emma has no idea where their time's Neal is, but he's probably out there looking for his past self in
order to stop him from leaving Emma's past self. Emma assumes he'll wait until after his past self met the fence—so after he has the money, but before August got to him.

Emma doesn't know where exactly August ran into Neal, but she does know where Neal was meeting the fence. If they go there and tail Neal's past self, they're bound to find their time's Neal.

If they're lucky, Neal might not even know that she and Killian are here. He might have his guard down.

If they're even luckier, he might still have Merlin's hat and the hat might still have enough magic left to get them home.

They throw away their trash and Killian rolls up the half-full package of Sour Patch Kids and tucks it into his pocket. He tries to give her his jacket but she's warm enough in her sweater as long as they're on the move—plus, the jacket helps him hide his hook.

Before they leave Emma ducks back into the 7/11 to buy a flathead screwdriver. Killian raises an eyebrow at it but asks no questions.

They head back towards the park. For what Emma's about to do she needs the cover of darkness, and although most of the shops along the street are closed and there's basically no foot traffic, they'd still be in plain view if anyone did decide to stroll by.

Anyone like the cop car currently rolling up the street towards them.

Emma slows her steps to a more casual speed, and Killian follows suit beside her, either because he notices her do it or because he also has the instincts of a past criminal.

"Should we ask for help?" he asks out of the corner of his mouth.

"Uh, no," Emma says. "That's not really gonna work here."

If they tell anyone they're time travelers they'll be arrested for sure.

The car passes by without stopping. Emma risks a glance at the cop driving and almost has a heart attack when she recognizes the officer that's about to arrest her 17-year-old self.

Fuck.

She hastily turns her face away and pretends to be studying the store fronts they're passing, as if she's interested in antiques or insurance or Irish dance lessons.

They make it to the park unsolicited, and Emma leads Killian over to a long line of cars parked against the curb. "Okay," she says, "start trying the door handles until you find one that's unlocked. If you see a little red light blinking on the dashboard, leave that car alone."

"We're stealing a car?"

He's giving her a look, a look she can't decipher in the dark but guesses that, judging by his tone, is a cross between amusement and surprise.

"Yea, so what?" she says. "You stole a boat. Remember the one you 'borrowed' to take Ian and Henry to Heron Island?"

"I've stolen much more than a mere dinghy in my time, Swan. I wasn't passing judgment, I was merely voicing my approval—I always knew there was a little pirate in you."
She rolls her eyes even though she knows he probably can’t see, but she feels a blush creeping up her neck and over her cheeks.

"C'mon, let's do this before we lose our chance."

It takes three harrowing minutes of testing car doors with her pulse hammering in her ears and her hands shaking before Killian calls softly to her from two cars ahead.

"Found one."

It's a gold Ford Taurus with plates from Illinois. Emma silently apologizes to its owner as she slides into the driver's seat. Killian gets in beside her and they both slump as low as they can. Emma's about to insert the screwdriver into the ignition when she sees movement across the street and freezes.

"Bloody hell, Swan. Is that you?"

It is.

It's 17-year-old Emma Swan. Striped dress, black tights, boots. Wool jacket with the fake lambskin collar. Messenger bag. Ponytail and black-rimmed glasses. The stolen watch Neal gave her displayed proudly on her wrist. Everything from a thrift store except for the dress, which she lifted from a Forever 21 at the mall.

Emma expects Killian to make some saucy quip, but all he says is, "You were so young."

Emma's stomach twists. She really was.

"I just turned 17. My birthday was a month ago."

That seems to startle him even more.

Emma gets it. She used to wear a lot of makeup to look older, and she copied how the college girls at Portland State dressed so no one would think she was a truant high schooler.

But she should have been in high school. She should have been dating high school boys and thinking about junior prom and studying for the ACT test, not robbing gas stations with a guy nearly a decade older and having unprotected sex in the motel rooms they squatted in for a few hours while the actual occupants went out to dinner.

She thought she was mature, world wise, but when Emma looks at her younger self now, all she can think is that she's looking at a baby.

17-year-old Emma enters the parking garage and disappears from view. If she's already at the meeting place then it means past Neal's on his way to meet the fence. They only have a short time left.

Emma reapplies the screwdriver to the ignition. She glances up at Killian—he's been unusually silent—and sees him staring out of the window, jaw clenched and a muscle pulsing angrily in his cheek.

"You ok?" she asks.

"I'm fine, Swan," he says tightly. He drags his eyes from the windshield to look at her. "Ah, that's what that instrument is for. I thought you meant it for a weapon."

Emma shrugs. "Who said it isn't?"
She'd be lying if she said that the screwdriver she used to keep in her bag for hot wiring cars didn't also reside up her sleeve sometimes, just in case—once she even had to use her slim jim to defend herself against a handsy homeless guy. It wasn't the most useful of weapons, but it was dark and the guy was drunk and thought it was an actual sword, so they both escaped unscathed.

Emma gets the car started, earning her a small grunt of amazement from Killian. She drives away at as inconspicuous of a pace as possible, hoping they don't happen to pass by the owner in the process and blow the whole thing—the absolute worst case scenario right now, aside from Neal getting to past Neal before they can get to Neal, is getting caught by the cop that's also supposed to arrest her 17-year-old self.

That would probably mess up the timeline a bit.

She hopes them just being here doesn't mess up the timeline.

Emma suddenly wishes she had watched that Butterfly Effect movie with Henry when he had to watch it for his philosophy class last year—what if she runs over a squirrel and it changes the course of history?

It's a very slow one-mile journey to the abandoned library where past Neal is meeting the fence; Emma has to not only navigate purely from memory, but keep an eye out for wayward wildlife.

They don't see their time's Neal anywhere, so either he's ahead of them and already lying in wait for his past self, or he's behind them and still making his way towards the library.

Either way Emma and Killian need to be careful not to be seen.

They dump the car in an alley two blocks from the library and walk the rest of the way. Emma finds some wet wipes in the Taurus's dashboard and wipes down the steering wheel and the door handles; she also finds a pen and an old receipt and leaves a thank you note on the seat along with the rest of the cash from her pockets—twelve whole dollars. It's meager compensation, but she hopes it's enough to convince the car's owners not to go looking for the thieves.

The library is a small square building with a Walgreen's parking lot on one side and a Dunkin Donuts on the other. The property is surrounded by a black wrought iron fence and a jungle of weeds, some of which are so high that they look like small trees.

There's an elementary school nearby, and Emma once happened to overhear two of its students in the Dunkin Donuts discussing the rumor that a python lives in the library's basement. The story was sufficient to keep most kids away, which meant the cops didn't pay the building too much attention, which made it a decent place to occasionally conduct illegal activity.

Emma and Killian hunker down to wait in the shadowed gangway between a hair salon and a pizza place, across the street from Walgreens.

If past Neal were to use the fastest route from the library back to the parking garage where 17-year-old Emma is waiting, then he'll walk right past them—there's a chance he could take a different route, but standing in the mouth of the gangway, leaning against the wall, Emma is both hidden and has a clear view to the library, so she'll be able to see past Neal leaving and plan accordingly.

The Walgreens' digital marquee sign says it's 8:20. Neal's meeting the fence at 8:30, so he's probably already in place behind the library. Emma and Killian have about twenty minutes until he'll start heading their way, maybe less.

Killian takes up a position across from her, leaning against the opposite wall, facing the opposite
direction. His face is half in shadow, wearing the same expression Emma saw in the car.

"What are you thinking?" Emma asks quietly. She needs to talk, to distract herself from the nervousness writhing in her guts and her cold legs and the fear she knows is lurking in her mind, the fear that they might return to the future and find things changed, Ian gone.

Killian blinks, eyes shifting from the street to her. She almost flinches. His gaze is cold and as sharp as a knife.

"I'm imagining all the different ways I'd like to hurt Neal," he says, voice flat.

"Killian-"

"No, Emma. Don't ask me not to be angry. You may have moved on, but..." He gives a quick shake of his head. "I'm sorry, Swan. I won't forgive him."

Emma had to move on for her own sanity, and because she really didn't want to waste any more energy on Neal. All of this feels old and worn and dead to her—it's not that difficult to detach herself from it.

For Killian it's fresh.

Emma reaches out and lays her hand on his chest, over his heart. His hand joins hers, covering it, and they stay that way for a minute, his heart beating steadily beneath her fingers.

"I love you, Emma. I can't help wanting to hunt down and kill everyone who's ever hurt you."

"I know."

"I know." She thinks about the whip marks on his back, the ragged scars on his blunted wrist. If the situation was reversed, if they were in Killian's past and she was face to face with Captain Silver or Rumplestiltskin, she knows exactly what she would be fantasizing about doing to them.

Abruptly Killian's eyes flicker to the right and then widen.

"Neal."

Her heart stutters and then starts racing. She scans the street, but from her angle everything within view is still.

"Which one is it?"

"Our Neal," Killian growls.

Moving simultaneously, they swap positions. Emma moves further into the shadows of the gangway, out of sight and out of Killian's space.

Within seconds Emma hears footsteps scuffling along the sidewalk, and then Neal appears.

It's definitely the Neal from their time. His crocodile skin is gone, but he still looks scruffy and disheveled.

Killian lunges.

Sometimes, Emma thinks that him having a hook for a hand gives off the impression that he's somehow incapable or lacking, as if losing his hand injured his entire being.

But it's a lie.
He moves with astonishing speed and grace, getting both arms firmly around Neal's chest, pinning Neal's arms and covering his mouth, then hauling him into the gangway with the same strength that surprised David.

Emma steps away from the wall and into Neal's view. Neal has a split second to see her and realize what's happening before Killian twists, throwing Neal roughly to the ground and pinning him.

The first punch delivered to Neal's face is expected, but the second, third, and fourth are a shock—and yet Emma can neither look away nor bring herself to stop it.

She watches Killian's fist break Neal's nose, watches his rings tear Neal's cheek, his lip. Something inside of her uncoils luxuriously, like a cat stretching in a sunbeam.

It's fucking *satisfying* watching Killian beat the living shit out of Neal.

Neal yells, writhing beneath the knee Killian has pinned to his chest, but Killian is relentless.

"You bastard," he snarls. His words, punctuated by the sound of his first striking flesh, reach Emma's ears more clearly than the sounds Neal's making. "You fucking bastard. You fucking worthless piece of shit."

"Stop it!"

"No."

Killian's knuckles are bloodied, catching the faint light every time he raises his fist to deal another blow.

Wait.

Emma blinks.

There's something strange about the light.

Moments ago the gangway was pitch black, but now...

Peaking out of Neal's jacket is Merlin's hat. It's crumpled up, but it's still glowing with the purplish light of the mini galaxy swirling inside of it.

The hat still has magic.

Emma and Killian can use the hat to return to the future.

"Killian! Stop!"

Killian pauses.

Emma darts in, reaching for the hat, but Neal's—fuck his stupid little weasel brain—is closer and faster; he takes advantage of Killian's distraction and plunges his hand into his jacket.

"NO!"

There's another explosion of light, and once again Emma finds herself clamping her eyes shut and reaching blindly through it, fumbling for control of the hat.

She thinks she feels Neal's wrist, but as soon as she closes her fingers around it she's yanked
backwards and hurled into the air like a rag doll.

Fortunately, the landing's a little softer this time.

Emma opens her eyes and sees the night sky through a canopy of leaves. Apparently she's on her back.

"Killian?"

"Here, love."

He's on her left. Emma sits up, her body all aches and pains again. "Where are we?" she asks.

It's warm. Are they back home?

She slowly gets to her feet, and looks around. They're not in the mines. They must be in the woods.

Only, Emma doesn't remember it being this humid.

Or even this hot.

The trees aren't quite right, either, and the ferns are monsters compared to-

Fuck.

"Killian-" she starts, mounting panic strangling her voice.

"Aye, love," he sighs. "We're in Neverland."

"But when?"

The answer comes immediately.

There's a sudden crashing in the undergrowth ahead of them, and Killian grabs Emma's arm and yanks her behind a tree. They stand pressed together, chest to chest, their hearts hammering as one, listening to the voices of Emma's parents drifting through the trees, growing louder as they approach and then fading as they pass by and continue on.

"Why did you have to tell Emma about Neal?"

"I told you, David: I can't lie to her. She deserves to know."

Emma looks up at Killian. She knows exactly when they are, and from Killian's expression, so does he—after Emma and Killian first kissed, but before the Echo Caves.

"Neal's going to try and stop us from falling in love," she says.

Killian's lips quirk. "Are you saying that this is where you fell in love with me, Swan?"

Emma doesn't answer. She may not have been in love with Killian in Neverland, but this is definitely where it started, where Emma began falling for him.

This is what led directly to Ian.

And Emma's not letting Neal fuck that up.
Hello! We're almost at the end, and I just wanted to take a moment to thank all you wonderful people for reading this fic that's been a full two years in the making. I couldn't have done it without your support, and it's been a joy to be on this journey with y'all! I hope you enjoy this chapter; the next update probably won't be for about three weeks, as my fiance's dad will be visiting for the next two weekends, but I'll work as hard as I can to get it done as soon as possible!!!

Killian hates Neverland.

It's not merely because of Pan and his boys. It's this filthy hot jungle and its hidden thickets of nightshade and all the beasts crouching in the shadows.

When Killian escaped the first time he vowed never to set foot in Neverland again; he broke his promise to himself once for the sake of Emma Swan, because he didn't want to see her family torn apart, and because there was something about her that he couldn't resist, something that stirred parts of him that had lay dormant for over a century.

That he's here again now unwillingly is stirring his bloodlust.

Wherever Neal is in this godforsaken jungle, he should be praying that a tiger comes along before Killian does, because being eaten alive is far more merciful a fate than what Killian has in mind for the man—did Killian mention that he hates Neverland?

"What do you think Neal's game is this time, love?" he asks quietly.

Emma, walking ahead of him along a narrow dirt track through the ferns, turns her ear towards him and then shakes her head.

Either she doesn't know or she doesn't want to say.

Either is fine.

Currently they're searching for a place to hide out, a place where they won't stumble into their past selves. Formulating a plan can wait until they've found both shelter and fresh water.

Killian flexes his hand while he and Emma walk, focusing on the lancing pain in the bones and the throbbing in his knuckles. He broke Neal's nose right away and he could have broken more, but he wanted Neal conscious, he wanted Neal to feel every punch, every new bruise, every new cut—he may have broken one of his own fingers in the process, but he'd happily break more so long as it's Neal's face he's breaking them on.

He guides Emma from behind, steering her away from the heart of the jungle and towards the cliffs. Her pale hair is a beacon in the gloom; he's certain that, were he to close his eyes, he would still see her golden glow against his eyelids.

She scans their path for rocks and quicksand, and Killian watches the trees for pythons. He keeps his
ears open, listening for voices or the telltale hooting of the Lost Boys, but the jungle is silent.

Pan must not know they're here yet—they didn't exactly arrive the usual way, so they must have escaped his detection.

*That* won't last long.

Pan will realize something's off eventually, and when he does he'll go searching for the source, and he won't stop until he finds it—finds *them*.

Killian has no desire to be a part of Pan's games again, not in general and especially not with so much at stake. He and Emma need to regroup, then they need to find Neal as quickly as possible and get back home.

He hopes that blasted hat still has enough magic left for one more trip.

After twenty minutes of cautious tiptoeing, they find a safe place to sit and rest. It's near the cliffs, outside the cover of the trees but tucked snugly against a boulder the size of David's pickup truck.

Killian does a swift patrol of the perimeter, checking for signs that the Lost Boys frequent the area, then, finding none, settles beside Emma, sitting in the dirt inside a concave depression in the rock face that's as good as a cave. He can hear the waves crashing against the base of the cliffs, so loud it drowns out all the horrible sounds from the jungle; there's a breeze as well—nothing Killian would call *cool* or *refreshing*, but enough to alleviate that wet blanket feel on his skin.

They didn't find water, but Killian *did* find a coconut, a coconut which he punctures with his hook and offers to Emma.

She takes it, smiling like she's holding back a laugh.

"What is it, love?" he asks.

"It just reminds me of last time, that's all." She takes a sip from the coconut, grimaces. "Or it reminds me of now, I guess. I don't know. I don't know how this works."

She passes the coconut back. He takes his own sip and tries not to gag; he was never very fond of the taste, and it's been quite some time since he's been forced out of necessity to drink it.

They trade the coconut back and forth until it's empty, then Killian removes the rolled up package of Sour Patch Kids from his jacket and he and Emma share the remainder. It's not much in the way of sustenance, but the sourness overpowers the coconut taste, and they remind him of Ian.

Back in their own time Ian should be sleeping, likely with a belly full of pop tarts and popcorn and chocolate milk and whatever else Will and Granny let him eat.

In this time, Ian hasn't even been conceived yet.

It's a strange thought. For nearly six years Killian had a son but didn't know it; Ian's been in his life for only two months, and already Killian can't imagine his existence *without* the boy. The idea that something might happen *now*—that he or Emma or Neal might cause some minor change in the timeline that prevents Ian's conception—is chilling.

Killian turns to Emma, finds her watching him, waiting.

"Are you ready?" she asks.
He almost grins.

*His Swan.*

He would follow her anywhere, to the end of the world or time itself—and even back into the jungles of Neverland.

"What's the plan, love?"

"We have to find Neal again."

Killian nods. "Do you have any idea where to start looking?"

He beat the absolute crap out of Neal so the man shouldn't be able to cause too much trouble for at least a little while longer, but the island is vast and would take days to search even without all the obstacles and without the risk of running into their past selves.

"I don't know where he is now," Emma says, "but I'm pretty sure I know where he'll be going."

"Where?"

"To find you."

"Me?"

"Past you."

"Ah."

Emma doesn't need to elaborate. At this point, Neal must realize that the only way he's keeping Emma and Killian apart is by taking Killian out of the equation completely.

But of all the times and places Neal could have chosen, why did it have to be fucking Neverland?

It's a rhetorical question, really—Killian *does* understand why.

It's because, returning from Neverland, Neal was a hero, the prodigal father returned just in time to help best Peter Pan and save his son's life. He probably believes that he truly had a chance with Emma all those years ago. Killian made a show of stepping aside and allowing Neal an opportunity to prove his worth, but it was just that: a show.

Killian knew even back then that Emma would never forgive Neal, that she might let Neal back into Henry's life but she would never allow him into hers.

And Killian knew something else Neal didn't, he knew that he and Emma had already met twice since their first dalliance aboard the Jolly Roger, that the fire between them was growing, that the most recent occasion Emma had whispered his name like a prayer during, and let him hold her after.

Neal's first plan failed, so while Killian was thrashing him in Portland his first thought when he took hold of Merlin's hat must have been to replace Killian, to eliminate him as he'd tried to eliminate him before when he tied him to a dock piling below the wharf and left him to drown.

Killian sighs. "I suppose that means we have to go find me as well," he says.

"Yea."
He flexes his hand again, relishing the twinge in his knuckles and the sharp pain in his middle finger—there's definitely a fracture or a sprain in there somewhere. Fortunately he wears no rings on that finger, otherwise the swelling would be a problem.

"Let's get going, then."

Killian doesn't want to remain in Neverland a second longer than he has to. The faster they find Neal, the faster they can leave—and this time when he gets his hands on Neal he's going to make sure Emma has possession of the hat before he resumes pummeling the man to within an inch of his life.

They stand and plunge back into the trees. Killian leads this time; they need to move more quickly than they did before, and aside from being the one with the better sense of direction and a map of the island in his head, Killian would also rather be the one gored by a wild boar should they happen to stumble across one.

He also wants to be the one Pan sees first should they run into him.

They walk closer together than they did before, close enough to maintain a whispered conversation.

"Do you think he'll try to contact any of the others?" Killian asks. "His father, perhaps? Or Regina? They might be willing to be his allies."

"I don't think Regina really likes him," Emma says, "but Gold might help him, yea. I don't know if he'll risk it though—I mean, I don't think he gives a shit about the timeline, but he'd have to explain how he's the Dark One and I bet he doesn't want to do that."

"Should we ask for help?"

"No, we—they are here to find Henry. We have to let them do that. And we can't let ourselves see us, anyway."

"Aye."

Their situation is beginning to feel like a tangled web. One tiny tug here could send vibrations along the entire pattern of their existence.

They stop twice for water—drinking their fill from tiny springs that Killian knows from past experience are safe to drink from—and once for Emma to relieve herself behind a tree ("God, I don't miss that.") before Killian abruptly slows their pace.

Emma bumps into him with a grunt of surprise and Killian feels her grab at his waist to steady herself. "Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"I know where the camp is, love," he says gruffly. "What I'm not certain of is where we are—our other selves, I mean. You said we can't be seen, correct?"

"Oh, yea. Sorry."

He's been approaching the camp in a wide arc, tightening the angle gradually as they draw nearer. He estimates they're within a hundred yards of the camp, so within another fifty they're within patrol range—if they even set a watch that night. He can't seem to remember.

He wracks his brain, trying to recall what happened after Pan told him about Neal and then he told Emma's parents and then Emma's parents told her. He feels as if the answer is just out of reach. He
closes his eyes, trying to get a clearer picture, trying to see what he's missing.

His footsteps slow to a crawl. He feels Emma brush past him; he knows she won't venture too far ahead so he lets her go.

A hazy image begins to form in his mind.

Snow told Emma that Neal was in Neverland, and Emma closed in on herself.

Emma closed in on herself so Killian-

A sound from up ahead alerts him. His eyes snap open, hand jumping towards his hip and a cutlass he doesn't currently possess, and he sees himself—his past self—standing in the path, gaping at Emma.

*Now* Killian remembers what happened.

Emma closed in on herself so Killian did what he did best back then and tried to drown his sorrows in rum.

His past self is currently piss drunk, all rosy-cheeked and glassy eyed, his stance tilting a bit too far to the right.

Fortunately, his past self is also too enraptured by Emma to notice his future self standing ten feet away.

Before Killian can formulate a plan, Emma moves. She rushes forward, grabs the other Killian by the lapels, and pulls his mouth roughly to hers.

It's an effort to strangle the shout of protest that rises up his throat, but Killian manages.

He watches in excruciating silence as his past self hungrily returns Emma's kiss, wraps his arms around Emma's waist and tugs her hips against his. A bizarre sensation bubbles up inside of him, part jealousy, part...arousal.

*Bloody hell.*

Emma's not exactly resisting, either—in fact, her body is melded to the other Killian's, her hands are fisted in his hair, and if Killian's not mistaken, she's *moaning*.

Growling under his breath, Killian, knowing his past self wouldn't notice right now if an elephant trampled him, strides over, grabs himself savagely by the arm, and pulls him away from Emma.

His other self's eyes widen when they lock onto Killian's, his lips, swollen from Emma's kisses, form a small round 'O' of surprise, and then Killian punches him.

Pain explodes through his fingers as his fist connects with the other Killian's jaw and he lets out a small gasp. He automatically recoils, curling his arm in and clutching his injured hand to his chest.

The other Killian collapses. He hits the dirt with a muffled thud and doesn't move.

"What did you do that for?" Emma asks, eyes popping.

"What did you do *that* for?" Killian hisses, gesturing at the body on the jungle floor with his hook.

"I don't know! I panicked. I was trying to distract him." She sucks in a breath and folds her arms
over her chest. "Took you long enough to help."

"Well, it looked like you were enjoying yourself," he says, cheeks hot. "I didn't want to interrupt."

Her shoulders relax and her arms loosen. "I was enjoying myself. That was a really good kiss."

It's probably a compliment but Killian can't bring himself to appreciate it.

Her eyes flicker downwards. He's at full mast, a fact made devastatingly obvious by these blasted tight trousers.

He glares, daring her to comment, but she only frowns.

"What happened to your hand?"

Killian looks down as well. His middle finger is swollen all the way up to the knuckle, and the skin is an interesting bluish purple color. He tries to close his hand but his fingers barely twitch in response.

"I think I may have broken something," he says in dismay.

He doesn't mind the pain, he only minds the inconvenience and the liability it creates. He stubbornly attempts to make a fist again only to suffer another intense burst of pain that has him baring his teeth.

"Fuck," he snarls.

Emma's there in an instant, cupping his hand with both of hers, covering it as Killian once saw Ian covering a lightning bug that he caught.

Her touch is gentle, the coolness of her skin soothing. He loses his ability to focus on anything save for Emma, forgetting for a moment that the unconscious form of his past self is lying at their feet.

There's sweat beading her brow, which creases as she focuses on their hands. Emma's healed him before —the bite on his thigh from that demonic pony—so he recognizes the sensation, the prickle as her magic soaks in, then the numbness and then the relief, the ache in his finger and knuckles dissolving. It sends a warm shiver through him that relaxes every muscle he had clenched tight to help him bear the pain.

He slips his hand from hers and curls it tentatively into a fist.

"Better?" she asks.

He grins. "Aye, love. Thank you."

Emma nods, and then turns slightly, all the better to gaze down at Killian's past self.

"That's going to have consequences," she says.

Killian resists giving his other self a swift kick in the shin, and says, "He'll blame it on the rum, Swan. Trust me."

"I don't remember you having a bruise though."

"I didn't hit myself that hard."

It's a lie—he hit himself very hard.
"He—I..." Killian grits his teeth. He feels his anger rekindling, building in his chest, expanding with every beat of his heart. Fuck Neal, fuck time travel, and fuck this entire island. "He'll wake up soon. We should go."

"We can't just leave him," Emma protests.

"We can't take him with us."

"No, I mean this is what we came all the way out here for—to guard your past self and to catch Neal. We have to stay close to make sure he doesn't swoop in and kill you while you're unconscious."

She stares at him hard for a moment, and then her face crumples and she squeezes her eyes shut.

"God dammit!"

Killian freezes, stunned. "Emma?"

She shakes her head, eyes still closed. "I don't want to keep doing this."

"What?"

"I don't want to keep chasing Neal through all of time trying to stop him from ruining the future. I want to go home."

"I know, love. I do too."

She's trembling, though Killian can't tell if it's from the strain of trying to keep from crying, or the strain of trying not to blow something up with her magic.

Killian reaches out and places his hand lightly on her arm, near her wrist. "Do you trust me, Swan?"

She opens her eyes. "Of course I do."

Her lack of hesitation makes his stomach flip over in a pleasant way. His hand leaves her arm and he reaches into his jacket. He finds the folded bit of paper tucked away in the hidden pocket along his ribs, pulls it out, and offers it to her.

Emma takes it and opens it, her entire body falling still as she sees what it is.

It's the newspaper ad for the house she was looking at, the gray one with the wraparound porch and the tower-shaped corner and the huge yard. He removed it unnoticed back at the loft.

"When we return to Storybrooke," he says calmly, "I'd like to make this happen."

Her eyes widen, and they move from the newspaper ad to his face.

"I want you and Ian and Henry to have that house."

He sees her swallow.

"Why are you showing this to me now?" she asks.

"So that you know I'm serious when I tell you that—no matter how long it takes, no matter how far the journey—we will get home."

Her lips part, and it looks for a moment as if she's about to say something, but then she steps forward
and kisses him.

If he were to contemplate the moment later he would realize that Emma meant for it to be a tender, chaste kiss, and he would feel foolish for the feverishness with which he swept her into his arms—but in that instant the image of her kissing his other self was burning in his mind and the need to reclaim her was overwhelming.

Their lips crash together and his hand finds her hair and his hook arm finds her waist and he holds her to him like a drowning man grasping at driftwood. His tongue is tracing the seam of her lips and she's opening her mouth to him when there's a bright, multicolored flash against his eyelids and a surge of energy washes over him from head to toe.

He gasps and Emma gasps and his eyes fly open.

For one absurd second he thinks he must have somehow orgasmed—until, that is, he catches movement out of the corner of his eye and turns his head just in time to see a wave of rainbow light fade into the darkness of the surrounding jungle.

"Killian, was that...?"

"I...I don't know, love."

Killian's heard tales of True Love's Kiss, but he's never actually seen one in person.

He turns back to Emma and finds her staring at him with as much bewilderment as he feels—then she jolts out of his arms.

"Ow! Shit!"

She fumbles at her shorts pocket and pulls out the Wishing Star by its chain.

Killian gapes. The white jewel at the center of the silver snowflake is dazzlingly bright, as radiant as an actual star.

"No way," Emma says. "Is this because of the kiss thing?"

"I don't know, Swan, but you should use it."

"What?"

"Use the Wishing Star."

"How?"

"Make a wish, love," he says, and grins. "Take us home."

With a massive groan, Killian wakes up.

He's not surprised to find himself lying on the ground, as it's not exactly the first time he's had a bit too much to drink and collapsed—it's usually onto the floor of his cabin where it's private, however, and not out in the open for all to witness.

He pushes himself to his feet and begins lumbering back towards camp, hoping no one noticed he was gone and that there were no attacks or otherwise unwelcome visits while he was incapacitated.
To distract himself from his pounding headache and the odd throbbing in his jaw, he tries to remember what he was dreaming about.

The memory presents itself with little difficulty.

*Ah, yes.*

He was kissing Emma.

Just the memory of it floods his body with warmth.

The dream was over far too fast and didn't go quite as far as he wishes it had—though perhaps that's for the better. He shouldn't be fantasizing about her and all the delicious things he'd like to do to her *with* her—while they're here trying to rescue her boy from that demon Peter Pan.

Plus, she'd likely be able to read what he was thinking in his expression and punch him for it.

He laughs to himself, but has to stop immediately as it only increases the pounding in his head.

As he staggers onwards he remembers that there was a rainbow in the dream as well—a wave of rainbow light that passed through him.

Strange. He can't imagine what *that* meant. Perhaps he needs to be more careful in picking water sources.

Killian arrives at the camp to find everyone asleep, including Emma. She's lying with her back to him—to everyone.

*One day,* Killian thinks, the ghost of her kiss still on his lips. *One day I shall earn her trust.*

He sits, picks up his canteen, gives it a careful sip to ensure it's water and that it's not contaminated, and drinks.

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Emma had to be careful with her wish—as much as she would love to leave Neal behind she knows she can't. He could cause some serious trouble in the past, and he still has Merlin's hat.

So she slipped the Wishing Star's chain over her head, told it that Neal's coming too, grabbed Killian's jacket tightly in both hands, and said, "I wish we were home."

The journey through time with the Wishing Star isn't any more gentle than it was with Merlin's hat, but all that matters to Emma is that when her feet hit the ground again and she opens her eyes she and Killian are back in the mines.

She looks up at Killian, and he looks back. There's a lot they need to talk about—that True Love's Kiss thing for starters—but that'll have to wait.

This still isn't over.

Emma lets go of Killian's jacket and turns, taking in the scene surrounding her.

There's a lot of noise—her parents are there, blurs in her peripheral vision bombarding her with questions, but before she can acknowledge them she needs to make sure Neal made it back.

He's there, kneeling on the ground in front of the cell they made for him. His face a pummeled mess, one eye completely swollen shut, and the other glowering. His shirt is stained with blood and
drenched with sweat, and peeking out of his jacket is the blue velvet tip of Merlin's hat.

Emma holds out her hand and calls for it. It jumps into her fingers as if relieved to get away from Neal and she immediately feels its magic humming through her, making her own magic bubble pleasantly beneath her skin. The miniature galaxy floating in the center of the hat is dimmer and rotating more slowly than it was before, but Emma's going to make it work.

Emma has to make it work.

She has to get the Darkness out of Neal and she has to end this right fucking now because she's so god damn sick of this whole thing.

The Apprentice is exactly where Emma and Killian left him. He doesn't look like a man that's been standing for four hours so Emma guesses the Wishing Star brought them back pretty close to the moment they left. He does look like a man with some questions, however, but if he gets to be cryptic and vague sometimes then so does she.

"Alright, are you rea-" she starts to ask, but then she sees her parents and Henry, frozen, all staring at her.

It's like a switch flicks in her brain and all the noise she's been hearing for the last two minutes clarifies into individual questions, played back to her as if she's listening to her voicemail.

"Emma!"

"Emma, what happened?"

"Mom!"

"Where were you?"

"What happened?"

"Is everything okay?"

"Emma!"

"Mom!"

Her eyes flick from her mom to her dad, standing with his cell phone to his ear, to Henry, clutching the dagger warily as if he might have to defend himself with it, back to Snow. There's something troubling in her expression that makes Emma focus on her.

"Mom, what's going on?"

"Will called-"

A spike of terror pierces her heart. "Ian?"

"Ian's okay," her mom says quickly. "Will said he had a nightmare about someone called the black feather lady. He said Ian won't stop bugging him to call you and tell you that she's coming."

"She's coming?"

David lowers his phone from his ear. The screen is glowing and Emma can see the red hang-up button near the bottom, so whoever he's talking to is still on the line.
"Hal called too," he says. "Allan opened that urn they were supposed to be guarding. Robin's there now." David pauses, licks his lips. Emma can see his hesitation, the grief that's lining his face and making him appear suddenly ten years older. "Allan's dead. Hal says some woman wearing a dress made of black feathers came out of the urn and killed him, then disappeared."

The Black Fairy.

Emma thinks immediately of Ian's dreams and turns to Killian.

"We have to get to Ian," he says, his tone strained, grating like metal striking stone.

Emma's gathering her magic to attempt her second-ever teleportation when another voice interrupts.

"Oh, I wouldn't bother with that, dearie."

Cold air sweeps through the cave, raising goose bumps along Emma's bare arms and legs. The voice is unfamiliar, and yet Emma knows exactly who's speaking.

The Black Fairy is surprisingly beautiful, and not at all the wicked-witch type that Emma imagined from Ian's description. She looks neither young nor old, with a long, oval face, prominent cheekbones, and a set of plump pink lips that most women would literally kill for. Her dress is made of black leather, with a tall ruff made of glossy black feathers and more feathers in the skirts.

She's standing behind Neal, one hand fisted in his hair. When she sees that she has Emma's full attention, she smiles.

"Little Ian's safe for now," she says. "Although I did thoroughly enjoy playing with him in his dreams. I'll have to thank him for that."

Killian growls and steps forward but Emma shoots an arm out and slams it into his chest—she doesn't have the actual strength to stop him but he halts nonetheless.

The Black Fairy purses her lips and gives a simpering little laugh, her black eyes glittering with amusement.

"What do you want?" Emma says. Subtly, she tries to tuck Merlin's hat beneath her arm, out of sight, but it's no use.

"Oh, don't worry; I don't want that dusty old thing. I came to take back what's mine."

As if on cue, Neal begins struggling. His skin ripples, changing from flesh tone to the green-gold scales of the Dark One. Still smiling, the Black Fairy yanks Neal's head to the side and back, exposing the straining muscles of his neck.

"You've had your fun, my sweet—centuries of it. Now it's time to return to mummy."

With one hand she lifts Neal onto his toes as if he was a rag doll, and then she plunges her other hand into his back.

Neal screams, the sound half his own voice, half the voice of the Dark One. Emma thinks she screams too, and she hears Henry bellowing, but before she can force her feet to move the Black Fairy pulls back her arm and lets go of Neal.

Neal's body crumples; he falls to the floor and doesn't move, his skin once more human-colored but gray beneath the bruises. Within seconds the dirt is soaked with his blood, a puddle that grows so big
so fast that Emma knows there's no chance Neal's still alive.

Emma tries to go to him—this is it? This is how it happens? *This* is how it all ends?—but Killian's hand locks around her elbow like a vise and holds her there. Emma drags her eyes away from the sight of Neal's blood and sees the Black Fairy, still with her arm raised, and clinging to it, from fingers to elbow, is a wriggling mass of darkness.

The Darkness that Emma was supposed to pull out of Neal.

The Darkness that she was supposed to remove safely.

The Darkness that was supposed to revive Regina.

"Oh, how I've missed you," the Black Fairy croons, turning her arm one way and then another, admiring the way the black goo glistens in the torchlight.

Emma feels numb. She can't even bring herself to look at Henry, to check on him.

This has all going more horribly than Emma could have possibly imagined.

And she has to stop it from getting any worse.

She takes Merlin's hat in both hands and pours her magic into it, pours it through her hands like a funnel, into that tiny galaxy whirling at the center.

But the Apprentice is even faster.

Like, astonishingly fast.

His wand is up in a flash and the air ripples as something invisible rips across the cave and slams into the Black Fairy. She stumbles backwards several steps but keeps her feet, and when she turns to look at the Apprentice she's grinning.

"Bedwyr. How nice to see you again. The last time I saw you, you were a little boy barely as tall as Merlin's waist. I'm surprised you're still alive."

The Apprentice remains silent, wand still pointed at the Black Fairy. Her grin grows, and she takes a step forward—but can't.

Her eyes widen. "Oh."

She tries once more, but the only thing that moves is her head, jerking forward as she throws her body against whatever unseen force the Apprentice is holding her with.

The Apprentice raises his other hand and thrusts it towards the Black Fairy, then curls his fingers and rotates his wrist, as if he's turning a doorknob. He starts pulling his arm in, and as he pulls his arm in the black goo clinging to the Black Fairy's sleeve goes with it.

Slowly the Darkness is peeled away from the Black Fairy. When it's free, it floats through the air towards the Apprentice, stopping halfway to hover exactly over the center of the empty salt circle.

Emma stares, her heart beating frantically in her chest.

This might not be a total loss after all.

She can't do anything for Neal, but they might still be able to revive Regina. She just has to make
The Black Fairy shrieks, a high pitched wail that makes the walls of the cavern shake.

"Emma!" the Apprentice barks, over the noise.

Emma drops the hat and raises her hands. She feels the wall of magic the Apprentice has around the Black Fairy, and she takes hold of it—the moment she does the Apprentice pulls back, and then the Black Fairy’s power is pitched against hers.

It’s unlike anything Emma’s ever felt.

Neal’s Dark One magic felt oily and gross, but the Black Fairy’s magic is ten times worse—touching it makes her skin crawl and her mouth taste like mold and her teeth ache like they’re getting drilled at the dentist.

She expects the Black Fairy to put up a fight, to try and push through Emma’s magic, but instead she only smiles again, and says, "We don't have to be enemies, child. If you help me-

"Shut up!" Emma snarls. Does this lady seriously think she was born yesterday? Does she think Emma’s going to forget that she terrorized her son's dreams?

The Black Fairy's smile evaporates. "Fine then. When I get free, I'm going to kill you. I'm going to make your son watch, and then I'm going to kill him too. I'm going to-

"Leave her alone!"

Another new voice rings out, accompanied by another cold rush of air—this one carrying the bite of winter and that crisp clean scent of fresh fallen snow.

Emma twists around without dropping her arms and sees Sarah Fisher standing in the mouth of the cave beside her parents and Henry.

She blinks. "What the fuck?"

"I called her," Killian whispers. "I'll explain later-

"Who're you?" the Black Fairy demands.

Sarah steps forward. She's wearing pastel plaid printed shorts, sandals, and a tank top and looks like she came from a weekend cookout. "My name's Ingrid," she says, then holds her hands up, palms glowing white and surrounded by what Emma swears are tiny swirling snowflakes. "I haven't used my magic in a while so I might be a little rusty—but then I imagine so are you. Oh, hello Bedwyr."

The Apprentice turns a crinkled-eyed smile on Sarah. "Good to see you again, Ingrid. You look well."

"I am, thank you. Remind me later to tell you all about my grandchildren."

The Apprentice chuckles—he fucking chuckles while he's still got the Darkness suspended in midair right in front of him—and says, "I'd like that."

Emma feels like she's going crazy. She must be hallucinating or under some spell, because Sarah Fisher cannot be here in Storybrooke and she cannot have magic and who the hell is Ingrid and how does the Apprentice know her and why is he flirting with her and-
Sarah’s looking at her now, ice blue eyes gentle. "I know it's a lot to take in, Emma. I promise I'll tell you everything later if you promise right now to focus."

"Okay," Emma finds herself saying. She has no idea what's going on but she knows she trusts Sarah, and Killian said he called her and she trusts Killian too.

Sarah nods. "We're going to put her back in her urn, where she belongs. Do you think you can call it-"

The Black Fairy lets out another shriek that shakes the ceiling. "No!" she screams. "I'm never going back!"

And suddenly the Black Fairy's slipping from Emma's grasp.

"Shit!" she swears. She grits her teeth and tightens her magic, every muscle in her body gone rigid with the effort, but it's like trying to hold onto a giant pissed-off bar of soap, or a sea urchin, one of those spiky black motherfuckers with venomous spines.

"Emma! Hold her!"

"I can't!"

She feels sharp prickles all along her hands and arms, like needles driven through her flesh, and even though she holds on, the Black Fairy tears free.

Emma tumbles backwards and hits the ground hard; Killian's kneeling beside her in an instant, his cutlass returned, but the Black Fairy's gone, a pile of strange purple embers in the dirt the only sign that she was ever there in the first place.

"Where did she go?" Emma asks, staring at the purple embers. Some of them are lying in the pool of Neal's blood. Emma tries to focus on that and not on Neal's body.

"Back to the Dark Realm," the Apprentice says solemnly.

Emma looks up at him, then she looks past him and almost pees her pants.

Regina's awake.

She's sitting up, and she's staring at back at Emma.

"What the hell just happened?" she says.

---

It's hours later. The mines are finally cleared, Neal's body removed and sitting in a freezer at the morgue, Regina in a hospital room somewhere undergoing several thousand medical tests.

Regina clearly recognized them all, though from what Emma can tell, the price was paid: Regina barely acknowledged Henry's existence—the person she was most excited to see was Robin.

Henry didn't cry, but as soon as they left the mines Emma hugged him and apologized and Henry didn't reply but he let her hug him, and while she held him she felt him trembling, felt every emotion that passed through him.

She doesn't know if he blames her, and she doesn't know if she would blame him for blaming her; he's doing his Henry thing and sitting silently with a mug of hot chocolate topped with whipped
cream and cinnamon on Granny's patio, at the same table as Emma and Killian and Ian, and yet light years away in his own mind.

Emma gives him his space. She wouldn't even know where to begin anyway, were she to try and talk to him. She still can't fully comprehend what happened, and she thinks it will probably be days before it even feels real.

There are other people on the patio. Her parents are at the next table, sitting separately only because there's physically not enough space at Emma and Killian's table; the Apprentice and Sarah are sitting at another table with their heads bent together, looking at what Emma assumes are photos of Tiana, Sienna, and Cole on Sarah's phone.

That whole situation is still a mystery, but there's obviously some history there and maybe a little bit of a spark, and the thought of Sarah or Ingrid or whoever she is staying in Storybrooke is pretty great, and the thought of her maybe having a little love in her life is even better.

Will Scarlet's sitting with David and Snow, sipping a beer. Emma's not sure if he's technically allowed alcohol yet, but she's not going to stop him; he put up with her kid for a full evening and even walked into town to meet them with Ian on his back and the keys to Granny's in his pocket, so he deserves a drink.

Ian himself is asleep, naturally. He's sprawled in Emma's lap, one leg and foot hooked over one of Killian's legs.

Killian has his hook arm draped over the back of Emma's chair, his other hand holding a beer bottle steady on his thigh. Emma holds her hand out and he passes the bottle to her so she can take a sip, and when she passes it back he takes his own sip before settling it back on his thigh.

There's a lot she wants to say to him, to discuss, but she doesn't have the energy or even the brain cells required to speak, so she just looks at him, smiles, and thinks: *We made it. We're home.*

He grins, and Emma knows he's thinking the same thing.

It wasn't easy, it wasn't a true success, but they still have what's most important, and the four of them plus her parents can recover and rebuild, together.
Chapter 54

Emma wakes up to the smell of breakfast. She opens her eyes to find a plate of pancakes shoved beneath her nose, and Ian watching her intently.

"Hi," he says, grinning. "Dad said I should wake you up."

They're at the loft, Emma's upstairs in bed, alone except for Ian, and even though she can't see Killian's smug smile she can feel it radiating upwards from the kitchen, where she expects he and probably her parents are eavesdropping.

Emma looks at the pancakes.

"Those are for me?"

"Uh-huh."

They're Killian's now-signature recipe: thin but dense and nearly the same circumference as the plate, topped with a giant lump of half-melted butter.

There's also a crescent-moon shaped chunk missing from the side closest to Ian.

"Looks like somebody already had a bite," she says.

Ian giggles and ducks away, carrying her breakfast to the stairs and then trotting down them.

Emma guesses that means she's gonna have to follow him if she wants to eat.

She stretches and sits up. It's Saturday. Thursday night was the night Neal died and Regina reawakened, and Emma's basically been in a coma ever since. She slept for an entire day, as if all the exhaustion she hadn't allowed herself to feel for nearly two full months finally caught up to her; she only woke up twice on Friday, once in the afternoon to pee and once in the evening to devour a plate of stale pop tarts before falling promptly back asleep.

Today, however, she actually feels refreshed and not at all like crawling back beneath the blankets.

Today she wants everything to return to normal; she wants to go outside and be reminded that the world didn't end, that life moves on.

Emma gets out of bed and rummages around until she finds a clean pair of sweatpants, her bra, and a
fresh t-shirt. She's by the window checking that it really is still morning and she hasn't slept the whole day away again when she hears Henry's voice.

"Mom?"

"Yea?"

"Are you—can I come up?"

"Yea."

Henry's head appears in the gap at the top of the stairs and swivels around until he spots her.

"What's up, kid?"

He hops up the rest of the stairs but halts on the landing. "Nothing," he says. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

The image of Neal's dead body worms its way abruptly to the front of her mind, and Emma sees his glassy, staring eyes, the surprised expression frozen forever on his bruised face, the hole ripped in his back, and the pool of his blood before she manages to push it away.

"I'm fine," she says. Henry doesn't move, he just stands there looking a bit unsure, so Emma asks, "Are you okay?"

"Yea."

Emma doesn't believe him. Two days ago he saw his dad die, the grotesque finale to what's been a carnival of horror and misery.

She crosses the room in three short strides and hugs him; his arms go around her too fast, he squeezes her too tightly.

"Everything's going to be alright," she says.

He nods into her shoulder. "I know."

She holds onto him a moment longer, then gently eases away. She reaches up and brushes the hair off of his forehead, lets her hand briefly cup his cheek as she lets it fall back to her side; he's not really like Ian, he's not into all the touchy-feely sorts of things that Ian is, but he tolerates her motherly displays of affection from time to time, especially when he's feeling down.

"How was your day yesterday?"

"Good. We went to the beach." A smile tugs at his lips. "Ian lost all the sunscreen."

"What?"

Killian's voice interrupts. "Everything alright up there, love?"

He's standing at the bottom of the steps, peering up at them with a worried crease between his brows that's probably visible from outer space. He's still in his pajamas, which Emma assumes is for her sake because he usually dresses as soon as he's out of bed.

"Yep, all good," Emma says "We're on our way down."
Killian nods and moves away. Henry starts to follow but Emma stops him with a hand on his elbow and he turns back.

"Talk after breakfast?" she asks.

Henry smiles again. It's microscopic, but it's real.

Downstairs, Killian and Ian are already sitting at the kitchen table, waiting. David's chair is vacant and there's a place setting there, but neither of Emma's parents are within sight.

Henry takes the place next to Ian, so Emma sits in her dad's seat, Killian on her left. Her eyes find Killian's immediately, and his crinkle in a smile.

"Good morning, love."

She smiles back. She vaguely remembers him getting into bed with her and Ian last night, spooning her and murmuring in her ear, telling her about his day with mumbled contributions from Ian. She doesn't think he stayed there all night, but she doesn't know if he slept on the pull-out or if Henry did.

"Morning," she says. "Wanna go to the beach later?"

Killian's smile grows. "You read my mind, Swan. I already went on a supply run this morning."

"Supply run?"

"Aye. The sunscreen mysteriously vanished." He throws a pointed look Ian's way, and Ian, one cheek bulging with a wad of half-chewed pancake, ducks his head.

"What about the backup sunscreen?" Emma asks.

"Also gone. Somehow neither bottle made the return trip home from the beach yesterday afternoon."

Ian sinks a bit lower in his chair, eyes averted.

"Luckily," Killian continues, "Whatever tragedy befell our sunscreen seems to have been an isolated incident; the drug store was fully stocked and I was able to acquire three replacement bottles—one of which you'll never find."

The last part is again directed at Ian, who narrows his eyes in an expression that clearly says, Challenge accepted, and bites a sausage link savagely in half.

Emma shakes her head and applies herself to her own breakfast. She's two pancakes in when she realizes she's eating way too fast—faster than Ian, even—and slows down, purposely setting her knife and fork down and picking up her coffee instead. She takes a sip, then asks, "So where're my parents?"

"Visiting Regina," Killian says.

"Is she still in the hospital?"

"Aye, she is. They're releasing her today. Your parents wanted to help her get resettled and, erm..."

Henry glances up from whatever comic book blog he's reading on his phone. "Basically, they're secretly testing her memories," he says. "They're trying to figure out what she remembers from the seven years they were in the Enchanted Forest."
"Oh," Emma says. She didn't even think of that, but she's glad someone did. "What about the, uh, the other thing?"

She looks between Henry and Killian, and it's Killian who answers.

"So far it seems the price was paid," he says. "She doesn't remember raising Henry."

Henry goes back to reading. Ian's silent, munching an enormous mouthful of bacon, listening but not commenting—Killian must have already talked to him about some things.

After they finish eating Emma sends Henry and Ian upstairs to change for the beach, and she and Killian clean up the table. Emma feels Killian's presence against her back as she carries the plates to the sink, close, but not hovering. She stops and lets him bump into her. His chin drops onto her shoulder and his lips find her neck immediately.

"I'm glad you're feeling better today, love," he whispers, his breath warm against her skin.

"Thanks for letting me rest.

"Of course, Emma. I know you needed it." He presses a kiss beneath her ear. "I missed you."

A sigh escapes her and her body softens, melts into the hard planes of Killian's chest. "I missed you, too."

His lips trail lightly down her neck, towards her collarbone. "I have a surprise for you later."

"Is it what I think it is?"

"Definitely not."

He nips her ear and then disappears, sliding past her with his handful of silverware and two mugs hanging from his hook, flashing her a grin and an eyebrow waggle just before Ian thunders back into the kitchen, dressed in a pair of Hulk swim trunks that Emma didn't know they owned.

After they clean up they get dressed, gather their beach gear, pack some snacks, and start walking. They head straight to the docks and then turn right, following the ocean south towards East Point. It's a long way to go, but Emma's grateful for it, grateful for the exercise and for the chance to readjust to reality, grateful for the glorious late July morning and the brilliant sun and the heat.

Ian trots ahead, doing his usual zigzag routine, darting from one climbable thing to the next, occasionally looking over the sea wall into the water or running halfway down a pier and then back, or overturning something shiny in the gravel parking lot that always ends up being a piece of broken glass.

Henry sticks with her and Killian, walking in between them. His phone is tucked away somewhere, which Emma takes as a sign that he wants to talk—or is at least willing to.

The air feels heavy between them, burdened by the weight of everything that's happened over the past two months. Of everyone involved, Henry's lost the most, and as Henry's mother Emma feels partially responsible.

She failed.

She wasn't fast enough, wasn't good enough, touched something she shouldn't have like a fucking toddler, and because of all that Henry lost his dad.
"I'm sorry, Henry," she says quietly.

Her words seem to startle him. "For what?" he asks.

"For the way this all turned out. For what happened to your dad."

"Mom. It's not your fault."

Emma opens her mouth to argue, to outline all the reasons why she is to blame, but she realizes that this conversation is becoming about her and that's definitely not what she wanted, so she presses her lips together and remains silent. She's gathering herself for a rapid change in topics when Henry sighs.

"I wish things had turned out differently," he says. "But my dad made his own choices, and it's nobody's fault but his that he ended up dead."

"The Black Fairy-"

"Wouldn't have killed my dad if he'd just accepted our help and let us take the Darkness out of him."

Henry looks away for a moment, and when his eyes meet hers again he says, "I know what Neal tried to do. I can't forgive him for not caring about erasing my little brother from existence."

Emma doesn't know what to say.

Henry's right: Neal was a dick right up until the very end, and he squandered every second chance Emma tried to give him, every opportunity to be saved. What he tried to pull with Merlin's Hat, knowing full well what the consequences would be, is unforgiveable.

But understanding that doesn't make her feel any less like a failure.

This isn't how things were supposed to end.

There's a cold, dark place deep inside of Emma that opens its jaws, and feels herself start to sink slowly down, down, down into it.

"Emma," Killian says.

Her head snaps up—she doesn't even remember when they stopped walking—and she sees blue eyes the same hue as the sky.

Suddenly, her vision blurs; tears sting her eyes and then streak hotly down her cheeks.

Killian's arms are around her shoulders in an instant, pulling her in and hugging her tightly to his chest; his hand curls around the back of her head, fingers buried in her hair, and she feels his stubbled chin scrape her brow.

"Catch up to your brother, will you?" Killian says, his voice a deep thrum in his chest, competing with the drumming of his heart. "We'll be right there."

Grief shudders through her, but as abruptly as the mood overtook her, it evaporates, as if all it needed was to be let out. She leans hard into Killian, letting his arms support her.

"I messed up, Killian," she whispers.

"No you didn't, love. None of this is your fault."
"I woke up the Black Fairy."

"But you didn't let her out—and it's not as if you woke her on purpose. For all we know she tricked you into touching the urn in the first place, the same way she tricked poor Allan into opening it."

Emma turns her face into Killian's shirt. "She's gonna come back."

"I know. We'll be ready."

*How?* Emma thinks.

How can they prepare to fight a power that *Merlin* couldn't even defeat?

What do they do? Do they leave Storybrooke? They'd be leaving the town completely vulnerable. Do they evacuate? That might save lives in the short term, but if they abandon Storybrooke they'll be allowing the Black Fairy to move right in and take over, and from here she would have access to the rest of this world, magical or not.

"Mom?"

Someone is tugging on her jean shorts. Emma peels away from Killian to find Ian standing there with one eye squinted closed against the glare of the sun, and what Emma hopes to God is not an actual real live crab in his hand.

"What's up, kid?" she asks.

"You okay?"

"Yea, I'm fine." She wipes swiftly at her eyes; if she's lucky her tears were so brief her face didn't have a chance to get all red and puffy. "I just needed a hug."

Ian grins and steps forward and slips his arms around her waist. Emma tries not to cringe when she feels the crab scrape along the entirety of her stomach before settling against her hip. She holds still, praying it's dead.

After a full 30 seconds, she says, "Uh, Ian?"

"Yea?"

"What's going on with the crab?"

Ian tilts his head back. "I found him in the parking lot. I want to put him back in the ocean before he gets run over or a seagull eats him."

Out of the corner of her eye she sees Killian's face pinch with sudden, suppressed laughter.

"Alright. How 'bout you go do that then?"

Ian nods smartly and races to the seawall, where he unceremoniously dumps the crab into the water. Emma watches him turn on his heel and sprint to where Henry's waiting with the beach bag; past him, off in the distance, Emma can just make out the golden stretch of sand that is East Point.

She takes a deep breath and starts walking. Killian follows, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back.

"You sure you're okay, love?" he asks.
"I will be," she says, then throws him a smile. "It's just going to take some time."

Killian nods. His next step brings him closer, so that their hips bump lightly together with every stride. Up ahead, Ian leaps onto a bench and then uses it as a springboard to vault onto Henry's back; he loses one of his Crocs in the process, and screams so loud he startles some nearby seagulls when Henry pretends he's going to kick it into the ocean. Emma might be exasperated if she wasn't so relieved to see both her boys behaving normally.

"So," she says. "What else did I miss yesterday? How was Ian other than the sunscreen thing?"

"He was fine," Killian replies. "I had to tell him that Henry's dad died though. I hope you don't mind."

"No, it's okay," Emma says. She trusts that if Killian had to have that conversation with Ian without her then he believed it was necessary, and she also trusts that he's capable of handling something like that with Ian. "What did you tell him?"

"Only that there was a accident and we weren't able to save him."

"Did you mention the Black Fairy?"

"No. I didn't know what to say."

"Did Ian ask about her?"

"Aye. I told him everything's fine and that we'd talk more about it later. I was hoping you'd take the lead on that one."

"Okay. Thanks for waiting."

"Of course."

"How're my parents?"

"They're fine. Mostly worried about you and Henry."

"Did you tell them what happened? You know, with the hat and in the past and everything?"

"Aye, I did. I...I left out one detail, however."

"Which one?"

He looks down at her. "The kiss."

Heat spreads over her cheeks and coils in her belly.

*Our True Love's Kiss.*

Is that what it really was?

Emma experienced a True Love's Kiss once before, when Henry ate the poisoned apple tart and nearly died. It felt different this time, the wave of energy that passed through her warm and tingly and revitalizing and a lot like an orgasm.

*Maybe because it's a different type of True Love,* she tells herself.
So what does it mean? Do she and Killian have to move in together now? Get married? Does True Love last forever? Or can it be lost?

She guesses that's something they're just going to have to discover on their own.

Instead of freaking her the fuck out, as she once would have expected, it actually excites her.

She smiles, the warmth in her stomach blossoming. Killian smiles back, a goofy, boyish looking grin that reminds her of Ian.

The first part of this story may have just ended, Emma realizes, but another chapter is just beginning.

Their afternoon at the beach is wondrous, and Killian wouldn't mind if it went on forever—only he has a surprise planned for Emma, and, whether she's aware of it or not, he made her a promise.

At 3:00, Killian tells the boys, "It's time."

Emma eyes them all suspiciously but doesn't comment, merely follows along and allows them their secretiveness.

They pack up their beach gear and head to the showers, where they thoroughly rinse the sand from all the places Ian's managed to accumulate it before toweling him off and getting him into clean, dry clothes.

The walk back to the loft seems to pass much quicker than the walk to the beach. There, Emma, Killian, and Henry change. Snow and David still haven't returned yet, but they know what Killian's plan is, so he knows they won't worry.

Henry drives. Emma sits in the passenger seat, and Ian's chattering distracts her enough that she isn't aware of her surroundings until they arrive at their destination.

"We're here, love," Killian says, when Henry pulls over and parks the car.

Emma swivels in her seat to face the window, and freezes.

Killian looks too.

It's the house from the newspaper, the one he caught Emma daydreaming about, the one he showed her the clipping of in Neverland.

The house Emma Swan wants to be hers.

The house Killian wants her to have.

"What is this?" she asks, eyes still fixed on the house.

"I made us an appointment, Swan." She turns to him and he elaborates, "To see the house. The real estate agents-" an awkward term on his tongue- "are going to show us the property, and if we like it, we can make them an offer."

The power of speech seems to have failed her; she stares openmouthed first at him, and then once again at the house.

Killian gets out of the car, closes his door and opens Emma's, takes her hand, and gently eases her out of the vehicle. He leads her up the sidewalk, Henry trailing a step behind, Ian darting ahead and
bounding up the stairs as if they already own the place.

The front door opens before Ian reaches it, and out steps a woman that matches the picture on the website Killian and Henry found a digital listing of the house on. She greets them, and starts the tour.

It's neatly organized and spacious. The windows are many, creating a bright, airy atmosphere. Everything is wood, reminding him strongly of his ship, and to the east a small beach is visible, easily within walking distance.

Killian likes it. He likes the kitchen and the wide open front room and the cozy little den and sun room tucked away at the back of the house. He imagines the four of them watching movies in the den in the evenings, enjoying sunny mornings or even rainy afternoons in the sun room, reading or chatting or just watching the world outside the windows.

He likes the master bedroom with the curved nook and its own private bathroom, and the three other bedrooms of varying sizes on the same floor. He likes the attic, dry and well-lit, with storage space and the potential for a fifth bedroom.

"Dibs," Henry mutters, out of earshot of Ian, who's leaving finger-and-forehead-prints on the floor-to-ceiling palladium windows.

Outside they're shown the shed and the yard, which Ian claims they could fit a pool and a hockey rink and a trampoline and a tree house and a swing set in.

"Well, probably at least the pool," Henry says.

"And all the other stuff," Ian argues. "And an alligator."

"Why an alligator?"

"To guard the pool."

Emma doesn't say anything until they're left alone on the front porch while the real estate agent goes inside to close up.

"Fuck," she says, hands on her hips and her eyes closed. "Fuck. I really like it."

"Then it's yours."

Her eyes pop open. "What?"

"You heard me Swan. It's yours."

"Killian, we can't—I can't afford this."

"Yes, we can," he says.

She bites her lip, eyes flicking back and forth between his. "How?"

He puts on his best smirk, hooks a finger in the pocket of her jean shorts, and pulls her hips to his.

"I'm a pirate, Swan," he says. "I've got treasure buried all over Storybrooke."

Not to mention the stash aboard the Jolly Roger that Blackbeard was kind enough not only to watch over for him but to donate to.
"And if that doesn't cover it," Killian adds, "I'll sell the Jolly Roger."

Emma blinks and her lips part. As Killian leans down to kiss her, he can't help but think of their last kiss.

*True Love's Kiss.*

He's not certain what all the implications are, what it means or what it *will* mean for him and Emma, but he wants to find out.

He leans his forehead against hers, their noses just brushing, and says, "I love you, Emma."

"I love you too, Killian."

From the porch swing to their right, Henry hoots, and Ian giggles.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I can't believe that, after over two years, this fic is ending. I just want to thank you all for reading and for the encouragement you've given me to keep writing. I'm grateful for your support, and I hope that you'll join me for the next step in the journey, a mini-sequel and a sequel, coming soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A month passes.

The mines are cleared, Neal's blood scrubbed from the dirt, the salt circles erased, and the strange purple embers the Black Fairy left behind (now just lumps of charcoal) collected for study. Everyone wonders aloud how Neal escaped the cell—until David touches one of the bars and his hand comes away slick with squid ink.

"Shit," Emma says. "Is that—did we give that to Neal?"

Meaning, when they made him touch squid ink to get him into the cell, did they stupidly give him the tool he needed to get out of the cell?

"He could have had his own," David says, wiping his hand off on his jeans.

Emma shrugs. "I guess it doesn't matter anymore."

Neal's dead. The whole thing was a fiasco, but it's over.

That hole inside of her is closing gradually, scabbing over. There will always be a scar, a reminder, but everyday she feels less guilty, everyday it's easier to accept that what happened to Neal wasn't her fault, that he went so far down the wrong path that he was beyond Emma's—or anyone's—ability to save him.

Henry arranged Neal's burial, picked out a plot in the cemetery and the headstone; he said he didn't want a service, just a gathering of anyone who wanted to be there at the graveside.

Several people showed up, none of them for Neal. Everyone there was there for Henry, and maybe a little bit for Emma.

Nobody spoke while they watched Neal's coffin lowered into the earth. Emma's mind raced, reliving everything—the good and the bad—one final time. Killian was the first to throw a shovelful of dirt into the grave, and Emma was the last.

-/-

They clean out Gold's manor next, discovering in the process that ownership of both the manor and the pawn shop passed to Belle when Gold died.

Belle takes over reluctantly but gracefully, sends anything valuable to the shop, anything magical to Regina's vault, and donates the rest.
"I'll sell the shop once I get everything in order," Belle says.

"What about the house?" Emma asks.

"I don't know. Do you think anyone will buy it?"

Honestly, Emma doubts it. It'll probably become the sort of "haunted" place teens break into on dares and kids ding-dong-ditch on Halloween.

"Maybe we can demolish it and put a public garden there or something," Snow suggests.

"Oh," Belle says. "I actually really like that."

Emma sort of does too. She doesn't want to look at Gold's manor for the rest of her life, just another reminder of everything that happened—she would prefer to see the place healed, see Storybrooke forget both iterations of the Dark One it was host to.

With all of that taken care of, focus shifts, from the aftermath to the future, to the Black Fairy.

Everyone agrees that she'll return, and that they'll need to be ready when she does. The Apprentice's house becomes ground zero for research and development. Belle and even Regina locate every book, scroll, and scrap of parchment they can that contains any mention of the Black Fairy, and all the rest of the fairies in Storybrooke are rounded up and interviewed.

According to them, the Black Fairy's return is some sort of end-of-the-world type scenario.

You know, no big deal.

When the fairies ask who released their version of the antichrist, nobody gives them a straight answer.

Which is pretty nice of them.

Emma owns up to it though, because she may as well.

She expects dark looks and muttering to follow her confession, but what she doesn't expect is for Blue to say, "Well, I guess that makes sense."

"What do you mean?" Emma asks.

"You're the Savior, Emma. You were meant to fight the Final Battle."

Snow lets out a soft gasp. "The prophecy," she says breathily. "I forgot..."

Emma looks between her parents and Blue, then to Killian, who's clearly as clueless as she is, and then back to her parents. "What are you guys talking about?"

David's doing a very good impression of Killian's jaw-clench thing. "Rumplestiltskin made a prophecy. He said..." David sighs, stops glaring at Blue and turns sad eyes on Emma. "He said that you would return to us, and when you did, the Final Battle would begin."

"Oh," Emma says. "Do I, um...does the prophecy say I'm going to win?"

Blue starts to speak, but David cuts her off.

"The prophecy doesn't even say Emma has to fight," he says savagely, squaring his shoulders and
moving a half-step in front of her as if the prophecy is an actual physical force he can protect her from. "It just says the Final Battle will begin."

Blue looks at David with sympathy—but also like he's a complete idiot. "Emma is the wielder of the greatest light magic ever born into this world," she says. "The Black Fairy is the source of all Darkness. Of course Emma has to fight."

"But she doesn't have to fight alone," Killian says, his arm locking tightly around Emma's waist. He glowers at Blue, daring her to challenge him.

Blue lifts her chin primly. Snow smiles softly. "Killian's right. Emma's not alone. She has allies."

"A lot of allies," adds Sarah Fisher, who's been spending an interesting amount of time at the Apprentice's house.

There are nods all around the room, from the absurd amount of fairies, dwarves, and Merry Men they managed to cram into the Apprentice's parlor. Regina's the last to commit, but when everyone turns to her expectantly she rolls her eyes and mumbles, "Fine. Yes."

"I guess we're continuing our magic lessons then," Emma says to the Apprentice.

He lowers his head in a small bow. "It would be my pleasure."

-/-

All of that happens during the final week of July, and in August, life moves on.

Sarah Fisher decides to remain in Storybrooke.

"Maybe not permanently," she says. "But at least for the time being."

She tells Emma her story, of how she was born a princess, how magic was rare in her kingdom and both feared and misunderstood because of it, of how she was close with her sisters Helga and Gerda but when she accidentally lost control of her magic and killed Helga, Gerda turned on her and cast her out. Eventually she met the Apprentice, who helped her escape to the Land Without Magic.

Henry's eyes pop. "Oh my God. Frozen is real too."

"My nieces, I believe," Sarah says.

"So, should I call you Ingrid now?" Emma asks.

Sarah shakes her head, smiling her serene smile. "I prefer Sarah."

"Does Tiana know?"

"No, but I suppose I can tell her now that I can actually prove it."

Ian whirls abruptly on Henry and punches him in the arm. "I told you I saw that snowman move!"

Emma vaguely remembers them having an argument last winter about whether or not Ian could have possibly seen the snowman outside the kitchen window salute him.

Sarah presses her lips together in a secretive smile and winks. Ian grins triumphantly, and Henry
grumbles, "Shut up."

-/-

Regina moves back into her mansion. David and Snow probed her memories and discovered that she does not, in fact, remember anything about raising Henry, and in her mind she was Neal's captive in the Enchanted Forest for the past seven years and an unwilling participant in the casting of the Dark Curse.

That's both fine and not fine at the same time.

It's great that there are no awkward gaps in her memories that they all have to dance around, but that particularly filling-in has the potential to be a problem if she decides to hold a grudge against Neal or maybe take out her animosity towards Neal on Henry—she does treat him rather coldly, ignoring him whenever they're in the same room until it's absolutely impossible not to, and whenever they interact Emma swears the temperature in the room actually drops.

Luckily, Henry's being pretty chill about the whole thing and keeps his distance.

"I don't know," he tells her with a shrug. "I was upset about it at first, but then I realized I sort of don't want to be her son anymore, and if she had her memories it would just be how it was before, you know?"

Emma knows. The tension, the hostility, Henry caught between her and Regina.

"This way," Henry continues, "I don't have to hurt Regina's feelings. She can move on and be happy."

Emma's relieved to hear it, and only somewhat because a tiny part of her that she'll never tell anyone about ever is happy that Henry would have chosen her 100% over Regina.

"Maybe in some alternate universe things would have been different," Henry adds, almost as an afterthought. "Like, if we hadn't all been separated for so long, you know?" He finishes the conversation with another shrug, and they move onto to discussing how he plans to decorate his bedroom.

Because he has a new one.

In the house.

In Emma's house.

The house she now owns.

She still can't believe it.

Move-in day feels like a dream—it also feels incredibly silly, because all she and the boys have in Storybrooke is their clothes and one box of their shared belongings.

The day after Emma, Henry, and Ian dump their stuff in their new house's front room, they rent a U-Haul from the next town over and drive it to Boston.

David and Snow follow in the pick-up truck. They claim they want to help, but they spend most of their time in Emma's apartment being very unhelpful, cooing and fawning over photographs and the boys' bedrooms instead of packing her cookware and her bath towels.
It only takes a few hours to load the trucks; Emma leaves behind the furniture, taking along only personal possessions and absolute necessities. It's financially impractical, but she doesn't want all the old memories clinging to her new house.

Well, except for one.

The hallway closet doorjamb has marks on it from seven years of tracking Henry and Ian's growth.

The lowest is Ian at 9 months, when he was standing on his own and just starting to walk, and the highest is Henry, drawn on graduation day three months earlier.

"I didn't notice this before," Killian says, gently touching a green Sharpie line labeled: *Ian, 1st day Kindergarten.* "Why the closet?"

"Because I wasn't sure if I would get in trouble for it with the landlord, so I put it someplace he was really unlikely to ever see it."

Emma runs her thumb over another line, a black one with a faded *Henry, Nov. 2013* next to it. That was only a week or so after they left Storybrooke with new memories, right before Emma found out she was pregnant.

"If you could go back in time and be with us from the beginning," she says quietly, "would you?"

Killian answers without hesitation.

"No."

Emma looks up at him, surprised. "No?"

"I've accepted things the way they are," he says. "Knowing Ian now... I wouldn't risk changing that, changing who he is."

Emma kisses him, her hand sliding around his neck to hold his lips to hers. She hears someone enter the hallway, and then quickly leave it. Killian pulls back, the tiniest fraction; she feels his breath against her lips, then he plunges back in, lips hard on hers, the heat sending a pleasant buzz through her whole body.

It's David that interrupts them, sliding past them with a lilting, "Pardon me." Henry follows, with a more direct, "Get a room."

Emma and Killian separate, both blushing and avoiding each others' eyes until they're alone again, at which point they share a laugh.

Killian gestures at the doorjamb. "Well, love, shall we pry it off and bring it back to Storybrooke with us?"

"I'd like my security deposit back, so no. I've also got a better idea."

She lays one hand on the doorjamb, closes her eyes, and reaches for her magic. It's like trying to permeate a brick wall, but as she pushes, the bricks soften, and eventually she's able to touch her magic—barely, but just enough.

When she opens her eyes the marks are gone.

"Where'd you send it, love?"
"To the bedroom."

"Ah."

She doesn't say *our* bedroom. And there's a reason for that.

Killian didn't pay for the house.

Emma didn't pay for it either.

Her parents did. They asked Killian if they could have the honor, explained that they wanted to give her something, to make up for all the years they weren't able to give her anything, and Killian conceded without argument.

"They implied they have more means to provide for you than I do," he told her, in a fake pout—she could tell he actually *was* disappointed, but doing his best to hide it.

"What did they say?"

"They said, 'We were royalty in the Enchanted Forest, Killian. You should see our bank account.'"

"Yea, I wouldn't call that implying. They essentially just came out and said they're rich as fuck." Emma sighed then and slumped against Killian's chest. "Do you think this is because I wouldn't let my mom throw a carnival for Ian's birthday?"

Killian chuckled, and leaned down to kiss the tip of her nose. "I think it's because they were robbed of the chance to raise you, and they want to do anything and everything they can now to make sure you're comfortable and happy."

"I guess." She turned her face into Killian's shirt, rubbing the soft cotton against her cheek, inhaling his scent. "Are you sure you're okay with them doing this?"

"No," he said. "But I've no justification to refuse permission for something they truly don't need my permission for."

Emma understood. Killian wasn't her husband. He had no claim to her other than the son they shared and the two months they'd been dating.

And it's for the same reason that Killian's not moving in with her and the boys.

She knows that Killian offered to buy the house originally without assuming that he was automatically moving in with her or that it was in any way *his* house.

And Emma appreciates it.

*God,* she appreciates it.

He was giving her the freedom to make the choice of when, or if, they began sharing a physical home.

Emma honestly doesn't know what she would have done if Killian had paid for the house—how soon she would have asked Killian to move in with her; she just knows there wouldn't be an awkward barrier preventing her from doing it, as there is now.

But they'll figure it out, one day at a time, with a lot of sleepovers in between.
David and Snow have never seen any of this world outside of Storybrooke, so Emma gives them a tour of Boston. They do all the touristy things: the Freedom trail, a duck boat tour, the North End for pizza and cannoli, and, because Ian insists, Fenway Park. Snow makes them all ride the swan boats in the Public Garden and takes several thousand pictures, and David has to be physically dragged away from the view atop the Pru.

They spend the night in the apartment, then head home to Storybrooke the following morning. Emma's parents take the U-Haul and the pick-up. Killian, Emma, and the boys go to Charlestown Marina and sail Whale's boat home.

It's a solid day of sun and waves and chasing the wind and pulling Ian away from the rail every time he leans over it too far—which is about once a minute. He's fearless aboard the boat and has the same grin and gleam in his eye as Killian. Henry's a bit more hesitant but loosens up shortly after Killian shows him how to steer then claps him on the shoulder and leaves him alone and wide-eyed at the helm.

"Maybe you could use some of the money you saved not buying a gigantic house getting a little boat like Whale's," Emma says.

Killian looks at her sharply.

"I mean, for teaching Ian and Henry how to sail."

His expression clears and grows thoughtful, and when they return to the docks Emma catches him eyeing the boats there.

The next day they buy beds, a kitchen table, and a couch, but the rest of the furniture trickles in slowly and they live mostly out of boxes for nearly two full weeks.

The house starts to finally feel lived in just in time for Henry's birthday.

Emma throws him an outdoor party, which looks only slightly less like it's for a 6-year-old than Ian's party did because Ian insists Henry needs a piñata and Emma puts the pool and the Slip 'N' Slide out to keep the kids entertained.

The same crowd that showed up for Ian's birthday shows up for Henry's, carrying offerings of beer, soda, and snacks. David grills, because it's his duty—his words, not Emma's.

"He's never actually done this before," Snow whispers to Emma. "But he has all these memories from his Cursed identity of being a grill master, so..." She clicks her tongue in exasperation as they watch David flip burgers with a metal spatula in one hand, a beer in the other, and the world's largest grin.

"He's fine," Emma says. "If he wants to be a grill dad, let him be a grill dad. He can come over and cook us hot dogs whenever he likes—I mean, you guys did buy the grill. And the backyard."

Snow rolls her eyes again, this time in Emma's direction. "We didn't buy the house for us, Emma—we bought it for you. You and Henry and Ian." Her voice drops low, soft but sweet and a bit singsong-y. "And, you know, Killian too."

Emma chokes on her beer and coughs.
Snow moves quickly to pat her back. "Don't tell your father I said that," she mumbles, when Emma's recovered. "He's a bit...old-fashioned. He thinks you two should get married before you move in together."

"Mom!" Emma hisses, cheeks reddening. She can feel her eyeballs popping out of her head; she does not want to be having this conversation with her mom—not now and possibly not ever.

Also, she was living with Killian on his ship for weeks. How is that any different than if he were living with her and the boys right now in the house?

Emma thinks there's probably a double standard in there somewhere.

Snow just smiles and leaves Emma there to burn with outrage and finish unpacking the hamburger buns by herself.

-/-

Too fast, the day arrives when it's time to move Henry to college.

Emma's been dreading it from the moment he blew out the candles on his birthday cake and she realized: Fuck, my kid is 18.

She feels like she only just got to know him, and she knows that part of that is because of how much she missed—ten whole years—but she knows another part of it is that she's not actually ready to let go of him.

Like, at all.

Sure, she can't hold onto him forever, and sure, deep down she knows it's what's best for him, that he needs to go out into the world and figure out who he is, find his path.

But he's her kid.

He taught her how to be a mother.

And Emma wishes the good thing they've had going the past 7 years didn't have to end.

Ok, maybe not end.

Change.

Things are about to change. Big time. And Henry leaving for college is really only part of it.

Northeastern's campus is actually pretty nice, and it's in a good location—close enough to interesting things that Henry won't get bored or feel isolated, and close enough to their old stomping grounds that hopefully he won't feel too far away from home.

After they move Henry in, they take him to lunch and then for a shopping spree at the bookstore.

Emma never went to college herself, but she's seen enough college kids rolling around Boston to know that Henry needs—at bare minimum, and just to start out with—a pair of sweatpants, three t-shirts, and a hoodie, all with Northeastern's logo.

"Can we go to a hockey game?" Ian asks, of course having immediately spotted the mannequin wearing Northeastern's team jersey.
"They don't start playing until the end of October," Henry says.

"Yea. Can we go?"

"That all depends," Emma says. "Are you a Northeastern fan now?"

Ian puffs up his chest and nods seriously.

"You're sure? You're ditching BU?" Emma had never gotten around to dropping $300 for the boys to see the Bruins, but she took them to a few BU games, and that sort of became Ian's team.

Ian nods again.

"Alright, I guess we can go then. Remind me in October, okay?"

"Okay!"

Emma knows he won't forget.

Their day ends with a stroll around campus, Henry consulting the paper map his RA gave him and pointing out all the important buildings. His excitement is unmistakable, and it calms Emma a bit.

*He's going to be just fine,* she thinks.

Still, she cries a little when she hugs him goodbye. He lets her stand with her arms around him for as long as she needs, and then it's Ian's turn—he throws himself around Henry's neck and sobs. Henry holds him, patting his back, telling him, "We can talk on the phone every day. And we can Skype whenever you want."

When the leave, Killian has to carry Ian to the car, because he's too sad to walk.

The drive back to Storybrooke seems to take forever, and Emma's heart aches the entire way. She doesn't realize she's crying again until she feels Killian's fingers brush her cheek gently, wiping away a wayward tear.

"It will be alright, love," he says.

"I know," she sniffs. "I'm just gonna miss him."

"Me too, Swan."

His hand finds hers and he laces their fingers together. Emma takes a long, deep breath, settling herself.

Beneath the layer of melancholy dulling her senses is an undercurrent of excitement. Although one chapter of her life is ending, another is beginning, and the future seems ripe with possibility.

Emma squeezes Killian's hand and smiles. She has no idea where they're going, but she knows they're going there together, and as long as she has Killian by her side, she knows everything's going to be fine.

Henry sits on his bed and looks around. His dorm room is definitely a huge downgrade from his new attic bedroom back in Storybrooke, but at least it's clean.

With a sigh, he lays down with his arms folded beneath his head and closes his eyes.
What happened—everything with his dad, Regina reawakening—still doesn't feel totally real, as if the past three months were a dream.

Seeing his dad die was...not great. He'll always regret how things turned out, regret that Neal hadn't been an entirely different person, a person that could have accepted the way things are and moved on, a person that could have been happy just being Henry's dad.

It sucks. A lot. But Henry will be okay. David and Hook are better father figures than Neal ever was, so it's fine.

And as for Regina, Henry really is over it—over her. It literally only took five minutes of being in the same room as her for him to realize that. He hopes whatever she has with Robin is real, and that they both end up happy, but it feels good to finally be able to let go.

Henry takes a deep breath.

He's excited. And nervous. And he doesn't miss his mom or Ian yet, he knows it's only a matter of time until he does, but it's okay because he knows that, wherever he goes, whatever path he chooses to follow, they'll always be there when he needs them.

Killian admits it was difficult to say goodbye to Henry, even knowing the lad is only a few hours away and that he'll be home to visit in a month or so. It seems strange to be embarking on the next part of the journey without him, but Killian knows the boy needs to chart his own course.

At the house, Killian shuffles a yawning Ian into the bath. He waits until Ian's physically inside the tub before leaving the lad alone.

Emma's just outside the bathroom, pulling an armful of fresh towels from the linen closet; one's solid, one's striped, and one's patterned with dinosaurs, but they all match the bathroom's navy blue and lime green color scheme.

Killian's enjoyed watching her slowly fill the house with personal touches and turn it into a home—her home. Some of the rooms are still bare, but the ones that aren't each have their own character, their own distinctly Emma flair.

She's asked him for suggestions along the way, colors, patterns, textures, but mostly he's let her have her way—his only real request being an armchair for the rounded nook in the front room, to read in.

Emma bought two armchairs, a small table, and a tall bookshelf made of dark walnut that matched the rest of the furniture on the first floor.

They've spent a few mornings and a few evenings in that nook, Killian in one chair with a book in his lap, Emma in the other, sometimes with Ian.

Emma turns to him now, dumps the towels into his waiting arms, then reaches back into the closet.

"Do you really think Ian's going to use more than these three?" Killian asks, hefting the pile he's holding. He's certain Ian doesn't even know the purpose of the wash cloth or the hand towel and will only end up using the "big towel".

"No, I'm getting towels for us. I want to switch ours out too-"

She stops, frowns. When she pulls her arm out from amongst the towels, she's holding a book.
It's Henry's storybook, the massive brown volume with *Once Upon a Time* written on it in gold letters.

"I didn't put that in there," she says.

"Ian?"

Emma shakes her head. "No. I actually thought we left this at the loft."

"Perhaps Henry or your parents brought it over."

"And put it in the closet?"

She flips the book open, casually, and the page it falls open to has a picture of Killian tied to a tree, and Emma pointing a knife at him.

She snorts. "My mom once told me that the book appears when it's needed."

"Why does the book think we need it now?" Killian asks.

"Maybe it's just telling us it's time."

"Time for what?"

Emma looks up at him. "Time to tell Ian our story."

-/-

"Alright," Emma says. "Remember what I told you last time? About there being a lot of stuff in here that you're not ready for?"

Ian nods. He's tucked into bed between Emma and Killian, his hair still damp from his bath, Roger and One-Eyed Jim beneath either arm.

"So when I say 'blindfold' that means you cover your eyes. Got it?"

"Got it," Ian says, and grins.

Emma raises her eyes to Killian's, and he opens the book across his knees, to the page showing an illustration of Emma pulling him from a stack of bodies.

Both Killian and Ian listen to Emma explain how her and Snow wound up in the Enchanted Forest to begin with (a little different from how Ian got there), and then Killian starts reading.

"You tried to stab him?" Ian interjects, when they get to the part where Emma grabbed his hair, jerked his head back, and held a dagger to his throat.

"No, I didn't try to *stab* him," Emma huffs. "I was just...threatening him."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't trust him. I knew he was lying."

"Oh," Ian says, turning owlish eyes on Killian. "Mom always knows when you're lying, so be careful, because otherwise she'll ground you."

Killian bows his head briefly in acknowledgement. "Duly noted."
"Were you scared?"

"Hm?"

"Were you scared when my mom tried to stab you?"

"Aye, lad. I was scared," Killian says, over Emma's hissed, "I didn't try to stab him!"

Ian bites his lip in a grin, then turns eagerly back to the book, prompting Killian to continue. He reads all the way up to the part where Emma leaves him on the beanstalk before he quietly closes the book and sets it on the nightstand, beside Ruby's fish tank.

"That's it?" Ian asks, appalled.

"No, there's more," Killian says.

"A lot more," Emma adds. "It's a long story, kid. We'll read some more tomorrow night, okay? It's late."

Ian scowls at them. "Fine."

They ignore his grumpy face and finish tucking him in. After Killian places a kiss on his forehead, he asks, all sweetness once again, "Are you staying tonight?"

"I'll be here in the morning," Killian says. It's not actually an answer, but it seems to satisfy Ian. He closes his eyes, dark lashes resting against his pale, golden-freckles cheeks, and rolls onto his side, dragging Roger and Mr. Jim and half the quilt with him.

Killian follows Emma from the room. She turns out the overhead light, switches on the nightlight, and closes the door. In the hallway, she turns into his arms, her hands coming to rest on his chest.

"Will you stay?" she asks.

"Of course I will, love."

This is the way it's been, Killian only staying if asked.

Usually Emma asks, though sometimes Killian spends the night on the Jolly Roger just to maintain appearances—he and Emma aren't married, after all, and he knows that sort of thing means something to David.

Killian doesn't mind that Emma's parents bought the house—he didn't offer to do it presuming it was his ticket to move in right away. He knew Emma needed time to settle, to play with the idea, to come to the decision on her own, and when she does decide what she wants, Killian knows there's no barrier that can stop her.

Emma goes up on her tiptoes to brush his lips lightly with hers, then she takes his hand and leads him down the hallway. They go to the bedroom, and close the door.

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3 months later, November

It's Thanksgiving. Emma's parents decided to celebrate the holiday with a gigantic potluck at Granny's, to which no less than five turkeys were brought.

Emma's currently at home, in the bathroom.
She *might* have left a little bit early.

Because Emma Swan *might* have a bit of a problem.

She licks her lips and lifts her eyes from the tiled floor to the sink. Sitting on the edge is a dumb, cheap piece of plastic that's possibly about to change her life.

Emma reaches out and lifts the pregnancy test off the sink. She drops her hand back to her knee, and holds the pregnancy test without looking at it for a few deep breaths.

*It's alright. You can do this. It's fine. Everything's going to be fine.*

Everything *was* fine.

Right up until she threw up the moment she smelled Granny's stuffing, that is.

Her gut roils again, not with nausea this time but with nerves.

Emma's been pregnant before. She knows the signs. She also knows she was a little loosey-goosey with her birth control pills in October, and that she and Killian haven't been using condoms lately as much as they used to.

Slowly, she turns her wrist, until the little window on the front of the stick is visible.

*Fuck.*

Two pink lines.

Emma Swan is pregnant.

Chapter End Notes

So, I think it's pretty obvious at this point where the sequel's going, yes? Ok, good. See you there!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!