Toxic is the Unyielding Love

by maggiemerc

Summary

After the events of “Destiny is the Rabbit Hole” Regina returns to Storybrooke to find the world changed in ways she could not have fathomed. Now she's on a quest to discover the new Storybrooke’s dark secrets and her journey will take her into the jaws of a fire-breathing serpent, the lair of a mad scientist and to a masquerade ball where too many of those dark secrets could be revealed.

Notes

The above summary is easily the most difficult one I’ve had to write because SPOILERS. But I heavily hinted at a lot of this for a while, so the above is good enough.

The real setup for this story will be apparent by the end of this chapter. I hope you’re up for the ride, because it’s going to be cracked the hell out.
Chapter 1

He arrived as a storm raged outside the city. It rarely rained in Agrabah. The storms that beat against the city walls were made of sand and wind and lightning that left streaks of glass across the desert floor.

It was through such a horror, reigning molten glass from the sky, that he appeared with his two girls. He was dressed in clothes of another land and had a rakish grin but spoke softly to her husband.

“I’ve brought my finest wares to populate you harem,” he said with a smile, and he waved to the two girls, the pale one who ducked her head coquettishly, and the proud Middle Kingdom girl who squared her jaw.

Her husband delighted at his new playthings and as he crowed with joy the man who’d stepped in from the storm turned to her with a knowing smile, “And here she sits, the Queen clever enough to escape her husband’s chopping block.”

She held out her hand and he took it in greeting, pressing his lips to her knuckle. “All the lands marvel at you my dear, and every whoremonger curses your name.”

“Why,” she asked.

“Because every day you live is another day one of our girls is denied your throne.”

“I am sorry to anger you.”

“Ah,” he held up a finger as a point, “But I could never curse such a beauty as you.”

“Your tongue is sly whoremonger.”

It darted out to lick his lips and she found herself watching it…wantonly.

“Your husband will soon retire, yes?”

“I have told my story for the evening. Now he will leave me for other pleasures.”

“It happens that I have brought more than those two whores to ply this palace’s king and queen. I would gladly…share…my other wares with you.”

He opened his mouth to further illuminate his plan but she placed her finger on those coral pink lips. His skin was pale against her own. How unnaturally white this visitor from another land was.

“Not here. Come to my room. Ply me there.”

“With pleasure.”

The clock struck twelve and he appeared at her door with a basket of fruit and a bowl of honey. The fruit was succulent, the honey fragrant, and his words perfumed as he told her of their origins.

They found their way to the bed of pillows she often reclined upon. She in nothing but silk, and her sweet traveller in dark breeches alone.

His kisses were gentle and his words soft.
He plucked a plump berry from the basket and submerged it in the honey. Drew it up and let the honey drip licentiously from it. He meant to feed it to her, but first he dragged the honeyed berry across her lips. Smeared its stickiness onto her skin. She darted up to capture the fruit between her teeth but he smiled playfully and put it between his own. He dipped down and begged her with a touch to claim her prize. Which she did gleefully.

His hand, clever, with silver rings that glinted in the brazier light, crept skillfully up her inner thigh.

“Tell me,” he whispered with that silken tongue, “what do you know of Sinbad and His Four Thieves?”

His tongue painted an arabesque down her throat.

“There was,” she gasped, “a pirate. He has sailed the seven seas and seen lands that even a god would not dare set foot upon. In one such land he met the Four Thieves. Clever and evil and good and beyond all morals they raid every kingdom in searching for a way to a land untouched by magic and carrying the promise of their revenge and their love.”

“And they found their way?”

She tilted her head to give him better access, “Yes. But Sinbad stole it from them. He fled from them for a year and thirty days before finding sanctuary in my husband’s palace.”

“And how can your husband give him sanctuary? He is but a king with a few more guards than others, and they are of legend.”

She smiled, “Ah, but he has bargained with creatures from beyond and commands Falak, the fire breathing serpent who lives beneath the earth and warms our hearths with his angry breath.”

“And Falak is dangerous?” The only thing more wicked than his tongue was that hand between her thighs.

“He is a serpent who breathes fire and is larger than the palace itself with a thousand teeth sharp as any sword.”

“But the Four Thieves defeated the Hydra, the Minotaur and the Kraken. Outsmarted the Monkey King, twice. Out- lied the liar Loki too. Dueled Hercules to a standstill at the feet of Atlas and coaxed Amaterasu from her cave.”

She leaned back to study his blue eyes that danced with secrets. “You know their story well.”

“Yes,” he said, “but I wish to hear more from you. Who are they?”

“Their names are hidden, as names hold power. But there is the Warrior Woman from the Middle Kingdom. She is as strong as a god and twice as fast with her sword and more noble than any man who draws breath.”

Something clattered to the floor in the hall.

“And the fair princess whose beauty hides a savage cunning. Her fingers are quick with any lock and she wields a bow that never misses its mark stolen from Artemis herself.”

Someone shouted, grunted and then was silent.

“And the wicked sorceress and fallen queen torn from those she loves and doomed to wander every
world but the one she seeks. She never weeps, but turns her emotions into terrible magic that tears asunder worlds and it is said she laughs merrily as they burn.”

He leaned over her, his blue eyes like sapphires shining. “And the fourth?”

“The pirate.” Oh no. “Who has seduced ever maiden and man he’s ever met, but those three he sails with, and who is almost unmatched with a sword, but holds no rival when he flashes his—“

He grinned, “Hook.”

“You?”

“I’m afraid so my dear Scheherazade.”

She looked down at the silver hook he wore instead of a hand. How had she never noticed it until now?

“You’re wondering why you didn’t notice it until now? A trick of Regina’s.” He stared at it with pride, “Hides my hook quite nicely for a time.”

“You’re one of them.”

“Yes, my dear, and I’ve come for the bastard Sinbad. If you tell me where he is my friends and I will kill that evil husband of yours.”

“Why—“

“He forces you to tell him stories correct? Until he grows bored and then,” he slashed his finger across his neck, “off with your head. How many have you told?”

“A thousand…and one.”

“Why make it a thousand and two when my hook can silence that brute and you can have a kingdom?”

It was an appealing offer. “And all you require?”

“Sinba—“

The door to her chambers blew open and two women—his two women—backed into the room. One had dressed in a green gown with a brown leather vest that kept her breast restrained so she might fire arrow after arrow as smooth as a master marksman. The other was in armor from the Middle Kingdom and wielded her sword confidently, batting away spears and arrows the guards in the hall unleashed.

“Did you find Sinbad,” the girl in the dress asked.

“Well, I was about to before you two clomped in!”

“Could you hurry—“ the one in armor glanced over her shoulder at them and rolled her eyes. “Killian. Where is your shirt? And your pants?”

“I was seducing!”

The archer caught an arrow shot at her and then fired it back, “Times up! Will she help us or not?”
Hook, one of the dread Four Thieves rounded on her and looked almost, pleading, “Well love. Fancy a kingdom?”

“I—"

The whole room suddenly shook as something rumbled far, far, far, far beneath them.

“Was—"

“That—"

“The serpent?”

“Yes,” Scheherazade said. “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

Hook had his back to her, pulling his leather pants up over a very nice rear, “It’s all right. That’s why we keep an angry sorceress around. Comes in handy for—“

The boom was deafening. Everyone, but the Four Thieves of the apocalypse, covered their ears. The sky beyond the window had been the black of a moonless night, but was suddenly bright as a summer day.

The warrior woman grabbed Scheherazade and jerked her around to face her, “Sinbad. Where is he?”

“With my husband. Late at night they disappear beneath the castle to play games with that winged cap of his.”

“It isn’t his,” the markswoman said, “we stole it from Hermes. He was busy getting seduced into a threesome with Aphrodite and a satyr and missed the entire affair!”

“Can you show us where,” the warrior woman asked.

“Yes. I—I think so.”

Hook ducked down under the cushions they’d been residing on just moments earlier. “Good. Let me find my shirt and we’ll be—“

The wall that held the windows exploded into shards of masonry. A body flew through, slamming into the tapestries on the far wall and sliding to the floor—hidden beneath one beautifully woven cloth. The thieves were, again, not fazed in the slightest. Hook continued to look for his shirt and the two women turned to push the soldiers in the hall back.

The body coughed and stood, tugging the tapestry off to reveal a woman, dressed in tight leather pants, tall boots, a shirt nearly as billowy as the pirate’s missing one, and a very well tailored red silk-lined black coat that flared at the waist. Her friends were adventurers. She was…power. She brushed chalky flecks of wall off of her and shook the dust from her hair.

“Well,” she said expectantly.

“He’s down below,” the warrior called.

“She’s going to take us to her,” Hook followed up.

“I see.” She cocked her head to the side in curiosity. “Killian. Where on earth is your shirt?”
“I don’t—ah ha!” He held up the black shirt triumphantly. “Found it. How goes your war with Falak, the fire breathing serpent?”

“The name is a misnomer. He has tentacles. Hundreds of—“ One such tentacle darted into the room and wrapped around the presumed sorceress’s waist. Her eyes widened in surprised. With an oomph she was dragged back out again into the night.

Hook pulled his shirt over his head and walked to the edge of the room to watch the battle. The other two, having dealt with the soldiers, followed. Their heads moved in tandem, tracking the fiery war waged in the courtyard.

“Someone should help her,” the markswoman mused. “Only two of us are needed for Sinbad.”

“Well, I’m not going,” Hook declared. “You women always send me after the monsters that explode in pus and frankly I’m tired of having to clean it out of my own damn clothing. You go Mulan. You’re fond of hot-headed serpents.”

“I am not a serpent,” the markswoman said in offense.

“And I’m not the one that let Sinbad get away in the first place,” the warrior, Mulan, said.

Both women slowly turned to stare at Hook who continued to watch the fight.

“I didn’t let him get away. He drugged me.” He looked back at them.

They were completely silent.

“Fine. But this is the last time.”

He swung back around dashingly grabbing Scheherazade and dipping her so low her hair brushed the floor. “Until next time love,” he proclaimed before dropping a very wet and pleasant kiss on her lips.

He swung her back up and in nearly the same motion kicked a sword up into his hand, took a running start and leapt out of the hole into the wall, catching hold of the giant, hundred tentacled, fire breathing monster with his hook.

A shower of fire exploded from a tentacle and a dark shape, the woman, dropped, stopped, and then flew back up, launching fireballs at the serpent’s head while Hook climbed higher up with his sword between his teeth.

“They’ll be fine right,” the markswoman asked.

“Yes,” Mulan said definitively. “This isn’t nearly as bad as the jikininki.” Both women shuddered visibly.

Outside a tentacle wrapped around Hook and flung him through a palace window directly below them. A chorus of screams rang up from below, followed by a swaggering, “Ladies.”

“Of course, he gets thrown into the harem,” the archer said in annoyance.

Another tentacle snaked into the room below jerked the pirate back out and into the fight.

“He’s always getting tossed into rooms full of scantily clad ladies.” The archer was still very concerned about that. “Is it magic? Did Regina curse him?”
Mulan rolled her eyes, sheathed her sword, and swept Scheherazade into her own arms in the most dashing way she’d ever been swept. “Please, your Majesty, take us to your husband, so we might kill him and finally give this kingdom the queen they deserve.”

Oh my. Scheherazade blushed.

The markswoman rolled her eyes, “Am I the only one who doesn’t flirt with the people we rescue?”

####

Falak, as it turns out, cast fire by regurgitating its own bile and igniting it. If one happened to be a witch capable of flame retardancy and could hold one’s breath while being swallowed one could arrive in that stomach full of fuel, create a single spark, and explode the monster from within.

This is precisely what Regina did.

She, unfortunately, failed to account for Killian, who had apparently been very, very high up in the air at the moment of the explosion and was plummeting towards the ground with a very unmanly yelp.

She could have caught him, but forming all the gooey remnants of the monster into a cushion for his fall was much more amusing. He sunk into it face first and stopped very quickly, his feet sticking comically up in the air and his entire body going rigid.

“Killian, dear,” she called, “Are you alive?”

His foot twitched and the whole circle of body parts quivered.

“I’ll take that as a yes!”

It had become a running joke between Regina and Aurora to see how filthy they could get the pirate on any given adventure. So far the time he spent twenty minutes in a giant’s large intestine stuck between two boils he had to burst to escape was the worst. They’d made him sleep in a dinghy dragged by the ship for a week until the smell wore off.

Regina popped her neck and glanced down on her clothes. They were wet with unburned bile that likely reeked as badly as the mess Killian was in, and her hair clung to her skull.

She shook her head and ran her fingers through the sopping wet mess that her hair was. Then scowled. Of all the—she’d burned her hair!

It had grown out quite nicely over the last two and a half years and now it felt shorter than when she’d gone through the damn portal!

Aurora and Mulan appeared at the edge of the courtyard with a fidgety Sinbad between them. He kept trying to twist out of Mulan’s grip, but as Regina knew from experience, it was virtually magical in its resilience.

Aurora glance up at the feet sticking out of the Falak goo and ducked her head to mask her smile. Mulan just blinked—she actually liked to use the dinghy to meditate and hated having to give it over to a reeking Killian Jones.

Sinbad stopped writhing just long enough to stare at Regina. “Did you do something to your hair?”
Regina scowled. “Will anyone protest if I turn him into a bird for the foreseeable future?”

Killian had managed to free one arm and waved what she presumed was a no. Mulan and Aurora agreed.

“Uh,” Sinbad protested, “I prote—“

He was cut off as his vocal cords shifted and he shrank to the size of a—

“A parrot,” Aurora asked.

“For Killian. He’s been wanting more friends.”

Mulan caught the bird swiftly and tied a piece of leather around his leg to keep him from flying away. “He’s so colorful.”

“I know,” she said gleefully, “And…” she raised her hand to call for a moment of silence.

Sinbad the bird squawked, “I’m horny.”

Neither Mulan or Aurora could find their words.

“He says the first thought that slips into his tiny little brain.”

“Your breasts are spectacular,” he squawked, his beady yellow eyes on Regina.

On second thought, as hilarious curses went, it might be the sort to backfire.

“Does Mulan go down on Aurora?”

Horribly, horribly backfire.

Killian finally wrenched the rest of himself out of the body parts and leaned on them, rested his chin in his hand. “I’m curious for the answer to that question as well.”

Sinbad squawked, “Let’s have an orgy!”

####

Scheherazade’s queenly coup was swift and far more pleasant than Regina’s own. The people cheered, the king’s body was paraded through the streets. Crowds roasted the parts of Falak on a spit and feasted.

Regina mused that she should have spent more time tearing down her own husband’s reputation before her coup. If the people had hated Leopold as she had maybe she wouldn’t have had to kill as many to secure her power.

“Thinking about your own coup,” Killian asked, “they didn’t quite take to the streets.”

“They did, but they were riots, and only after they thought I’d killed Snow White.”

“Scheherazade’s ascension is much more pleasant than.”

“Quite. You’d think her husband was a monster.”
“He beheaded his first thousand wives after taking their virginity and kept her alive because she told nice stories. And he had a fire breathing tentacle monster living under his castle. And he tried to buy Mulan and Aurora from me for a blow job and a camel. And he thought Sinbad was an honorable man.”

Sinbad flapped his wings in protest, but didn’t speak. Mulan had fashioned a muzzle for him so fast Regina half thought she’d used magic and it kept him blessedly silent.

“He’s not the only one.”

Killian laughed, “I never thought he was honorable. Just magnificent in bed.”

“Are you trying to make me ill?”

“I’m not the one who has sex dreams about the dear departed Miss Swan.”

Being forced to wander in each other’s dreams for two week had forced the four of them to bond early in their partnership, but it also had unleashed all sorts of truths Regina would have preferred stayed hidden. Like her apparent lust for Emma Swan. And Hook’s lust for anything with genitalia. And Mulan and Aurora’s very chaste mutual lovefest that had had honest to God rainbows and unicorns.

“Do you think she’ll be a good queen,” she said, pushing the conversation away from the woman she’d passionately kissed the last time she’d seen her and couldn’t stop thinking about since even though she hated her a great, great deal.

Regina shrugged, “She has lovely taste in lovers.”

“And she seems wise. She has the support and love of her people. And her father was essentially running the kingdom as Chief Vizier. Together they could turn Agrabah into a jewel.”

Scheherazade broke away from the crowd of virgin girls they’d liberated from her dead husband’s harem and skipped over to them, laughing all the while. “Come my friends,” she said, “take in the festivities!”

Killian grinned rakishly, “If you’re offering.” He dragged the queen back out into the joyful firelight, leaving Regina comfortable in her shadows.

Until a little girl came up to her with a little coaxing from her father. “Are you one of the Four Thieves?”

That silly title grated on Regina’s nerves but she smiled politely, “I am.”

“Which one are you?”

How were they identified? Warrior woman. Pirate. Princess. “The Evil Queen.”

The girl frowned. “That’s not one of the Four Thieves!”

“Oh?”

“There’s the Pirate. The Princess. The Warrior. And the Sorceress.”
“And what have you heard of the Sorceress?”

She braced herself. “That she is separated from her lover and her son and her magic comes from her sadness.” Well. That wasn’t exactly accurate—“and she shoots fireballs!”

Regina leaned down and snapped her fingers, a blaze of fire forming just above her thumb, “That I do. The better to roast children who don’t mind their parents.”

The little girl’s lip wobbled, indicating she was in no way as brave as Regina’s own son. She burst into terrified tears and she turned on her tiny little heel and dashed back to her father. He glared, but didn’t say anything. The little girl might think she was some ridiculous woman fueled by tears but the man was old enough to know the legend of the real Regina. The Evil Queen.

“Most people would be humbled by that little girl,” Mulan observed, popping out of the shadows like she always did. It had become so habitual Regina didn’t even jump anymore.

“Most people would also find her story about my tears asinine.”

“Someone who didn’t know you would point out that you’ve changed, and that little girl can see it better than you.”

Regina scowled, “I’m so glad I’m surrounded by people who know me then.”

But Mulan wasn’t done. She clasped her hands behind her back and watched the fires thoughtfully, “That same someone would tell you that you’re not an Evil Queen. Not anymore.”

“Tell that to Falak, or Scheherazade’s husband, or the parrot on Killian’s shoulder.”

“Or the people of the Enchanted Forest?”

To those hypocrites it would never change. Not until she danced in red hot shoes of iron and burned to death at Snow White’s feet.

“They’ll see what we all see,” Mulan said with no small amount of her trademark confidence. “The Sorceress that took on Circe in single combat to save a kingdom.”

“That we needed unscathed if we wanted to find Hermes,” she quickly countered.

Mulan just stared serenely at her.

“Oh shut up,” she snapped.

“You know that I’m not just talking up your heroic qualities to goad you don’t you?”

That was interesting. Mulan had a puckish little streak. Not as playful as her girlfriend’s. More a quiet and dark sort of humor, that manifested in her tendency to play devil’s advocate just to see a person squirm.

“An ulterior motive? From you?”

“The plan is tomorrow you go through the portal alone. I just want that heroism I’ve spent the last two and half years nurturing to stick with you long enough for you to come back and get us.”

“I said I would.”

“It would be easy to forget. If we eventually made it over there you could just claim you couldn’t
bring the barrier down.”

“Mulan, I swore to you I would get you all to Storybrooke. I meant it.”

“Like the last time?”

Regina frowned. “What on earth is that supposed to mean?”

“The portal Emma and Snow went though. It was only powerful enough to get three people through. You just got left behind.”

Well…clever. And a surprise. “How long have you known?”

“I suspected back then on the ship when you agreed we were all coming with you. Earlier you’d told us there wasn’t enough power in the spell. That was why you’d come alone in the first place. But I knew when Killian and I found you bleeding in the forest.”

“And you didn’t say anything?”

“You’re our way home Regina, and now…you’re my friend. But I also think we’ve come far enough that I can be honest with you.”

And, the implication was, that Regina could be honest with her. “That was the plan.”

Mulan closed her eyes. The confirmation hurting more than either of them could have anticipated. “I can’t let you betray us again. I can’t let that happen to Aurora.”

Regina reached out and grasped Mulan’s hand. “It won’t. This time will be different.”

Because they understood one another quite more than either wanted to Mulan did not press Regina for reasons why. They were apparent enough. They’d spent these long years together. Forming… partnerships. They’d dared trust each other with their lives and they’d survived because of it. The four of them: traitorous pirate, honorable warrior, noble princess and evil queen. Something had been forged between them that Regina happily refused to define and Aurora teased as friendship when she was positive Regina couldn’t reach her with a fireball.

It was…pleasant.

They trusted her and cared for her and saw a hero where others saw a villain. And for that alone she’d make sure the three others made it to Storybrooke. Alive.

####

Two bright little yellow eyes, so close she had to cross her eyes to look at them properly, glared at her. “Hey,” the bird asked, “want to fuck?”

Regina shouted and sat up. Brightly colored wings beat at her face and she began pooling magic for the fireball to end all fireballs as Sinbad fled back to the assumed safety of Killian’s shoulder. The man, who was going to end up like his ex-boyfriend if he wasn’t careful, was doubled over laughing.

“It was priceless,” he exclaimed.

The fireball singed hair, feather, and blackened the wall behind the pirate in his bird. “Keep
“laughing,” Regina growled, “and I’ll give you a peg leg to go with the hook and parrot.”

He held up his hook and hand in peace, “It was just a joke.”

“I’m in no mood.”

“Nervous about potentially ripping yourself apart trying to break through the barrier up around your other world?”

Yes. Yes, she was. But she said instead, “I was sleeping. You and that bird brain interrupted it.”

He patted Sinbad’s head. “Be nice. The bastard used to have a whole brain.”

Regina actually looked forward to eventually removing the curse and watching the bastard’s embarrassment when he remembered every last moment of his time as a bird. Like the current moment, where he was defecating on Killian’s shoulder.

Killian’s grin faded, “He’s shit on me again hasn’t he?”

She nodded.

He took a swing at the bird, but as quick as the man he’d been Sinbad flew out the window and presumably above deck.

Or possibly to Mulan and Aurora’s quarters, which were just next door to Regina’s. Sure enough there was a low whistle from the bird, heard clearly through the thin wooden wall. “Woah, scissoring.”

Killian grinned, and even Regina had to smile at the curses in foreign languages and angry clanging noise that was likely a half naked Mulan drawing her sword and chasing the bird.

“He really is the best gift you’ve ever given me dear.”

“I’m so glad I could gift you the most irritating creature on all the lands.”

Killian’s grin turned positively child-like, reminding Regina of the son she hadn’t seen in years, and that, if all went well, she’d see again in mere hours.

The bird flapped by her window again and then flew—

“He didn’t go into the hold with the horses did he?”

A whinny and “whump” said that Sinbad most definitely did.

###

After a final meal shared with Scheherazade and her father, the Chief Vizier, they set sail away from Agrabah. There were a few sidetracks of course. Hwin and Gauvin both needed more oats and Aurora noted that Sinbad (only frightened—not stomped to death) would need birdseed. Killian got distracted at a tailor and spent thirty minutes trying on pants in a variety of colors he insisted weren’t black. And ever single food vendor in town tried to sell them Falak cooked in a myriad of ways.

They managed to escape the vendors. Or they thought they did, until Mulan revealed the barrel of salted fire breathing serpent she’d purchased that was guaranteed to give them dysentery.
Finally they set sail. The Jolly Roger was the fastest ship in any land and reached the border between the Agrabah and the Enchanted Forest in under an hour. It was their first time returning there since Sinbad had stolen Hermes’ winged cap from them and Regina was surprised to find that the land actually felt different.

There’d been changes between the Enchanted Forest before the curse and after the curse, yet somehow it was this visit in which the changes felt most profound.

She took a deep breath and found a pool of regret waiting in her chest and threatening tears in her eyes. This was her land, the silence and the smell of ash that pervaded it were because of her.

Her comrades, as if mindful of her dark thoughts, said nothing until they anchored the boat a few yards from shore.

Regina allowed herself a moment with Gauvin and Hwin while Killian prepared the dinghy to take them to the beach. They’d agreed that risking the ship (and horses) would be foolish. Regina’s first attempt at returning home would be on dry land.

It was the barrier’s fault. Their first attempt back to Storybrooke had been with a single splinter from Yggdrasill. It was actually less a splinter and more a fiber from the tree, as long as her finger and thin as a hair. It should have been enough to get her, the three others, the ship, the horses and even a continent through. That was the potency of the world tree.

But she’d run up hard against a barrier set between the world Storybrooke resided in and all others. It took them six more months to finally find an object powerful enough to pierce the barrier. Hermes’ cap allowed the god to travel between worlds with a thought. Shattered and inhaled it would, hopefully, let Regina do the same, and take as many as she liked with her.

**Hopefully.** Unmaking an object as potent as the trickster god’s cap was deadly, and consuming it to possess its power was positively suicidal.

Once on the shore she carefully pulled the cap from the velvet bag Mulan held. The wings on it seemed made of gold, and flickered as fast as a hummingbird’s. Regina had to hold it in both her hands to keep it from flying away.

Aurora started forward for a hug, but thought better of it. “Good luck,” she said simply.

“Try not to vaporize yourself,” Killian warned helpfully.

Mulan’s mouth was set in that permanent grim line of her’s, but her words were imbued with hope. “We’ll see you again soon Regina.”

They all stepped back, Mulan taking Aurora’s hand and Killian shading his eyes from the sun. Regina looked back down at the cap.

A god’s precious possession. An object so powerful armies would wage war a thousand years to possess it. She inhaled. Exhaled. Her breath was shaky. There was no room for that.

She inhaled. Exhaled again. Better.

Inhale. Exhale.

The wings started to move in time with her breath, slowing until she could see ever golden barb on each feather.
Inhale.

Exhale.

The cap began to disintegrate, turning to purple and gold dust.

Inhale.

Exhale.

There was nothing left of it. Just raw power resting in her hands. Thunder clapped. Wind blew violently in the trees.

Inhale.

Exhale.

She drew the magic in. Hot and alive it writhed through her, tattooing her skin with its power. Her knees turned unsteady. The thunder grew louder.

Lightening cracked on the sand.

Inhale.

Exhale.

It was in her now. All the magic of that god’s passageway between worlds.

All worlds.

She could see them with a thought.

She was Jefferson’s magic hat, seeing the great expanse of all universes pressed against each other. Pressed against her.

Inhale.

Exhale.

She could **that** world. The world with Henry and Emma and Snow White and everyone she hated and almost everyone she loved.

Inhale.

Exhale.

She reached out for it. The barrier around it flexed. Held. She pressed.

And pressed.

Cracks formed.

But the barrier held.

Inhale.

Exhale.
There. The tiniest of openings. Too small for a full grown woman. So she turned herself small. And smaller. And smaller still. The space between her and home yawned wide, but Regina reached and felt the grasp of home tightly on her mind and she pushed forward.

And with a gentle pop she was home.

###

But it wasn’t quite right. She was standing in a train station as grand as that one in Manhattan. A ceiling of marble was a hundred feet overhead. People, and sorcerers and monsters alike milled casually about.

She took a deep breath and could taste the exhaust and filth that she recognized as her world’s unique taste. She was home, but it was very different. As though every land that had ever been had found its way there.

Behind her a mirror shimmered and a man dressed in a ridiculous long black robe stepped out casually. He barely glanced at her as he walked by, his nose buried in a book. But then he stopped and seemed to stare at something else.

She followed his gaze to a statue in the middle of the station. A giant bronze statue of a woman in a grand gown.

A giant bronze statue of Regina in a grand gown.

What on earth?

The man in the robe glanced at her again and his eyes widened in recognition. He ran over to a very official looking woman in a uniform. He pointed and gestured wildly and Regina planted her feet firmly and prepared to fight. Whether with magic or with words she didn’t know. And she didn’t care. What she wanted most was answers, and she’d gladly pull them from the man or his friend with tortured screams in necessary.

Only a hand grabbed her wrist and a young man appeared before her and grinned boyishly. “Run,” he urged. Like they were embarking on a great adventure. He threw something at the woman approaching. She’d drawn a black rod from…somewhere and was jogging towards them.

But the something the man threw exploded in a flash of light and Regina let herself be dragged away. They dodged more guards. They came, all shapes and sizes, out of nowhere. Regina flung some away with magic, and some the man expertly tossed aside with a shoulder or a punch or a well placed kick. He led Regina out into an alleyway. The street was noisy beyond, and more sounds obnoxiously passed over head. The man paid them no mind, and they were running so quickly Regina didn’t have time to do more than wonder why one earth the sky was full of blimps and funny little planes.

They came abruptly to a dead end.

“Well, any more plans,” she asked sarcastically.

He grinned again, still acting as though this were all one of Henry’s video games. He drew a wand from the messenger bag he wore and tapped it against the wall. A door appeared. He tossed Regina through and followed just as guards could be heard in the alley behind them. Another tap and the door was gone.
“That should lose them.”

“They won’t just break though?”

“Not through a foot of cement and steel.”

“You’ve done this before.”

“Sure,” he said brightly, “lot’s of times.”

Regina couldn’t contain it any longer. She rolled eyes theatrically.

Which only made the man laugh.

It was…familiar. Sparking a sudden pang in Regina.

“Wow,” he said. “You’re really here. And you haven’t changed at all.”

He invaded her space, poking and prodding and squeezing her and just when she was about to scorch him into the unknown he picked her up in a hug and laughed again, more jubilantly than ever before.

“You’re actually here!”

And Regina had officially had enough. She shoved the man away and stepped as far back as she could without leaving the room. He held his hands up apologetically, but continued to grin like an idiot. Regina ran her hands through her hair and patted at her clothes in an effort to gain back some semblance of, if anything else, self.

“And where exactly is here?”

“Storybrooke.”

It was Regina’s turn to laugh. “I know Storybrooke. We never had a train station.”

“We still don’t. That’s a way station full of portals to other lands.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It was about the first thing your mom built when she got here. She used it to fill this place up with her goons.”

“I see.”

“Wait.” He frowned petulantly, “You really don’t believe me?”

“No. I’m afraid I don’t. This—world—isn’t mine.”

“It is yours though. This is the Storybrooke you created 1983.”

“And how could you possibly know that?”

He tilted his head to the side in a very familiar way, “Because you told me about it when Emma broke the curse and you didn’t have a choice.”

“Excuse me?”
He stepped into her space again, and took both of her hands like he had a right, “Mom,” he said carefully, “It’s me. Henry.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Feedback has been surprisingly awesome and robust! I’ll admit, I’m nervous on how people will take all of Toxic as it’s a little more heavy fantasy/dystopia than Destiny or even the show. Crossing my fingers you’ll enjoy the ride, and maybe promising you that part 3 will be much more grounded in a recognizable world.

But until then let the cracky steampunk future world continue! And if you’re curious about my plans for this or to get hints at what the hell I’m thinking then feel free to follow me on Tumblr. I’m blogging waaaay too much about this fic there.

When they had to flee Storybrooke and start living in the mine shafts under the town to hide from Cora and her armies and they’d turn out all the lamps out at night to conserve fuel and it would become so dark Henry couldn’t even see his hands when he waved them in front of his face Emma would pull him close and plant a kiss on the top of his head.

“It’s okay kid,” she’d say as rote as ever. “We’re okay.”

He was still little then. Young enough that he could curl up and let Emma hug him and not feel silly for accepting the comfort she offered.

“Tell me a story,” he’d beg her.

“What do you want to hear about?”

“My dad.”

“You don’t want to hear about your dad.”

“How you became a bounty hunter.”

“You’re too **young** to hear about that.”

“China.”

“Nope.”

“Boston.”

“Oh oh.”

It was a game. A series of requests she always denied. Until. “My mom?”

“Okay.”

And she’d tell him about how Regina suddenly appeared in a cave and fought centaurs and golems and an evil blood sorcerer to rescue her. Then she’d get all quiet as she ended her story with his mom’s noble sacrifice.
“She died so we could survive Henry. She did more for us than anyone ever has.”

He’d never had someone die to protect him before. It was a heavy weight on his shoulders. A burden he couldn’t escape. He thought about her every day for a while. Kept hoping she’d be alive so that burden would lift. Kept hoping she’d appear and maybe she wouldn’t be the Evil Queen that had left him, but the mom who used to hop into the bed with him on cold mornings and wake him up with a hug and a tickle and cold feet.

Only she never came.

And he grew too big to share a bed with Emma.

And one day as he was going to sleep he realized he hadn’t thought of his mom all day. Hadn’t thought of her as **Mom**. He’d grown accustomed to thinking of her as that hero in another land, that died to save his life and when he fought Cora and her wicked witches he thought of how his mother would be proud of him for standing up for himself. When he outsmarted Frankenstein himself he’d hear his mother remarking on how he was clearly cleverer than every other boy. She twisted around in his head until all the things he hated he couldn’t remember and all the things he’d loved shined like beacons.

But he moved on too. His mom became a martyr and he became a hero.

Only she was standing across from him now. Shorter than he remembered. She’d probably only come up to his chin if she weren’t wearing boots with heels like a runway model’s. But otherwise she was exactly the same. Same hair. Same dark and fickle eyes. Same smell. He’d hugged her and she’d smelled like home and apple and **Mom**.

Somehow in the last ten years Henry had grown up and his mother had stayed the same, trapped in time, an artifact from a world before the Queen of Hearts and her Wicked Witches and Rumpelstiltskin and the tinkerer Frankenstein. When the world made sense and she was at the center of his.

It had to be his mom, because when he said his name she shook her head like he was crazy. That was painfully familiar. “No,” she uttered, “No, my son is a child.”

“Yeah, ten years ago. Now I’m a terrorist—or a revolutionary depending on who you talk to. Oh, and I dropped out of school.”

“You got a GED,” she asked in horror.

“Pretty hard when Cora cut us off completely with the outside world and shut down the school. Grams tried homeschooling me. She made me carry around an egg for a week and pretend it was a baby and then we did that experiment where you build a cushion for the egg and throw it off a building. Which I aced.”

With help from Emma and her magic. She’s magicked the egg to make it invulnerable. He could have chunked it at a wall and the **wall** would have shattered. He ended up keeping it. It was good for acting like a mini-club when he didn’t have another weapon on him, and a nice reminder that on some rare occasions Emma could control her magic and not actually hurt people with it.

But his mom was shaking her head and still clearly trying to get a hang on everything he’d said. “I’m sorry. I… You’re Henry.”

He nodded.
She stepped into his space, taking her turn to poke and prod **him.** “But how is this possible? I was gone two and a half years. Not ten. You should just be starting puberty, not sporting this—Henry what is this on your face?”

“It’s a beard.”

“You look homeless.”

“Technically—“

She pinched him, “Okay. I do have a home.”

“And a beard. Has my mother outlawed **shaving**?”

“No.”

“Are razors more difficult to come by than food?”

“No.”

“Then?”

“Mom, come on. I’m twenty-one. If I want to have a beard I can.”

She narrowed her eyes, “We shall see,” she intoned. Another guy would have said that must be the Evil Queen voice, but she used to use the same tone when Henry refused to eat his squash or pick up his toys. So it wasn’t scary as much as it was part of the whole theater of the maternal.

…

He should have said that very smart sounding sentence out loud, maybe then she wouldn’t be so horrified by the beard and lack of a high school diploma.

Henry tilted his chin up defiantly and his mom’s features immediately softened. Her hands rose to cup his face. Her thumbs gently stroked his beard. Her eyes plaintively searched his own. “It really is you,” she said softly in awe.

He wrapped his hands around her own and held them there. It was a little moment, and maybe the only one they’d have. So he relished every second of it and drank in the sight of the mother he’d lost. Chronicled every wrinkle and mole and scar he could see and allowed himself to disappear into dark eyes that were foreign to his biological family, but to him, felt like home.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “It’s me.”

Tears flashed in her eyes and her lips quivered uncertainly between despair and joy. “You’ve become a very handsome young man,” she said with pride, her thumbs were still rubbing circles on his cheeks, but then she squeezed his face between her hands. “And you’re good? Noble?”

He squeezed back, and tried not to let the gathering moisture in his own eyes fall. Was he good? That was up for debate. All he knew was that he was was what— “I’m who you raised me to be.”

That was when the tears were shed and a single sob escaped her doubtful lips. It was natural what happened next. Ten years apart and that whole year they’d bitterly circled each other disappeared. He put his arms around her, noting how slight her shoulders felt and how delicate Storybrooke’s evil queen had become. He’d always thought his mother made of iron and as indestructible as diamonds,
but she was soft. Human. Her hands pressed against his chest, protecting his shirt from her tears. He squeezed tighter, trying to let everything they’d never said be spoken in the embrace.

Slowly her hands moved to wrap around his waist and the tears bled through the fabric of his shirt and they were one. Mother and son.

At last.

####

She had to set aside the natural horror at her predicament.

Ten years.

Henry had been a boy with a quick smile and true heart and a nobility independent of birth or upbringing. But he’d grown tall and strong, and puberty had turned him lean and wry. There was a confidence he’d never had before. A swagger that reminded her of his birth mother.

But.

Ten years.


Ten years and was she still a mother? Did she still have a son?

“Mom?”

He was offering her a hand to step over a metal pipe as thick as her waist. They’d descended below the city. Into utility tunnels Regina’s built but had never used. “Cora hooked them up to the infrastructure when she started building all her high rises,” he explained. “She has these crazy crocodile men living down here to guard everything, but we should be okay.”

“Why,” she asked, curious about Henry’s confidence.

“Their scheduled feeding time. Gives us a forty minute block of time to move through this section—”

“Without getting eaten.”

“Yeah.”

He helped her over another pipe, putting his hands around her waist and lifting her whole body up and over. When she’d last held him she could still pick him up in her arms. “Henry,” she asked, “why were you—wherever that was.”

He set her down. “I was waiting for a friend. She was scheduled to come in about ten minutes ago, but then I saw you and changed my plan.” The change in plan delighted him, as it always had. Henry had been a pragmatic boy, but lured by the unpredictable.

“And your friend?”
“She’ll be fine, Mom. She didn’t actually need me there, and you and I running away probably made a great distraction for her.”

“And she…she isn’t Emma is she?”

He laughed, “No. Definitely not. Emma doesn’t…travel well—through the portals.”

So they were portals. She’d half hoped they wouldn’t be. The rest of the lands were all pressed up against one another for the most part. Travel far enough on foot and one could find themselves amongst the folklore of China or in a forest populated by the characters of that obnoxious Danish writer. The lands not pressed up against each other required a portal. Except for Storybrooke. It had been cut off from magic, set far, far afield from all the other worlds. It took a curse to reach it and only the most powerful of magicks could let one return to it.

Except, it seemed, now.

“That was Cora’s first order of business when she took over. Tore down the well and built that giant way station for just about every land you can imagine. We had a dinosaur accidentally walk through one two years ago? Ate three warlocks and half of old city hall before they put it down.”

“That’s why one doesn’t just leave a portal open like a barn door.”

“You do if you’re Cora and trying to turn Storybrooke into a twenty-four resort for ever evil villain ever put in a book.”

Her mother’s promised paradise. Where they were gods commanding not just one world, but many…all.

“How did she get this far? I can’t imagine Emma or Snow just allowing this to happen.”

“She looked like you that first day. We thought she was.” There was a hint of regret in his voice that had Regina reaching out for him. But she held back at the last moment. Bitter memories of all the times he’d cast her aside rising to the forefront. “Emma kept saying something was up because she—you—Cora wasn’t talking about some weird stuff that had happened over there.” Regina blushed and was grateful for the red lamps that lit their way and masked the blush nicely. “Stuff” was that foolish and wonder—that idiotic ki—thing. The thing she’d done that she shouldn’t have.

A grinning Aurora was in her head, looking at her knowingly and telling her to just call it a kiss and say she’d loved it and thought about it every day since. She squished that Aurora beneath her heel.

“—Getting control of him was the first thing she did. Then at the party she just walked in with Mr. Gold and that dagger. Told us Storybrooke was hers now and that we were all going to be spared so we could serve as living trophies of her triumph.” He put quotes around the final word.

“But Emma—“

“Fought back with everyone else. And Gold stopped them. And Cora punished us by turning the seven dwarves into statues.”

There went her mother, doing things Regina had never even dared. “She killed them?”

He nodded, but the grief was old and barely shadowed his features, “Turned them to stone right in front of us. Grumpy was still holding the knife he was charging her with. Now when she gets really mad at us she breaks a head off and leaves it in the center of town. As reminder.”
“Make them love you,” Cora had always instructed her, “but if that fails fear is a wonderful motivator.”

How old had Henry been when the first stone head was laid in the streets and a person he’d known was reduced to nothing but a method of intimidation? Had Emma soothed his fears? Had anyone been there for Henry in that moment of horror?

She stopped their trek and reached again for him. This time just to offer simple contact.

“Henry I’m—“

She was what? Sorry her mother was a megalomaniacal sociopath? What would such an apology accomplish? It wouldn’t bring back the little miners. It wouldn’t alleviate the old wounds.

And Henry, her clever son, knew. He grasped her fingers and squeezed them briefly while offering her another consoling smile. “It was a long time ago Mom, and what could you have done? Gold is the most powerful magic force ever right? Cora had him and her own magic on top of that.”

She sighed, “I just wish I could have been there…for you.”

He tilted his head and studied her. “You know, Emma was always saying you changed over there. Said you were heroic.”

She braced herself.

“I’m really glad she was right.”

It was disingenuous to take comfort from Henry’s words. He’d missed her for ten years and clearly somehow forgot all the things they’d said and done to hurt one another. Forgotten all the times he’d accused her of being evil and insisted she wasn’t family. That was the problem with memories. In an optimist like Henry only the good ones survived. So he’d built her up into someone more than she was.

And she shouldn’t have taken advantage of that new role he’d cast her in, but she did so gladly. For it gave her that which she’d always wanted. A son who seemed to love her unconditionally.

####

They must have walked two miles underground. Regina’s feet didn’t hurt from the trek, but she’d long since grown tired of the dull red glow of lights guiding their way and the boring walls that confined them. The only thing that hadn’t bored her was watching Henry. He was leading them and all she could see was the back of him but it was a perfect back. Narrow shoulders, long arms that had likely only recently stopped being described as gangly. He wore a pea coat, and with his expensive looking boots, slacks and messenger bag he looked all the world like a bright young man on his way to classes at Harvard or Yale or Oxford.

But the hair at the nape of his neck brushed his collar. It was just a little too long. That had been his mode of rebellion as a child too. Refusing hair cuts until it was past his ears and he looked shaggy. “The other parents will think I don’t care about your appearance,” she’d insist.

“I don’t care,” he’d shoot back, and he’d cross his tiny arms and scowl. It was a gesture that would startle her later when Emma Swan perfectly mirrored it.
“You need a haircut,” she noted.

Henry’s lip quirked upward, “And I need to shave. And to graduate high school. Anything else Mom?”

“You should eat more. You’re far too skinny.”

“Yeah but look,” he turned around and yanked his shirt up to pat his stomach. “A six pack! Even Gramps doesn’t have one of these.”

“That’s because most men starve themselves for it. I highly doubt you get that from going to the gym and eating right.”

“I eat fruit…sometimes. And Grams can do wonders with the SPAM I steal.”

She shuddered. “Snow—Mary Margaret feeds you **SPAM**?”

Ten years of treating her son’s body like a temple and that twit ruins it with **SPAM**. She probably fed him candy for dinner. And— “And where is Emma in all this?”

“Emma doesn’t cook, Mom. Ever. She gave us food poisoning twice before I was twelve.”

“That does sound like the venerable Miss Swan.”

“And we only had one toilet,” he said, wrinkling his nose.

Disgusting.

“We used a bucket at one point.”

She closed her eyes to ward off that particular horror.

“And then Emma accidentally kicked it over.”

Closing them wasn’t working.

“We don’t use that cave anymore.”

She chanced a peek at Henry. His nose was still wrinkled in disgust.

“Your grandparents should be quite accustomed to the bucket system. We didn’t have indoor plumbing in the enchanted forest until my reign.”

“Oh I know. They talked about how living “rough” was easy all the time.” His obvious annoyance with that particular declaration brought a smile to Regina’s lips.

After ten years she wasn’t sure what she could claim of Henry. She’d been his mother, yes, but for only half his life. The other half had been spent in the care of the Charming brood and Regina naturally worried that their influence had erased all of her own.

The annoyance told her otherwise. Whatever else had happened Henry was still the son that had been placed in her arms those many years ago.

Henry came to a stop at a ladder leading to the surface, only she couldn’t spy any actual entrance at the top of the ladder. He leaned over casually, “You’re wondering how we get out.”
“It crossed my mind, dear.”

He pulled the wand from his bag. “One of the last five fairy wands in existence.” He wagged it about proudly, “Don’t tell Grams I have it.”

“There’s only five?”

Henry took to the ladder with gusto and Regina followed a little more carefully after him. “Cora destroyed the rest. Keeps the fairies all locked up too.”

“And their dust?”

He hooked his arm around a rung and tapped the wand against the ceiling over head, “I’ve got a supplier.”

An exit popped into existence. Henry climbed out and then reached down, grabbing both of Regina’s hands and again lifting her up with stunning ease.

“A supplier?”

“It’s a nice way of saying I steal it, Mom.”

“Charming. My son is a thief.”

He knelt down and tapped the wand over the hole they’d come up out of. “And a terrorist. You can’t forget terrorist.”

“And you sound like Emma.”

He shrugged but looked up to flash her a cheeky grin. A breeze ruffled his hair. “I look like her too.” She rolled her eyes and he laughed. “Come on. Let’s get you back to home base.”

He slipped the wand back into his bag and offered her his arm. Which she took—wrapping her arm around his and leaning into his body as they walked.

When he was a baby, all swaddled up so his tiny little nails wouldn’t tear his delicate skin and his little legs couldn’t kick about and disrupt his sleep, she’d hold him in her arms and dream of the day he’d be taller than her and they’d walk like this through the streets of Storybrooke. Her chest swelling with pride as she showed off her perfect son to the idiots that populated her town.

Reality wasn’t quite as picturesque. Storybrooke was no longer a sleepy hamlet, but a bustling metropolis. They stepped out onto a well lit street full of people. Cars drove by spewing exhaust, blimps loudly floated over head. She tried not to gape at the tiny planes that soared by, they didn’t have engines, but wings that beat as fast as a hummingbird’s.

Everything glistened. It was all steel and glass and brass and bright lights from giant advertisements hanging on towering buildings and promising eternal youth, the death of enemies and a hundred virgins for (literally) a siren’s song.

She clenched her jaw just to keep it from slacking open.

“A lot’s changed huh,” Henry asked in a low voice.

“It’s unrecognizable.”

“The new Storybrooke. Bought and paid for by magic and evil. And the one place everyone in the
universe wants to be.”

And in all her travels Regina had heard nothing of—what on earth? She came to an abrupt stop in front of a poster announcing the movie playing inside.

“Oh yeah,” Henry noted, “that’s some super popular new movie out of Hollywood. Movies and food are pretty much the only thing she allows in from the outside world. It’s supposed to be decent.”

No. It looked atrocious. Killian was a woman. Aurora and Mulan were men. Sinbad, the only one besides Regina not to undergo a gender change, was standing front and center grinning cockily. Emblazoned across the bottom was the title, “Sinbad and the Four Thieves!”

But the worst part, the bit that had her clinching her hand close to avoid incinerating the whole damn theater, was that she—or (more precisely) the actress playing her—was wrapped all around Sinbad like a shawl and clearly the love interest.

“My—that friend of mine? She wants to see it.”

“Well then you should have her shot.”

“Mom.”

“This,” she tried to use her hands to describe it and failed, “thing is libel.”

He looked skeptical, “This thing actually happened?”

“No, not in this fashion!”

He still wasn’t sure. “And you were there?”

She stood straighter, “Of course.”

“Then why isn’t it in my book?”

“Because it happened after that insipid book was written.”

And the story had somehow traveled overnight. She filed that curiosity away for when she was alone and could better examine precisely what had happened. It was a curiosity just like the barrier she’d broken through to get to Storybrooke and the dystopian future she now found herself in. Something that shouldn’t be but was.

They continued on with Henry acting as tour guide and it was all truly unrecognizable. There was no visible remains of the Storybrooke Regina had built with her own wrath and the blood of her father. Just her mother’s glittering metropolis, shining in the night.

“How many live here?”

Henry shrugged, “Couple of million? Most of the city isn’t as built up as this.”

“Still, this is more than Storybrooke ever was. And the people. They’re all from the portals?”

“Just the tourists and a few big wigs. Cora didn’t want refugees and immigrants clogging her beautiful way station, so she had the Cat and the Fox and the Coachman lure the workforce from overseas. Half this city is nothing more than slaves.”

Part of Regina was appalled, but most of her was impressed by her mother’s plan and how swiftly
she’d enacted it. She’d assured Regina, as she slid the knife between her ribs, that she would build her a paradise. And to some, the streets they walked very much were.

“You free them don’t you?”

“When I can. She’s started collaring them. They go beyond the town border and they don’t survive.”

“She has thought of everything.”

Henry was appalled, “Are you impressed?”

“Look at what she did in ten years.”

“On the backs of innocent people.”

“Yes, but—“

“Mom. This is a city built on bodies. There’s nothing to be impressed about.”

And before, before it had been a city built on her own sacrifice. There was everything to be impressed about. But she wasn’t going to push it with Henry. Not when he’d been so good to her. She had a son that loved her, which meant squashing down the part of her that thrilled at the city her mother had built.

For her.

####

Their tour eventually came to an end at a ratty old SUV with a corroded side panel and what look like a vagrant sitting in the driver’s seat. Henry slid into onto the bench behind the driver and pulled Regina in after him then reached across her to shut the door.

The driver jumped a good foot in his seat at their entrance and turned around, his only eye piercing them with a glare. “Jesus Henry!”

“I know I’m late—“

“No, you were a no show! Dorothy called an hour ago and said you’d been made and were leading half the cops in town on a merry chase through the alleys.”

Regina squinted. Up close he wasn’t such a vagrant. His beard was trimmed, and his hair wasn’t shaggy like Henry’s. It must have been the facial hair combining with the eyepatch and ratty jacket.

And the fact that last time she’d seen the esteemed Prince Charming he’d been clean shaven and possessing two eyes.

“I was fine Gramps. Besides. I found someone.”

Had he magic a beam of it shot from his single eye would have incinerated her. “I can see that,” he said disapprovingly. “Is there a reason your friend looks like Regina?”

“I can think of a very good one,” she said.

“Regina died.”
She rolled her eyes, “As have you, and Snow and even Henry here. You of all people should know that a person isn’t dead until they’re in the ground David.”

His eye narrowed. “If you’re actually Regina then why the hell haven’t you aged at all in the last ten years?”

“That’s a good question and when we aren’t sitting in a eye sore in the middle of a very opulent part of this new city I’d be happy to explain.”

“Gramps,” Henry urged, “it’s her.”

“She could be a trap.”

“She’s not,” he said confidently. “I trust her.”

“Then you can be the one to explain it to Mary Margaret.”

“I don’t mind,” she offered. “I’d be happy to tell Snow I survived. In fact I insist on being there to see the look on her face.”

“Mom.”

“Jesus,” Charming muttered, “you know you are exactly what I didn’t need today?”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” Henry and Regina both asked at once. Regina was offended while Henry was worried.

“Your mother’s having an episode.”

Oh how wonderfully **vague** and absolutely Victorian sounding—like the woman was an invalid.

“What has Emma gone mad?”

“No,” Henry explained, “She just has…an issue, and when she’s not careful stuff—“

“Explodes.”

“Her magic,” Regina assumed.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“She was using it back in the Enchanted Forest. With her power a tantrum would be very destructive.” And stupid.

Charming glanced at her in the rear view mirror. “They’re not tantrums.”

“She can’t control them.”

Regina scoffed, “She’s had ten years to learn how. Hasn’t anyone taught her?”

“Who? Your mother killed or imprisoned all the people who could,” Charming shot back with a little paternal protectiveness leaking through.

“She could teach herself. It’s **natural** to want to control one’s magic. If she didn’t she could hurt someone she cares about. Like my son.”

Beside her Henry closed his eyes, “Of course. You all told her I was missing didn’t you? That’s
what set her off.”

“Yup. But Mary Margaret’s already got her into the cage and Dorothy and Ruby have evacuated the refugees. Hopefully this one won’t be so bad.”

“Won’t? It hasn’t happened?”

“No, Mom, you’ll know when it happens.”

“Everyone will.”

###

And she **did** know when it happened because five minutes later she started to feel magic coalesce around her like she was preparing to cast a spell. Only she wasn’t. And more and more magic poured into her. Sparks skittered dangerously across her hands and…oh God.

“Pull over.”

“What?”

“Don’t—just pull over. Now!”

Charming must have seen the light racing over her skin because he twisted the wheel to the left, forced the SUV off the road and brought them screeching to a halt in front of a darkened store front.

Regina’s arms were shaking as she tried to open the door. Henry attempted to help but she pushed him back with her shoulder. Outside she skittered away from them.

The magic was like a flood into her system, overwhelming her senses.

“Mom?”

“Stay back!”

He and David were both out of the SUV and trying to approach her carefully.

“Regina’s what going on?”

She gritted her teeth in an attempt to hold the magic back. “I can only assume your daughter is trying to stop her ‘episode’ by putting her magic into an object. A locket she wears around her neck?”

“How’d you know?”

“Because I gave her that locke—“ An enormous wave of magic coursed through her, sending her to her knees. She reached out for support, her hand finding the brick wall. Arcs of magic cascaded from the point of contact, like tendrils of lightening, branching out across the brick and leaving blackened trails in their wake.

“Mom!”

But Charming held Henry back. Being wise for the first time in his life.

She was breathing faster. Doing everything in her power to contain the power. She swallowed.
“She’s putting the magic in the locket—which is a conduit—that is now open—“ another wave pulsed down her arm into the wall, “and her magic is coursing straight through it and into—“

“You,” Charming said in horror.

“Yes. Now could you kindly get my son out of here.”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“I’m not giving you a choice.”

Henry shoved his grandfather off of him and knelt gingerly in front of her, mindful of the magic coursing through her and just barely contained by her considerable willpower.

“I’m an adult now. And I’m staying.”

“You’re my son, and I can’t let you.”

She reached out to touch his temple. It was just the briefest of contact, but enough to shock him immediately into unconsciousness. Charming ran up, choosing to check his pulse instead of berating Regina.

“He’ll live. Now hurry.”

He must have agreed because he picked Henry up and threw him over his shoulder. He looked down at her. “What about you?”

“I’ll deal with this and find you all.”

“How?”

“The locket is a conduit Charming and I don’t have time to school you in magic theory!” A bolt of magic blew out of her hand and moving along a blackened trailed and shattering ever brick in its wake.

The explanation was satisfactory and when she could no longer hear the rough sound of the old engine of Charming’s SUV she allowed her grip on the magic to lax.

Not much. If she let go completely it would burn her up from the inside out. Instead the magic slipped off her body in waves of delicate light that pulsed with her every breath.

That idiot Emma had actually listened to her. She’d been trying to control all the magic inside of her herself and sending it into the locket. Which was clever, but doomed. The locket couldn’t contain it. No mortal, except the one who produced it, could.

She could only imagine the destruction Emma had accidentally wrought with all that power.

It must have been devastating.

And it would be again if Regina didn’t figure out a way to siphon it out of her.

“Hey you okay sweetheart?”

Her head snapped up to watch the man sauntering towards her. Flashy suit, expensive shoes. He was far, far from home. Curious in that way only an outsider would be.
“No,” she said weakly, “I’m not.”

“You’re glowing.”

“Yes. It’s—it’s harmless. I just…can you help me up?”

He came closer. “They kept saying I’d find crazy things here. And here you are, glowing.”

She took his hand and pulled herself up. “What else did they tell you about this place?”

“That I’d find more beautiful women than I could imagine.” He put his hand on her waist.

“Hm, enough to sate your desires?”

“We could find out.”

He leaned in for the most presumptuous of kisses and paused a hair’s breadth from her lips. “I’d prefer to show you what the things they didn’t tell you of,” she purred.

He gave her a little condescending smile that made it easier to play out her rash plan. “What’s that?”

It was such an easy thing to do. Take all of the magic inside of her and put it in another. All that power channelled through her touch and straight into him. Filling the poor human up. Burning him alive. His voice box was ashes before he could scream, and the smell of him roasting from the inside out was like pork until it wasn’t. For the smell of a burning man was unique to all others. A cloying smell that sat in the nose and painted the tongue. She could taste it. Such a familiar taste.

When the last of Emma’s magic had left her body and the sense of slipping control was put to rest Regina let the stranger’s charred corpse fall to the ground in a heap of crackling meats and brittle bones.

This man, one of the thrill-seekers out to catch a taste of her mother’s sinful new world. An awful man content to approach strange women all alone on empty streets. He’d come to enjoy the fruits of slave labor and dead dwarves.

But instead, he’d found the true population of Cora’s new Storybrooke.

The monsters.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Just when I think this whole idea is crazy and no one is going to stick with this crazy story you guys are overwhelming in your amazing support. Thanks so much. Crossing my fingers you continue to enjoy this ride!

It took him a full minute to realize it wasn't normal to wake up on the couch in his grandparent's living room with Grams stroking his face with a wet washcloth and Dorothy pacing somewhere down by his feet.

But after that first groggy minute where everything was normal but made no sense things got all clear.

"She tasered me," he said aloud. But it didn't come out right because his mouth was dry and his tongue kind of thick from being electrocuted by his mother.

"Who," Grams asked.

"My mom."

She shared a look with Dorothy, who came around the couch and took a seat on its edge. "Sweetheart, your mom was in the cage. She couldn't have."

Grams offered him a glass of water which he gulped down thankfully. Hydrated he pegged Dorothy with an offended glare. "No, my other mom—and stop looking at Mary Margaret like I'm crazy!"

"I'm—" Henry glared. "Okay I am, but Henry, your mom died. You've told me the story a hundred damn times."

"And I was there," Grams reminded him, "she never made it through."

"But she did, and I rescued her from the way station, and we were together until she zapped me with about a gajillion volts. Where's Gramps? He saw her."

"Checking on your actual mom."

"Oh my God Dorothy. I'm not being delusional."

She patted his thigh soothingly, "It would be perfectly natural after a few thousand volts went through your system."

"Yeah. And you know how that happened? My mom tasered my face!" He held his hand up, "With her hand!"

Dorothy and his grandmother shared another worried look and if Henry had to watch it one more second he was gonna start shouting, or kicking.

The couch.
Not people.

It was wrong to kick people—especially family. Especially women family who would both gladly snatch him by the short and curlicies and fling him across the room if he tried.

Instead he shot up out of his seat and grabbed his coat up form where it had been dangling forgotten on the hat rack by what passed for the door in and out of Mary Margaret and David's portion of the caves.

Dorothy stood too, while Mary Margaret wrung her washcloth nervously in her hands.

"Oh come on Henry, where do you think you're going?"
"Back out there to find my mom, who is alone, and she could be hurt, and scared—"
"If it is Regina I highly doubt she's any of those things," Grams said. "Her mother named the way station after her for God's sake."

"There’s a big honkin’ statue of her and everything."

He rolled his eyes, "Right, let’s let the crazy woman who worships her and we thought killed her find her first. That's a great idea."

His grandmother looked mortally offended, "I never said that!"

Dorothy grabbed Henry’s hand before he could leave the room, "Would you just stop a second?"

"I can’t—"

"I know. You want to find her,” she squeezed tight, “but we should have a plan. Maybe talk to David and figure out why he left her?"

"Because she asked me to."

Gramps’ authoritative voice bounced off the cave walls. And even when it was just family it demanded respect. He had come in from the shaft leading down to the cage and was wiping the sweat off his face with a bandana. It was always hot down in his mom’s cage. Hovering at ninety even on a good day.

He continued, "Regina needed space so I gave it to her."

Grams stood, “Regina’s alive?"

Of all the—Henry was just saying that! He crossed his arms surlily.

“And connected to Emma somehow,” Gramps said.

“What,” Dorothy asked, “like magic? Or phones? Because if Emma is getting reception I don’t think the cage is working right."

“Magic. She was glowing with it.”

Grams put her hand to her head, “I don’t understand. How is Regina using our daughter’s magic?"

“Because of that locket Emma never takes off.”
Her face hardened, “Then we make her take it off.”

It was a snap decision, the kind Grams always made. Like Gramps and his commanding tone in a lot of ways she was still Queen Snow White, making demands and expecting immediate and unquestioned compliance.

Her mission firmly stated she threw the washcloth down and tried to stalk past her husband, but he caught her arm. “We’re not doing that.”

“That woman is using our daughter, David. We absolutely are.”

“That woman is why Emma’s still conscious downstairs and we’re not calling August in here to do repairs. She saved her.”

“She used her.”

“Would you just think about this for a second?”

Henry glanced at Dorothy, both of them suddenly feeling kind of like voyeurs in his grandparents’ domestic dispute.

“What’s there to think about,” Grams was waving her arms, gesturing at places way above ground. “We’re making plans to end Cora for good and suddenly her daughter reappears after ten years, finds Henry and then uses Emma. That’s pretty damn suspicious David.”

“And it could also be a coincidence. Henry spent time with her today Mary Margaret. He trusts her. That should be enough.”

Her jaw was still screwed up tightly, so she was breathing loudly through her nose and doing what Emma called her “Angry School Marm” face. She’d been this way forever. Or at least since the curse lifted and she got back from the Enchanted Forest. Whatever happened when Mary Margaret and Snow White had merged had turned her distrustful and angry. There was never a decision made without an argument with Grams. The only way out of it was to gang up on her. Take her down with logic and superior forces.

Dorothy stepped closer to him for support, wrapping her hand around his bicep.

And he begged. “Grams,” he pleaded.

She threw her hands up. Groaning loudly she said, “Fine, you three want to trust the Evil Queen that put us all in this position in the first place be my guest, but don’t think I’ll trust her, and don’t think I want her anywhere near my daughter without a fight.”

That was directed at Gramps and there was a whole lot of fury behind it.

Dorothy raised her hand, her oblique way of diffusing the sudden tension between Henry’s grandparents. “So…does this mean we’re actually going back out to find Regina, or do you guys want to finish unpacking that baggage?”

David sighed, “You and I are going. Henry you’re staying here with your mom and grandmother.”

“You’re leaving Henry to watch me?”

“I’m leaving him here in case Regina somehow makes it back here before us.”
“And to watch me.”

He narrowed his eye, searching his wife’s features, but seeming to come up with none of what he was looking for. So he just sighed, which he’d been doing a lot nowadays. “I’ll be back,” he finally said.

Grams still had her jaw sticking out defiantly. “I don’t need a keeper David.”

He paused at the exit, his shoulders slumping, “I haven’t said you do. Did you ever think I wanted Henry here because of Regina? She spent most of your life trying to hurt you. I’d kind of like to make sure there’s someone here to help if she tries again.”

Henry wanted to say that that was bullshit and his mom wasn’t going to go killing Grams. Then he remembered why they’d all been in Storybrooke in the first place and shut his mouth.

Dorothy pressed her lips lightly to his cheek on her way out, “Be careful ‘kay?”

“That’s my line.”

She ruffled his hair, “Too cool for school doesn’t suit you Mr. Mills.” She dropped her hand to the knot of the tie he wore and loosened it with two fingers. “You’re my nerdy guy remember?”

He kissed the tip of her nose, “I’m a big damn hero Dorothy.”

###

She wasn’t sure how her mother could be the all powerful Queen of her dark little paradise and rule all she surveyed and still not have captured Henry and the Charmings. It wasn’t that difficult a task to accomplish.

With a little concentration it was easy enough for her to find them. Yes, she had that ridiculous locket to home in on, but her mother had had ten years in an enclosed space to find them. Moreover their grand hide out wasn’t actually so grand or so hidden. There were only so many entrances into the mines that ran deep beneath Storybrooke and with a little magic applied to the floor of the tunnels it wasn’t difficult to ascertain which were the most used paths through. Then it was a simple matter of following them until she found Storybrooke’s new undercity.

Those that had eluded Cora had made a home of the caves. Fabric and scavenged wood and steel served as partitions and door and even roofs in the larger caverns. Lamps fueled by a familiar feeling magic lit the caves. But no one guarded the spare little homes. There were no guards or even a bit of magic as protection anywhere.

It was all a collection of hovels and stalls and sad small markets full of people in tattered old clothes or colorfully bizarre new ones. An underworld in the truest sense. It reminded her of markets in the poorest parts of Agrabah and Bjarmaland and Opar. There were just enough of the downtrodden people filling the caverns that they didn’t seem to recognize Regina as they gambled and drank and wasted away their days. She ducked her head and pulled up the collar of her coat to further distance herself from the image of a queen the might recognize. That awful statue loomed large in her head. It had been brass. And far too stylized for her taste.

But the city beneath Storybrooke. That was even more offensive. Because it sprawled and there were so many people. It could not have been a secret—even an open one. Her mother should not have
missed it.

Had Regina still been a less...magnanimous woman—had she still been a thunderous queen—it would have been a simple matter to find this hideout and reduce it to cinders.

Yet her mother had not done so and the myriad of reasons why were yet more curiosities added to her growing list. There was a rotten core at the center of this brave new world that set Regina ill at ease.

Her path led her down and down, deeper into and deeper into a part of Storybrooke that had laid forgotten for the twenty-eight years she’d lived there, and, she noted, she moved further from population until she came to caves less settled, where speleothems still formed unmolested.

When she came upon the Charming home she knew it instantly. She stepped through the door made have aluminum sheeting and took in a home only Snow White could have decorated. No other home would have had so many weapons hanging on the walls and so many doilies on every other surface.

“I’ve never seen a home actually structurally comprised of doilies and lace before,” she said aloud.

Henry had been lounging on the couch with his boots up on the armrest like a barbarian and his head resting in his arm. He dropped the book he’d been reading and leapt across the room to grab her in his arms. As he spun her about she caught sight of Snow, standing in the makeshift kitchen in a pink house dress and white apron and wielding an impressively long chef’s knife.

The knife dipped downward a fraction and shock registered on Snow’s face. “Regina…”

“Yes, dear, alive and well.”

“I told you,” Henry said.

“Don’t gloat,” Regina reminded him. Even though Snow White was the one person in existence she would normally encourage him to gloat to asserting her parental influence was for more important at the moment, and her admonishment was caught more by Snow than Henry, her dark eyebrows knitting together in a frown.

He smiled sheepishly, “Sorry Grams.”

Regina raised her eyebrow and looked at Snow, “Grams?” She squinted, “Ah yes, I do see a bit of gray in that raven hair. You should really think about coloring. I’m sure some toothless woman in that market out there would be happy to rub some soot into it.”

Snow flushed bright red, but slammed her knife tip first into the countertop, “Yes I’ve aged Regina. Maybe because I was busy helping raise your son for the last ten years.”

“And I can only imagine the damage you’ve done.”

“Not nearly as much as your mother.”

She shrugged, “Damage? This just all appears to be my mother embracing the American Dream.”

Snow scowled.

“Mom,” Henry whispered, “can you maybe not antagonize Grams?”

She held her hands up in surrender, “Henry’s right. The bigger woman would say thank you
Snow…” And because Regina couldn’t resist one more snipe, “For managing to survive this long,” she added.

Henry sighed.

Snow picked the knife back up, hefted the handle briefly and then threw it.

“Grams!”

It clattered against the wall behind Regina and she retaliated, forming a raging fireball in her hand.

Little Snow wanted to play at war?

“Mom!” Henry leapt between them. “Both of you. Stop it. Now!”

Regina and Snow, agreeing for once, both protested.

“Now,” Henry said again. “Seriously. We’ve got enough problems without you two burning the house to the ground in a grudge match.”

“It’s just a cave dear. Hardly flammable.”

“Mom.”

“How about we try it without magic Regina. See if all those years sitting on your ass behind a desk kept you sharp.”

“Sharper than that dull blade you call wit dear.”

“Seriously Mom? Stop it. Please.”

She tilted her head. Another curiosity. Henry begging her instead of Snow. Asking **her** to be the bigger woman, while Snow stood there with another knife somehow in her hand and raised to throw.

He had his hand on her shoulder and his eyes kept darting to his grandmother and back to her. Pleading with **her** silently. It was…enough.

She extinguished the flame and put her hands in the pocket of her coat. Looking over Henry’s shoulder she addressed Snow again. “Henry’s right. Now isn’t the time for us to fight.”

Snow’s knife dipped, “Are you serious?”

“I am. And,” she swallowed, a bitterness rising in her throat, “I’m sorry.”

That surprised even Henry.

In her head she could hear Killian snorting in amusement and Mulan looking gravely serious and just a small measure of pleased. Snow still watched suspiciously. She vibrated with an anger that was unusual for the woman. Snow had been many things, but filled with such…wrath had never been one of them. If Regina was going to get to the bottom of this new Storybrooke’s many mysteries she needed to be able to do so **without** worrying about Snow slitting her throat in her sleep.

So she took her hands out of her pockets and held them up, “Truce?”

Snow stared at her a while longer, the tip of her knife tilted back up and Henry tensed beside her. Then she huffed and jammed the knife into the belt of her apron.
“Truce. For now Regina.”

“Good.”

The tension reduced a tiny measure Henry’s shoulders relaxed. “Okay,” he said, more to himself than for either of their benefits. “Okay. Good. Thank you—both of you.”

Regina nodded.

Silence filled the void.

Water dripped somewhere and more water boiled on the stove—how on earth did they fuel that?

“What, do you,” Henry looked around, “do you want something to drink? Eat?”

She wanted to know how they had a gas stove. Was the gas nearby? In an inclosed space? Did they even understand the hazard that thing presented? Where were the vents? What if there was a leak?

And—

And Henry was still looking at her expectantly.

“I ate before I left.” And she had a piece of that atrocious salted Falak in her pocket. “Just in case,” Mulan had said quite seriously as she pressed it into Regina’s palm.

How that woman hadn’t ever gotten the fact that Regina had magic and could conjure a feast out of thin air she’d never know.

“So,” Herny said, “So…”

So there they were. Henry and Regina finally reunited, and Snow watching warily with her hand still not too far from her knife, the ticking time bomb of a gas stove without ventilation over in the corner and a whole bevy of other mysteries facing them.

And at the moment the most critical one buzzed in the back of her head, like white noise from the radio. Emma’s magic.

“So I think it’s high time I see Emma. Don’t you?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Snow said immediately. Naturally.

“Really. You don’t think the very gifted sorceress should meet with the woman who likes to throw uncontrollable magic tantrums? That’s what you think?”

“A tantrum you apparently were connected too.” She stepped closer, puffing her chest out and raising her chin, “Oh yeah, Regina, David and Henry told me everything.”

How on earth did that woman make things sound so scandalous?

“I hardly think that’s true. Neither of them know the extent of Emma’s problem or my connection to it.”

“Then why don’t you tell us,” she shot back.

“Because I have neither the time or inclination to educate you on matters of magic theory. Not when you have that other time bomb squirreled away.”
“I think she should see her,” Henry said. “She can help, Grams.”

“Henry…”

He gave her a crooked smile, “It’s not like she can make it any worse.”

Oh that was comforting.

“Fine.” Snow threw her hands up in the air, “Take her to Emma. Ignore my incredibly reasonable suspicions.”

“Okay.” It was the bright way he always said that sort of thing and it was nice to know that some things hadn’t change. Henry could still rip a person’s heart out with a few cheerful words and a turn of his back. Cheerful and ruthless rejection and long division, Henry’s too greatest skills.

“Come on,” he said.

Leaving Snow “upstairs” they descended a creaky a-frame ladder that brought them into a tunnel a good fifteen feet below the one they’d been in. It was considerably warmer there and Regina flapped the sides of her coat to create a breeze between the fabric and herself.

“We’re not that much further down. Why the sudden rise in temperature?”

“Downside of the cage.”

“You and Charming mentioned that before. Care to tell me why you’ve locked Emma away?”

He looked a little sheepish. “Sorry. It’s not really like she’s locked away? She stays in there most of the time on her own. It’s just… you know what a Faraday cage is?”

She did, “A metal cage that blocks electric fields. We used to have one at home. You’ll recall you microwaved you action figures in it when you were seven.”

He blushed. “Right. Frankenstein invented one for magic—that doesn’t roast people or action figures. We managed to steal the designs and kind of build our own down here for Mom. Only August isn’t so great with the invention stuff since Gepetto died so it doesn’t work the exact same. The grounding’s all messed up so instead of the energy just evaporating—”

“We have this furnace.”

“But it absorbs most of the magic. Enough that people can live in the mines again.”

“Isn’t that wonderful to hear.”

He grimaced, “Actually it is.”

But he didn’t elaborate on why. Just seemed to turn so old and wary for a moment that the boy she’d still seen in fringes of the man disappeared entirely. Regina’s heart raced at the sight. It was an uncomfortable sensation that had her breath quicken too. And God how it hurt.

####

The “cage” was much larger than the word would suggest. Regina heard cage and thought of the miserable cell Snow and Charming had kept her in. She pictured guards and horrors and a soul
sucking misery that emanated from the walls.

But Emma’s cage was not so wretched. It was much larger than Regina’s had been, larger than her quarters on the Jolly Roger even. It was set in the center of a large cavern. The walls and ceiling and floor were all wire mesh and thick knots of wires wound out of the top of it and up into the roof above. The inside of the cage glowed with unspent magic that skittered across the walls and cast the entire room in a pale white light. There was a large bed inside, and stacks of books, singed targets from a shooting range, and Emma Swan, sitting against one wall and bouncing a tennis ball off another.

She looked the same in many ways. Same long blond hair, same narrow features so much like Henry’s. Where her father had lost an eye and Snow had gained gray hairs Emma had stayed painfully the same. She wore glasses now. A thick rimmed pair with one cracked lens and dirty white tape holding an ear piece on. Her hair was pulled up to help her better suffer the heat of her cage and she was wearing paper thin cargo pants rolled up to the knees and an even thinner white tank top that was virtually transparent with sweat.

Whump.

She threw the ball, the light of the residual magic rippling away from the point of impact, then caught it assuredly. Over and over again.

She paid them no mind. Too focused on her task.

Henry watched his birth mother, his mouth set in a thin line. “Mom.”

“Glad you’re okay, kid.”

Whump.

“Mom I…there’s someone here to see you.”

Whump.

“Not taking visitors today.”

He took a step towards the cage, but Regina caught his arm. “Henry,” she said quietly, “why don’t you leave us alone?”

Whump.

He shot a nervous glance at Emma. “Stay out of the cage,” he said in a low voice. “And I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

She squeezed his arm as he walked past her then returned her attention to the guarded woman.

Whump.

Emma still hadn’t acknowledged her. So Regina took her time studying the woman. Processing the creature that seemed resigned to her confinement. That was not the Emma Swan she knew. That woman tore down everything in her path. There was a reckless destructiveness in her every motion. She was not calm. She was not patient. Emma Swan was nature unleashed.

Whump.

How could ten simple years bring such a creature to such a place? What losses could sap the strength
from her? What could defeat her so?

Whump.

She put her hands in her pocket. Her fingers played with the seams of them as her feet took her closer. Inhale in through the nose and exhale out through the mouth.

She parted her lips to speak.

But Emma spoke first, “You’re not real.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Emma was lithe as she leapt to her feet. Despite having a few years on Regina now she was just as limber as that twenty-nine year old that had saved her life in Bluebeard’s palace.

“No. Because Regina Mills died.” So sure.

She ducked her head, “So I’ve been told.”

“She was stupid and thoughtless and she threw her life away to stop her mother.” She stalked closer to the edge of the cage. To Regina. “She sacrificed herself to try and give us a chance.”

Regina leaned in, saying conspiratorially, “That is the story spread.”

“In the end Regina Mills was a good woman,” Emma insisted. She was so close to Regina now. She could see each individual bead of sweat on Emma’s exposed skin.

“You make me sound like a saint.”

Emma shook her head. “No. Because you’re not her.”

“Then what am I?”

“I don’t know.” And she seemed to really look at Regina. Her eyes raking over her. “A trick of Cora’s? A disguise?”

Another step, so close she could now feel the hum of magic the cage contained. “I assure you, I am neither.”

Emma slapped the wall of her cage and spun, turning her back and pacing to the far side. Her feet slammed against the metal underfoot, the noise ringing painfully through the cavern. “Bullshit,” she growled over her shoulder, “because if you are Regina, you never died. You never sacrificed yourself for us. You spent ten years on a God-damned beach drinking Mai Tais why your mother ruined everything.” She turned to face Regina again, “And that’s not the Regina that threw me through that portal.”

How little Emma knew. How little she understood of that day. And how little seemed to remain of the Emma Regina had known. This wasn’t her. Not this caged monster.

She was something—someone—too familiar. A shadow of another life.

Regina reached for the cage door. The magic pooled at her touch, but the cage functioned well enough and there was only the hum of it instead of its touch.

“Stay out of the cage,” Henry had said. A warning. She could not abide warnings. They were threats
masked in kindness.

She opened the cage, throwing up a wall that kept all that magic contained within. Then she stepped in and let that wall fall.

It was…

Bliss.

A warm and languid heat.

Emma’s magic did not roll over her, it licked at every part of her in long, sure strokes. Regina exhaled and only heard the shudder of her breath.

On the other side of the cage Emma’s eyes were wide behind her glasses. Her hand flew to something around her neck and the magic suddenly pulsed inside of Regina, forcing her to gasp.

“No,” Emma breathed.

Regina’s legs were shaky and she had to lean back against the cage to disperse the power surging inside of her. The room grew dark but for the light emanating from where she stood. The shadows stretched long across the space.

“I assure you,” she panted, “I am quite real. And there were no Mai Tais or beaches. Just two and a half long years trying to get back.”

Emma crossed back to her quickly light bursting at her feet with each step. Then she stood so close—invasive Regina’s space like no other could. “Don’t screw with me lady. Regina died to save me,” she said with such surety. It was the conviction of the religious—the faithful. Ten years had turned Emma Swan into a zealot, and Regina was her icon. “She died to save our son.” She shook her head, “She died. And I know because I have this.” The locket, clasped so tightly in her hand, held so fervently against her chest. The chain bit into the skin of her neck. “So I would know if she was alive.”

It was an accusation.

Regina stared at the locket, at the sinew of the hand that clasped it, veins and bones and muscles like marble in the pale light and dark shadows. She dragged her eyes up to look upon resolute lips and then green eyes as dusky as the deepest forest. She pleaded with those eyes even as she reached for that fine hand.

“Why do you think I came back,” she asked softly. She allowed herself to bare a small part of all the bottled up emotion within just to help Emma see her. She leaned in closer too. “I was right behind you Emma, and now you’ve gone too far ahead.”

Emma’s tears seemed to glow in the soft light. “No. Regina is—“

She squeezed that hand. Resisted the magic that no longer pulsed through her, but was her. She was steeped in it. Immersed in Emma Swan. Two and a half years gone. There was only that moment. That foolish awful moment where she playacted at hero and claimed her prize. Only the prize had transformed in the intervening years. The hatred and distrust had washed away leaving something achingly pure and so very foreign.

This was not Emma Swan, but a dream. A waking dream that searched Regina’s face for some kernel of the truth she spoke.
And then the fervency waned and that screwed up face full of wretched passion fell and there was a loud crack followed by a bloom of pain on Regina’s cheek.

Had…

Did Emma just slap her?

“Okay, so then what the fuck took you so long?”
Chapter 4

She pressed her hand to her cheek. "Did you just slap me," she asked incredulously.

"You're Regina right?"

"Of course!"

"Then yeah, I did," Emma shot back challengingly.

"Any particular reason? Or were you just feeling the need to abuse me?"

"Oh I don't know?" She had reasons, and she ticked them off with her fingers, "How about you kiss me out of nowhere then pushed my ass through a portal then made me think you were dead for ten years which made me freakin' idolize your sorry ass and then you show up here like it's all freakin' okay."

"You can say 'fuck' dear. We're both adults."

"Okay." She poked her in the center of the chest, "Fuck you Regina."

"Have you got it all out of your system?"

She hadn't. She leaned in close. "You kissed me," she accused.

"I was—" Well, she really didn't want to explain it. Emma was waiting though. So she said, "Trying to distract you."

Emma raised an eyebrow. "I've found slapping works too."

"I noticed."

"How? How are you alive?"

"Mulan and Killian found me and then we found a way back and then here I am."

"Ten years later and looking practically the same?"

"Juice cleanse."

"From hell?"

"Tartarus. Same thing."

"Seriously," Emma said, a change in her voice begging Regina to set aside the little rapport they'd developed.

She said evenly, "It was two and a half years for me. Somehow when I came through time… expanded. I'm still trying to sort out the mechanics."

"And you're just…" Emma motioned haphazardly at her.

"Here."

"Now I kind of want to hug you. Which is weird because you're Regina."
No. No, it would in fact be the opposite of weird. It would be wonderful and a childish dream come true. “Yes, very weird.”

Emma rubbed at her bare neck before crossing over to the bed and flopping onto it crossed legged like a teenager. “So. How do you like what we’ve done with the place?”

“What one? Storybrooke? These caves? Or your quaint little prison?”

She shrugged.

Regina sighed and came to sit next to her, only without the loose limbed flopping. She crossed her ankles and leaned back on her hands. “It’s…different.”

“We have blimps now.”

“And high rises.”

“And a draconian police force.”

“And a statue of me. In brass.”

Emma grimaced, “If it helps Mary Margaret’s been campaigning to have it destroyed ever since we first got wind of it.”

“I’m more offended that she’s the only one.”

“Henry’s defaced it a couple of times.”

“That doesn’t help.”

“Used that wand he stole and gave it a beard.”

“Again, that in no way alleviates my horror.”

“I just gave it bigger boobs.”

She slowly turned to stare. Emma was grinning and had her hands out in front of her own breasts—quite visible through her translucent shirt. “They were so big they threatened the structural integrity of the statue.”

She proceeded to tell some story about a campaign she and Henry waged when he was fifteen that ended up defacing every single icon of Regina in the city. (There were that many?) It all sounded very sophomoric and like the exact sort of idiotic bonding Emma would engage in with their impressionable son. Regina tried to maintain a stony stare throughout. Not because she wanted to hide the equal parts irritation and amusement, but because Emma’s breasts were still very visible and there.

In front of her.

And far too much like they were in that recurring dream that involved Emma and a great deal of leather and a greater deal of sweat.

Did this cage really need to be that hot?

She desperately needed to stop thinking about them. And Emma. And. And dreams she’d thought she squashed before stepping through the portal. “Emma,” she said. “Perhaps we should pause this
scintillating tale of brass breast implants and discuss something much more pertinent.”

Emma looked at her knowingly. Why—

“Pertinent not perky.” She tugged her shirt down. “Honestly.”

“Okay. So what is more pertinent?”

“Perhaps this cage?”

Emma bristled, “It does its job.”

“No. It does your job. As did I an hour ago.”

She frowned, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know very well what it means. You were leaking magic energies like a sieve.”

Emma’s hand rose back up to the locket. “The conduit?”

“Is still open wide, dear, and were it anyone other than myself on the other end it would have been very deadly.”

“It’s not like I can control it—“

“It’s exactly like that Emma.”

“You’re saying that because you were born with magic and training, Regina. You had teachers. Some of us aren’t so lucky.”

Regina laughed, “I was born with it? Dear I didn’t use magic until the day before my wedding. My teacher was Rumpelstiltskin: a man who never had need for control because his power came from a magic dagger. I taught myself control,” she brushed at the thighs of her pants, “as it seems I must now teach you.”

“I think I’m okay without lessons from you.”

“This cage we’re sitting in would suggest otherwise.”

“The cage keeps people safe.”

“And it makes you a prisoner.” She stood up and held out her hand, “Now come along. We’re going upstairs and then, because this day hasn’t been long enough already, I’ll endeavor to teach you.”

Emma didn’t budge.

“I’d prefer not asking twice.”

“I can’t leave.”

“You won’t. That is an important distinction.”

“I can’t. When I have an episode it’s safer for me to stay in here until all the magic has…” she pointed to the wires overhead.

“And how long does that take? Hours?”
“More like a week.”

“I’m not waiting a week.” She reached down and grabbed Emma’s hand. Immediately the flow of magic picked up, but Regina managed to compartmentalize the sensation. “Come on.”

Emma snatched her hand back. “I said no.”

“I’m not—” Regina reached for her again and Emma went complete dead in her grip, forcing Regina to grab with both hands and put a little magic of her own behind the muscle she was using.

“Would you—” Emma grunted.

“Only when you come—“

“I said—” Emma shot up, slamming her shoulder into Regina’s chest and launching her back so violently the cage actually bent on impact. The glow of magic around them swirled to Emma, collecting at her feet and slowly crawling up and over her skin. “No.”

Regina curled her hand protectively over her chest, breathlessly saying, “Naturally. The only magic you can do is the kind that involves physical violence.”

The corner of Emma’s mouth twitched upwards, and then back to her neutral grimace again. “You seem to think you get this world and your place in it, Regina. But you don’t, and you don’t understand mine either. People die when I leave this cage.”

Regina dug her hand into the metal pressed against her fingertips. The magic was still encompassing Emma. Soft tendrils of white light impressive as they were frightening. And Emma herself was terrifying too. Because for that one moment she wasn’t the woman Regina had known in Storybrooke or grown to…care for in the Enchanted Forest. She was righteous destruction just barely contained by her own skin.

Was that what they all saw when they looked upon Emma? Not the churlish bounty hunter who stayed to be with her son but this—this force of nature who hummed with the power of gods.

Regina was accustomed to her own sticky monikers. Evil Queen being the worst of them. It was a shield certainly. Protection from the whims of others. But lurking behind its protection was abject loneliness she would wish on few others—and Emma was none of them.

She wasn’t the Savior. She was the woman who stayed for her son and did the right thing despite life itself teaching her the contrary. And she did not deserve this life in a cage.

It was protection, but only for the people who could die when she left it.

Regina held out her hand, “Not today.”

Emma looked from her hand to her face. Her eyes flickering back and forth nervously.

“Emma,” she said softly. But Emma didn’t come forward. She stepped back. Wary. “I need you to trust me.”

“I did, and you kicked my ass through a portal.”

“Do you see a portal anywhere,” she said with a smile. She took a careful step towards her. “You trusted me once—even if it was just for a day—you trusted me. Just do it again.”
“I kill—when I’m out there? Like this?” Her voice cracked. “People die.”

“Henry’s out there. Would I risk his life? If anything else, trust in my love for him.”

And she did. That one bit of logic was just enough for Emma, because she took Regina’s hand in her own, holding it tightly and shuddering at all the magic that moved between them just as Regina did.

“You’re still cold,” she noted shakily.

And Emma was still warm.

####

“Feet off the couch.”

Henry lifted his feet a fraction above the armrest and continued to shovel cereal into his mouth.

“And stop eating. You’ll spoil your dinner.”

“Mom says I need more food,” he said with a full mouth.

Grams stopped her compulsive tidying. “You mean Regina.”

He shoveled another handful in, “And that I should shave.”

“She’s right on that one. You look as furry as Ruby on a full moon.”

“You don’t complain about Gramps’ beard.”

“I do, just not in front of you,” she said sweetly—or what passed for sweetly coming out of Grams. Most people would have thought she was being kind of sinister.

Grams returned to the kitchen to continue cooking and Henry let his legs relax, his feet returning to rest on the couch.

“I said off,” she commanded without even turning.

Ten years and Henry was still constantly amazed at his grandmother’s ability to sense everything. He sat back up and planted his feet on the ground. The new vantage point pulled his attention to the open shaft to his mom’s cage. They’d been quiet down there.

“Should I check on them?”

“You shouldn’t have left them alone in the first place.”

“Grams…”

“I know she’s your mother and you love her, but Henry, I know her—”

“You knew the Evil Queen. To me she’s just Mom…usually.”

There’d been that one year when she’d been something terrifying and more. When he’d look up at the dinner table and see dark fathomless eyes staring back and a chill would run straight through him. She’d been something terrible and dangerous that year. Like a snake poised to strike.
But that woman he’d seen pop into existence at the way station wasn’t her. That was his mom and he wasn’t about to let his Grams’ old grudge come between them. Besides, “She’s also the only magic user we’ve had access to in years. She can help Emma too.”

Grams sighed, “I know. I know. I guess, if she can help Emma. Teach her so she won’t need the cage—“

“She can.”

She did. Minutes later when Henry was getting ready to go check on them whether they liked it or not one mom and then the other appeared out of the shaft. Emma helped Regina up and grabbed her hand and soon as they were both standing.

It was weird.

“Mom!” Only he wasn’t sure which mom he was talking to.

That was weird too.

Emma shot him a crooked smile, “Hey kid.”

Grams came out from around the counter. “You’re out…”

To which Emma held up their still clasped hands. “Trick of Regina’s. She’s teaching me—“

“Control. Frankly I’m shocked she’s even capable of it. What with that—“

She waved at Grams and Emma squeezed her hand. Which actually had the intended effect, silencing her before she could unload an insult.

Grams took another step towards them. "And you're feeling okay?"

Emma smiled nervously, "I've been better. Little out of my comfort zone."

"Snow," Regina brought the attention back to herself with her clipped tone, "I need somewhere private to work with Emma."

"The cage was private."

"I've been in the bellies of fire breathing serpents cooler than that pit. Is there nowhere else?"

"My room."

Dorothy would be pissed that he just offered their place. She was a pretty big stickler for privacy and the idea of having not one but two of Henry's moms poking around would make her break out in hives.

Emma raised an eyebrow, “And Dorothy’s okay with that?”

“Who’s Dorothy?"

“His—“

“My—yes. She’ll be okay.”

His mom and grandmother both shared a knowing look he really didn’t need to see.
And Dorothy is?

No one, Mom. I mean, yes she’s someone, just, I’ll take you to the room.

He ignored his still gaping grandmother and the extremely judgmental look from Emma and led them down a sloped tunnel. Grams and Gramps had made efforts over the years to tone down the “cave” quality of their home. There were photos and artwork tacked to the walls and a side table he knew they stole from his old place with Regina.

She didn’t notice—too busy asking Emma quietly, “Who is Dorothy?”

“Don’t ask me,” his mom shot back under her breath.

“You don’t know!”

“I definitely know, and that is between you and the know-it-all ahead of us.”

He turned to face them as he kept walking, “I didn’t say I was a know-it-all.”

“Sure you did, kid. Years ago. I believe your exact words were ‘I know what I’m doing.’ Right?”

He scowled which his mom immediately took as a triumph because she grinned back.

“Whatever.” He shoved his hands in his pocket and turned back around.

They stopped suddenly behind him, their feet scraping on the worn stone floor and he just knew why they’d stopped. Regina had to be one of the two most observant people he’d ever met and even just wandering down a dark hallway and wrapped up in a conversation she would have seen it given half a chance.

“Is that the side table from the dining room?”

Yup.

“The house got torn down. August helped Gramps rescue and restore it.”

“From our house?”

“I think it looks nice,” Emma opined.

“You would—Henry this place is far too humid for an 18th century Colonial piece.”

Emma snorted, “Oh please. It’s only 18th century Colonial because of the curse.”

“It’s worth more than anything you’ve ever owned.”

“It’s not even real, Regina. It has no value. You try to take it out of town and it’d disappear!”

“You don’t know that.”

“And you do?”

Fun. He’d forgotten how they could go from conversational to sniping in half a minute flat. Instead of opening the door to his room politely and watching them wander in while they continued to argue he kicked it open so the metal clanged nice and loudly against the stone wall and his moms stopped the bickering for a scant minute. “This is my bedroom,” he said slowly like to a child, “you two can
use it until dinner. Unless you kill each other. In which case the last one to die is in charge of cleaning it all up.”

Regina looked horrified, “I beg your pardon.”

“Kid, I love the hell out of you, but,” Emma put her hand on his shoulder, “I’m gonna snoop,” she said seriously. “A lot.”

He put his hand over his mother’s and looked just as serious, “Then you will betray my trust.” He stuck out his lower lip and turned on the wide eyes.

She nodded sagely, “I can live with that. If I find anything hilarious and incriminating it will be totally worth it.”

“But that means you’ll have to deal with Dorothy.”

Ah ha! That got her to blanche.

Regina sighed loudly, “Is anyone going to tell me who the hell Dorothy is? Or must I snoop as well?”

Henry had faced the Wicked Witches of Oz and Cora herself. Stuff that most guys couldn’t even imagine facing. But his mom was, well she was his mom, and he really didn’t want to have the conversation she wanted to have and Emma’s knowing looks said she thought he should have.

“I have to go,” he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the living room. “Help Grams with dinner and uh, stuff. You guys have fun.”

Then he ran.

####

After being quite impressed by her son’s heroic swagger and noble countenance Regina was less impressed with the way he dashed off and avoided the question.

Who the hell was Dorothy?

She looked down at her hand, still clasping Emma’s, and then to Emma’s face. She was staring after Henry thoughtfully—the ghost of a frown keeping her from looking too thoughtful.

“Is she a girlfriend,” she persisted.

Emma’s eyes snapped back to Regina. “You don’t want to…maybe let it go? Ask Henry when you two have time alone?”

“No. I want to know. And he just ran off like—I was asking him a sex question.” Her voice dropped low at the end.

And Emma actually smirked, “Well, you kind of are.”

“Oh my God. Dorothy is his girlfriend?”

Emma opened her mouth to confirm but Regina ignored her. Instead rushing into Henry’s room and dragging Emma behind her.
Women’s clothes. Men’s clothes. There were photos too. Mementos. Natural bits of a life shared cluttering up the room. They were everywhere. Inescapable.

“You let our son live with a girlfriend. Are you insane?”

“No! Of course not. They had their own damn rooms for years.”

Oh yes. Clearly. “You’ll notice we’re standing in a room they share.”

That’s when the hand in her own turned tight and Emma… She looked apologetic all of a sudden. Pained. And worse—she seemed to empathize with whatever ache in Regina she anticipated. “She’s not his girlfriend anymore.”

No. Absolutely not. Regina shook her head. No. Her son was twenty-one. She’d missed ten years. Just—just ten years. That wasn’t enough. Ten years was a breath to her. Ten years was longer limbs and sadder smiles, but it was just ten years. Surmountable. Possible. Ten years was not enough. Not for—

“She’s his wife.”

Emma’s warm hand slipped from Regina’s own. Her legs, usually quite excellent at keeping her upright, failed her and Regina sank to the rug, a plush and fashionable piece.

Had Dorothy selected? Pointed at it with a finger wrapped in a band of gold and turned to her doting husband and said “Perfect.” Or perhaps it was a gift. One given to a husband or wife. A piece shared between them.

“Regina.”

“He’s twenty-one.”

“I know.” Emma loomed over her. Silent.

“He’s a boy. And you let him get married—“

“He ran away to Boston when he was ten to find me. You couldn’t stop him then. What makes you think a mess like me could ten years later?”

“Because you were it!” She glared up at the other woman and hoped the tears appearing in her eyes weren’t so easy to see. “You were all he had Emma, and your job is to be his mother.”

“And I am. I’ve tried.” The creak of old joints and Emma knelt in front of her. She reached for Regina’s hand but Regina pulled it back. So she sighed and stood and her voice softened. “They eloped. Showed up one morning sporting rings—”

“He’s a child!”

“He was older than I was,” she fired back. For once something besides reticence flaring in her eyes.

And he was nearly Regina’s age when she’d walked down that long path draped in white and pearls and facing a fate so cruel. With Snow White herself leading her.

It chipped at her heart. Enflamed everything inside of her. Regina put her hand over her chest to ease the pain the flourished there.

The creak of knees again, and then the brush of them against her back before sure hands pressed into
her shoulders and carried with them the solace of Emma’s touch.

“It’s okay,” Emma said softly. “It’s just a panic attack. It’s completely—“

She threw her back, spinning to face her and rising to her knees. “It isn’t panic.”

“So you’re mad?”

“He’s married.”

“And she’s wonderful!”

Regina reared back, her mouth dropping open.

But Emma kept going. “Dorothy’s amazing, Regina. They’ve known each other for seven years now and they care about one another—they love each other in a way I can only hope to.”

“You expect me to believe it’s true love and that that’s enough?”

“I don’t know if it’s all that garbage from the Enchanted Forest but it’s real and it’s honest and I hate that they went and got married so young… But how young are they? Really? Our son’s spent half his life just trying to stay alive. He’s aged more than any kid should and he’s got someone to share that with.”

“Dorothy.”

Emma nodded. Her lips were pressed together, her own frustration written on her face. Reminding Regina of that day Emma had come sauntering up the path with Henry before her—a stranger drawn into an unknown world because Regina’s son couldn’t bother to listen to his mother.

“She’ll be home at some point. We can go back upstairs. Wait. Berate our son for his poor life choices if you want.”

It was an alluring prospect. Henry clearly needed to be berated more if he somehow was getting away with getting married when he didn’t even have a GED. But Emma was glowing again, faintly. Too faint to be seen by the naked eye. Just enough for Regina’s educated one.

“No.” She sighed, “We came up here to work, and you need it.”

“I haven’t exploded yet. That’s a good sign right?”

“That’s a sign that I’m nearby and conscious. You’re still putting off a great deal too much power.”

Emma pouted, “So what. You’re keeping me in check? Right now?”

“If you’d like I could scale back my control and we could watch you incinerate this room?”

“And deal with Dorothy having my butt when she saw the carnage? No thanks.”

“Very well,” Regina held out her hand. “Let’s begin.”

Emma reached for her hand, but paused, “He’s okay Regina. Really.”

Regina knew it too. Could feel the rightness of her son’s world. See the confidence and bravery. It wasn’t what she wanted for him, but he was an adult, and a good one.
Only she couldn’t say that aloud. Couldn’t agree with the woman across from her. She smiled painfully and took Emma’s hand—letting all the magic between them pull her away from despondent thoughts.

###

“You left your mother to tell Regina didn’t you?”

Henry winced. Not because of his grandmother’s recriminating tone—she didn’t have one. In fact she sounded proud. He winced because it had been a really shitty thing to do to both his moms.

“Emma’s always saying she wants to be a mom to me…”

Grams frowned only then whipping out the look of judgement that told him they both very well knew that wasn’t what Emma meant.

“Okay yes, I left Emma to tell my mom I’m married. And yes I stuck them in the one room in the house where it’s really obvious. But you don’t know my mom like I do Grams. She’s a hardass bitch and the disappointment she’s going to be throwing around will be intense.”

“I don’t know Regina? I lived with her longer than you did.”

“No, you lived with a crazy evil queen that hated you. She was my mom. I mean, did she ever tell you to pick up your room? Make sure you were home for dinner? Maybe express disappointment in all your life choices?”

“No…”

“Exactly. But me? She was a soccer mom Grams. Mine. And she’s already furious I didn’t graduate high school and I have a beard. So I’m letting Emma tell her I’m married and I get to avoid that look of massive disappointment.”

“She’s wrong to be disappointed in you Henry.”

He liked to think that too. Marrying Dorothy had been the right thing three years earlier. Building a life with her had been right. He could look back and have regrets. Wished he’d figured out it was Cora the moment he saw her, stopped her from getting Gold’s dagger. Wished he kept Emma safe and sound so she didn’t kill all those people.

Dorothy wasn’t one of those regrets.

She had been right.

But his mom’s disappointment—her opinion—still mattered. She still had some grasp on him. Fingers digging in and claiming him as her own. It wasn’t stifling or bad. It was just the way of things. All else aside Regina was his mom, and her opinion mattered.

He picked his bag up off the ground where it lay beneath the hatrack and dropped it over his shoulder. “I think I’m going to head to the bazaar and see if I can pick up some wine for dinner. Celebrating the family reunion and everything.”

“You’re running Henry.”
“Isn’t that what we’re best at in the Charming family?”

###

Teaching another person control while keeping them both safe was a bit like having two people operate a faucet without the benefit of communication. It was a lot of slow and methodical moments and trial and error that usually ended up with someone getting burned.

She carefully scaled back her control. Let Emma take more and more.


“Gah!” She yanked her hands back, magic flying across the surface like static. Tingling and fiery all at once. “Control Emma.”

“I’m trying!”

“Not very hard. Again.”

Emma scowled but held her hands out. She closed her eyes. Regina followed suit.

Silence.

“Can’t you just make me, like, a ring or something?”

“No.”

“You could do something to the locket.”

“That locket is one of the single most dangerous magical items I’ve ever come across.”

She cracked an eye in time to catch the offense painted on Emma’s face. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that thing was never intended to have the Savior funneling her magic through it for ten years. Who knows what it can do now.”

Emma shrugged, “We could catch one of your mom’s toads and put it on him and find out.”

“By ‘who knows’ I mean it will probably give anyone besides you direct access to all the reserves of your power. I’d rather not hand that sort of thing over to the enemy.”

“I could give it to you.”

How…how could Emma be so guileless? How could ten years break down so many of those barriers Emma had painstakingly erected? The woman she’d known in the forest had trusted in her love for Henry and nothing more. Yet the woman before her would gladly hand over the power to unmake worlds.

“What happened to never letting me use your power again?”

“When did I say that?”

“When I turned Bluebeard into dust and you made it very clear.”
Emma pulled her hand from Regina’s again and seemed to inspect it, squinting behind her sad little glasses. “I grew up. Learned to trust.”

Regina rolled her eyes, “The one thing that ever endeared you to me was your debilitating inability to trust.”

“I can call you shifty if it’ll make you feel better.”

“No,” she sighed, “we both know it won’t be true.” She looked up through the fringe of her hair and gave Emma a well-earned smile.

One reciprocated immediately. Settling into place that understanding they’d developed out in an enchanted forest a lifetime before.

And creating a flurry in the pit of Regina. The sort of nerves she could never remember feeling. A girlish kind of sensation she’d ascribed to ridiculous teenage romance novels.

She wanted Emma to smile. Wanted that understanding that only the two of them could possess. She wanted the intimacy of their shared bonds. Wanted the hands held in her own again. Dry, lean and strong hands that brought to mind dreams she tried to ignore.

She squeezed for fear that relaxation would loosen her tongue more than her grip on Emma’s magic.

“Again.”

Emma breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth.

She ran her thumbs soothingly over Emma’s hands. She’d never had someone to teach her control. Rumpelstiltskin had given her lessons in wrath and hatred and set her upon a world ill equipped for her.

She taught herself. Learned that the deeper she delved into herself the more profound her grasp of the power conjured. She was deftest in her angriest moments. Juggling thought and rage like a circus performer.

The magic bubbled up in Emma. Rattled against the barriers Regina threw up like a caged animal. She squeezed tighter.

The magic shivered, rumbling through them and ruffling the contents of the room.

“Focus.”

The magic was a windstorm in the room but Regina held on tight.

“Focus,” she intoned.

“Fuck!”

The magic exploded outward, making the whole room tremble. Loose bits of energy fled away from Emma and Regina plucked them up, pulling them in before they could do much damage.

Emma was on her feet. “This is pointless.”

“No, you’re tantrums are pointless.”

She got a rude gesture for that one.
“Shooting me the middle finger helps no one.”

“I don’t get this. Why is this so frickin’ hard to do? The rest of you act like it’s—like it’s driving a car.”

“I can’t speak for my mother or Rumpelstiltskin but I assure you I only learned control through focus and practice. It isn’t a natural extension of oneself.”

“I remember back in Bluebeard’s castle you telling me that doing magic was ‘brave.’ That it was about looking where no one else could.”

“I said that?”

She nodded, “You made it sound like just touching magic was heroic.”

Regina shrugged, “I apparently have a way with words.”

“You really don’t remember?”

“It was two and a half years ago.” And Emma had been breathless and breathtaking and terrifying. She’d taken to magic faster than anyone Regina had ever seen, and she’d turned her all-seeing gaze upon Regina. She’d trembled before those green eyes. Felt her undoing with a mere glance. “That was a long time ago.”

Emma roamed the room, peeking in drawers and filing through papers. “Ten years for me.” She held up a comic. “Someone’s still a Marvel boy.”

“If that’s the worst thing you find among their things we’ve raised him right.”

“Check under the bed. I’ll look in the closet.”

Regina didn’t question the suggestion. She rolled over onto her stomach and used her magic to rifle through the myriad of things under the bed. They were mainly clothes. “When on earth do they do laundry? There must be half a dozen pairs of pants under here.”

“All things is washed by hand and Henry is a twenty-something male.”

“He’s lazy.”

“No. He’s a guy. They can’t be bothered to do laundry even when they have washing machine—you know except my dad.”

“He is Prince Charming.”

Emma snickered and they continued their search for nothing in particular a while longer. Neither brought up Emma’s magic or how it was slowly being reigned in by the simple act of busy work. They didn’t discuss their son or his wife or even the thousands of things that had changed in ten years. They poked around and enjoyed the silence.

It was so rare a thing for. Killian never shut up. Aurora was only a little better. The four of them together had enjoyed few companionable silences. Instead there was constant conversation—bickering and teasing and even songs when Mulan thought she was alone and was brushing down the horses.

“You know what we should talk about?”
Emma’s similarity to Killian in the “can’t shut up” department? “I was rather enjoying the silence.”

“I’m sure.” Emma leaned what looked like a shotgun against a dresser and sat down on the bed, looming over Regina and putting her in a very—interesting position. Killian would certainly have said something about Regina being on her knees directly before the other woman.

Emma balanced her hands on her knees. “It’s just I’m poking though Henry’s junk and avoiding talking about—everything, but I keep coming back over and over again to this one thing.”

Regina brushed her hair out of her face and leaned onto the bed, “And what’s that?”

Emma stooped lower, so they were far too close and she could see every bit of remarkably unblemished skin. “You kissed me.”

“I…”

Emma tilted her head, as if she were studying Regina. She raised one perfect blond eyebrow. “It was a distraction.”

“That’s what I thought the first year or two. Then I had time to think about it.”

There were two choices: let her nerves show or go brazen. Regina was not about to show weakness. “Oh,” she asked, dropping her voice an octave. “So you have a new theory?”

Emma nodded, her own voice lower too. “Yeah.”

Going brazen may have been a poor choice.

“I think you wanted to kiss me. I think all that one on one bonding time in the woods had you feeling…romantic Regina.”

“I can assure you Miss Swan, it was all an effort to get you through the portal.”

“Miss Swan?” Her lips curled up like a cat presented with a bowl of rich cream. Damn it. “I haven’t heard that one in a while.” How could she sound so amused?

“Yes, well someone should put you in your place.”

“It’s been ten years and I’m getting pretty old, but I seem to remember you using that when you wanted to put distance between us.”

Her eyes were sharp and invasive. Raking over every bit of Regina and exposing every part of her in the process.

“Emma.” She shouldn’t have said her name that way. As though she were begging the other woman. But she was so damned close and so damned real and all the fantasies Regina had enjoyed were suddenly nothing compared to the actual woman before her with her clever little smile and bright green eyes.

She was a temptation. As tangible and breathtaking as the sirens that had nearly killed her and Killian both. She swallowed.
Why…why was Emma leaning in? Why were her eyes on Regina’s lips?

Why had she brought up the kiss?

And the connection?

And why was Regina frozen in place, vibrating with want and anticipation?

She stopped so close each breath pushed from her lips wet Regina’s own. “Why’d you kiss me,” she asked again. A torturous creation out to pluck every truth from Regina’s self.

The only answer Regina could muster was in an action. A little one. A tiny push forward and a connection that would unravel all the plans she’d made and hopes she’d fostered.

But when their lips were so close she thought she felt the ghost of Emma’s on her own the whole room shook and the lights flickered and she lost her balance and fell one way and Emma the other.

She pushed herself back up and was surprised to find Emma already standing. The seductive creature that she’d been a moment from kissing was gone. Emma stood more like a superhero from one of Henry’s comics. Her shoulders squared, her back straight and her eyes focused with a keen intensity that sent a different kind of shudder through Regina.

“What the hell was that,” she asked.

Emma’s lips were a flat line of resolve. “Rumpelstiltskin.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay. I was out of town for a week and a half. But I'm back now and ready to tell this story!

And if you’re wondering who I headcast for Dorothy and old hot Henry I answered THAT question on Tumblr.

The bazaar seemed less crowded than usual. Not precisely silent or empty, but unnervingly less than normal. There was a sort of dead space just there behind the noise. An absence of the vibrancy he’d grown accustomed to finding in the bazaar. Vendors and their customers still bought and sold with enthusiasm. Foreign and exotic smells he’d never expect to find in Maine still wafted all about him. But it was…off.

The people moved past Henry without touching him. The world moved past. His world had shifted with the arrival of Regina, but the ripples of her appearance had yet to spread beyond him.

So the world was its same old self, and he was not.

It was annoying. The whole point of escaping to the bazaar was to have a little peace and familiarity. To get away and just breathe and now what had become familiar over the last few years was off like milk a day after expiration.

Henry was swimming in sour milk.

He grimaced and pushed his way through a group gathering around the Three Bears Bar. It was the only place in the whole bazaar to guarantee alcohol that wouldn’t blind a person. The only place that his grandparents and mother actually went for their alcohol. Their friends and allies would all gather there at night, drinking and talking and trying to escape their awful worlds. It was probably sour milk for them too. Changed just enough to never be truly palatable versus what they’d once known.

That didn’t stop them from going though, and it didn’t stop Emma and Mary Margaret from both repeatedly prohibiting him from going. Nor had it stopped him and Dorothy from sneaking away at night and drinking way too much mead and wine and ignoring everything his mom and grandmom demanded when he was younger.

He’d bought a carafe of wine from the bar on the night he’d turned eighteen. He and Dorothy had celebrated by sneaking away to the waypoint station all alone with the wine. It had been late at night so the whole station had been closed. The only light had filtered in through the stain glass windows, dimly coloring the marble and gold and brass.

They’d made their way right to the center of the echoing hall, where the statue of his mother towered over the closed up wishing well. That had been his grandmother Cora’s crowning achievement. She’d closed off every path in and out of their world but the ones she commanded, and left a garish avatar of her lost daughter to guard it all.

The stones around the base of the statues—the ones that covered up the old well, were of white and
black marble. He’d pried a one away from the base of the statue to reveal the well, still filled with its magic water and they’d each tossed something in and made a wish. The same wish.

To find love.

It had been a big, gooey and romantic moment that had made them both blush like crazy. Dorothy had taken his face in her hands and pressed a kiss to his lips and whispered that her wish had come true. He’d said his hadn’t. Not yet. Said his definition of love was eternity and he’d given her a ring and she’d said yes and they’d drunk all the wine there all alone in the darkness and agreed that maybe his wish was coming true. Then they’d tossed the carafe in together “for luck” and carved their initials on the stone before returning it to the base of the statue.

He hadn’t thought it was weird to get engaged under the watchful eyes of his missing mother. At the time, a little drunk on wine and giddiness, he’d actually thought it was sweet. Like she’d been giving her blessing.

Only that wasn’t the case was it? Nope, she’d been alive all that time and he could only imagine her face. He still remembered every stricken look when he’d raced into Emma’s arms instead of hers. That had been another mother—and not even one trying to subsume her place.

Dorothy was his wife. His other half. She was the beginning and the end of him and his mother, who held on tightly and wielded jealousy like a heavy hammer, would not take it well. Could not take it well. Sharing him was as foreign to Regina as—as the new Storybrooke had been to Henry.

He could only hope she acclimated eventually. Like he ha—

“What’s with the brooding face, handsome?”

Dorothy had materialized in front of him with the gentle pop. It was her shoes, ruby red slippers that let her go wherever her heart desired, whether between worlds or rooms. She’d had them as long as he’d known her. Ever since that first day when he’d been sneaking into a bakery at the age of twelve to steal just a little food for his family of warriors and misfits. He’d heard the pop and turned around expecting Cora. Instead there’d been a thirteen year old Dorothy grinning and stealing bread herself. She’d thrown him a loaf and offered her hand, “Come on riches to rags, now’s not the time to gape at the little black girl who can teleport our butts out of here.”

Not quite sure who he was meeting he’d taken her hand and she’d taken him away. He’d drug his mothers kicking and screaming into their merged worlds, but it was Dorothy Gale who had guided him.

His wife was still patiently waiting for his answer. “Nothing,” he fired back automatically. As much as “I will always find you” was a Charmings saying so was outright denial the quick retort of a Mills.

Dorothy frowned, “Yeah right. You’re standing in the Three Bears buying,” she glanced down at his purchases, “a case of wine and frowning like someone took your favorite toy.”

“How can they when she’s right here,” he deflected.

She pinched him, “I’m not a toy jackass, and seriously, what’s up.”

“I may…have done something. Wait. Why are you back?”

“Because David and I couldn’t find your mom. He’s parking the truck and I went to find you. Now stop deflecting.”
“I’m not deflecting, I’m just taking a really circuitous route around to saying what’s—ow!” She’d pinched him again. “Jesus, okay, it’s my mom—my actual mom.”

Dorothy raised an eyebrow and images of all those times he’d tried to explain how he had two moms and they were both his **real** mom came rushing back.

“Regina,” he elaborated. “Regina found us and she’s helping Emma and I may have…um…”

His wife continued to stare.

“I may have left Emma to tell her we were married?”

“Hm,” Dorothy crossed her arms, well muscled and athletic as hell, arms he’d seen **eviscerate** flying monkeys, “would that ‘may’ actually be a ‘definitely’?”

“Maybe—stop pinching!”

“Stop being a jackass.”

“I’m not being a jackass,” he said testily, “I’m—I’m reverting.”

“You’re acting like Emma. Which is something you say you’d **never** do.”

Henry grimaced. “Can I help it? This is my mom, Dorothy.” He glanced around the packed room and lowered his voice—the rest of the bar didn’t need to know who had returned to Storybrooke, “The Evil Queen.”

She still wasn’t having any of it. She’d crossed her arms again and leaned against the bar top. Baby Bear, seeing their intense discussion, was wisely avoiding finishing the transaction he and Henry had begun. He’d moved onto other customers and kept glancing back at him and Dorothy nosily.

“Right, I know you’ve got an honest to God Disney villain for a mom, but it wasn’t like she spent your childhood talking to mirrors and ripping out hearts right?”

“Maybe?” He threw up his hands, “I don’t know! She hid **all** of it until the curse was broken.”

“Okay…but when the curse was intact what was she?”

His mom.

Dorothy’s brown eyes, only a few shades darker than her skin, softened. “She’s your mom Henry. Alive, and helping us apparently.”

“Yeah.”

She put her hands on his shoulders and forced him to meet her eyes, “So how about we stop standing around here avoiding her and you finally introduce me to the woman?”

That sounded almost like an excellent idea to Henry. In fact he grabbed his wife around the waist and gave her a firm hug to express his agreement. She put her arms around his neck and held him close and he inhaled that perfect and calming smell of her and he settled into the decision to stop running and turn around and face his mom and all the baggage there between them.

But then the whole room rumbled. People screamed. Chairs clattered. Alcohol fell off the shelves behind the bar, shattering and sending up the heady scent of a hundred different spirits merged into
one overwhelmingly sweet and disgusting whole.

No. Not the room.

The whole cavern had shaken.

People fell and those that had stayed upright looked around in alarm.

Dorothy twisted in Henry’s arms to look out the door, “What the hell was that?”

“An explosion,” Baby Bear whispered from where he’d dove to the ground behind the bar and been pelted by falling alcohol.

“Someone’s trapping us inside,” Henry asked.

“No.” He looked down at his wife. She’d begun to faintly tremble in his arms. “No, someone’s attacking us. David—David was parking his truck.”

And his truck could explode. Go up in flames with all the other cars and trucks hidden in the cavern. Grams had once called it a perfect point for an initial assault because of that.

They shared a look of dread before Dorothy faded from view with a gentle pop.

Henry pushed past the panicking people out into the main thoroughfare. The gold flames from where Gramps hid his car were visible from there. The smell of burning oil trailed down the tunnel to him, followed quickly by the acrid smoke. He pulled a bandana out of his pocket and tied it around his face as he ran against the swath of people and towards the flames.

Dorothy reappeared beside him, his grandfather held in her arms. He was covered in a sheen of oil, sweat, and soot, but otherwise just seemed dazed by the cut at his hairline that was leaking blood into his one eye.

“Gold,” he gasped. “He and his minions have started a full on assault.”

God-fucking—They had to know. They had to know. They knew Regina was back, and they knew Emma should be trapped in her cage and they just knew. It was the perfect moment for an assault—with one mother incapacitated and the other not technically aligned Gold and his cronies could do a lot of damage. “Damn it,” he hissed aloud, “Dorothy get him back to Grams. If either of my moms can help bring ‘em back. I’ll try to keep them busy. Okay?”

She squeezed his hand in support and flashed away again.

It was in time to miss the flood of gold pouring into the bazaar. They all had skin pebbled like a crocodile but shimmering like their master’s name. They were all dressed in perfectly tailored charcoal gray suits, women and men alike, and their eyes were wide and liquid gold—possessed by the madness of his touch.

This was how Gold worked now. He offered bargains and claimed the souls of those who could not pay, turning them into little specks of himself and scattering them about like flakes of precious metal. There were twenty or more, all emerging from the entrance of the cavern system and grinning madly as they surveyed the panicked people.

Behind them, silhouetted in the flames and clutching his ever present cane, was the man himself.

Gold.
Or as he’d come to be known. Rumpelstiltskin. Chaos contained by Cora’s command. A creature devoid of good or evil. He had only his desires and those of his mistress and he’d consume any who tried to come between him and his wants.

“Henry,” he boomed, “I hear we have a visitor. I’ve come to fetch her.”

Henry kicked a club of fallen wood up into his hand. “I’m sorry Mr. Gold, but you’re going to have to check another castle for this princess.”

The man frowned, the quip flying smoothly over his head.

“Give me Regina and I’ll leave you to pick up the pieces of this quaint little town.”

Thunder cracked and ozone filled the air and Emma was suddenly standing beside Henry, the sheer force of her presence stunning everyone standing and for a moment there was the still quiet before a storm.

“Or,” she growled thunderously, “I can just kill your shiny metal ass.”

####

Regina had very strong memories of the one time Emma had teleported her. The image of it was a painting in her head. Strokes of bold color laid thickly on a canvas. Her mother on one side. Bluebeard on the other. Emma Swan wrapped around her and flinging them both from that tower.

She remembered the sinking feeling as they were falling and those arms around her body. Arms protecting her. And then the blinding pink smoke and her horror that a neophyte like Emma Swan would even attempt such complicated magic as a teleportation.

She also remembered reaming the other woman for it immediately afterwards and she’d rather hoped that her tongue lashing had stuck.

It had not.

Emma stood, declared they were being attacked, whipped off her glasses and threw them to the bed and then with a crash of thunder and a rip in the fabric of the world so garish that all it could do was bleed ozone, she’d disappeared.

Teleported.

Snap and she was gone.

And somehow her technique had grown worse in the past ten years. As though she’d forgotten the little bits of knowledge buried in the locket and now just forcefully ripped apart the world via her own will and power and bare hands.

There was no more terrifying sight in Regina’s living memory. Firebreathing snakes, her own mother, none could compare to the recklessness of Emma Swan. What the woman had done was a hair’s breadth from catastrophe. Too terrified to even attempt to teleport after her Regina instead ran from Henry’s room and up into the living room where Snow stood in mute horror.

Not from the magic her daughter had done. No, her eyes were on the door to the outside—on some distant point where that rumbling had begun.
“What’s happened,” Regina demanded.

“An attack,” Snow said distantly—her hands wringing a dishtowel, “We’re under attack.”

“Emma said the same thing before she tore a fabric in reality.” She snapped her finger in front of Snow to draw her attention back. “Are you just going to stand there gaping,” she motioned to the door like a woman guiding a senile grandmother, “or would you like to go help put a stop to this?”

“I—“ Snow actually looked panicked. “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you—“

There was a gentle pop as the air was displaced and Charming appeared, covered in grime and looking the worse for wear and wrapped up in the arms of a strange woman.

Regina would have liked to think the woman was a sorcerer, what with her ability to teleport so deftly, but Regina knew sorcerers. Could see the power emanating from them like those ridiculous auras awful New Age healers spoke of.

This woman had no magicks. The power that Regina or Emma had was not in her purview. She had only those sparkling slippers on her feet. She was Regina’s own height, but with skin nearly as dark as her black hair, which was divided into a multitude of microbraids and pulled back into a loose ponytail. Her brown eyes were sharp, focused, and unnerving. The eyes of a hero born for the stuff and never failing to see every little detail of the chaos surrounding her.

This was a woman she’d only heard tales of—and even those tales spoke of her as a child—not a woman—not an adult. A child who changed the course of an entire land. Shifted the balance of power in Oz forever and put the Princess Ozma on the throne.

The Queenmaker from Kansas. The overthrower of tyrants.

Her son had married Dorothy Gale.

She had not presumed it would be the Dorothy. What a foolish hope—to desire her son not to marry some storybook heroine. Naturally her graceful and heroic son would seek out a woman as heroic and graceful and clever.

She sniffed, between Dorothy and Charming there was the faint odor of burning oil.

Squaring her shoulders she frankly appraised the other woman. “Farm girl from Kansas I suppose.”

The woman dragged her eyes up and down Regina’s form. Seeing every bit of Regina and causing her to bristle uncomfortably. “And you must be the crazy queen who goes around ripping out hearts.” She had the hint of a twang in her voice. The twang of the American midwest. Bringing to mind tractors and corn fields and old men in overalls standing before silos of grain.

“That’s my mother, dear.”

“My mistake. I got my despots confused. Henry’s mother.” Dorothy dropped Charming unceremoniously into Snow’s arm and offered her hand.

“Henry’s wife.” Regina took the proffered hand.

Dorothy’s grip was assured, neither too tight like she was challenging Regina or limpid like she was deferring. Only confident. It reminded her of the old Snow—who lorded over their land so
righteously. Or Emma ten years earlier as she’d swaggered up the path to Regina’s house and introduced herself.

“We have much to discuss,” Regina noted.

Dorothy’s smile was less than enthusiastic. “We do. After we stop the shiny asshole from attacking the bazaar and killing a lot of innocents.” She looked over Regina’s shoulder, “Where’s Emma.”

“Already there.”

Dorothy frowned. After a quickly glance at Snow and Charming she offered Regina her whole arm like a man asking a women to dance, “You coming or you want to sit back like Ma and Pa Kettle here?”

Regina stepped close, “Oh I’d quite like to see my old friend Gold.” Ramping up the Evil Queen snarl she’d long ago perfected, she continued, “Let’s go say hello.”

###

The magic of Dorothy’s shoes were less like the magic of Regina’s own teleportation and more like how she travelled between worlds. Shrinking and growing so quickly the air around them was displaced with an almost soothing sound. It was a smoother way to travel and Regina found herself, again, envious of the other woman.

She coveted those shoes.

But there was no time to find a way to possess them herself. When they were standing on solid ground again it was in a war zone. People were screaming and rushing past her in droves, carrying with them the unique smell of a fire with a mission. Not the fire of a fireplace or a bonfire. But the sort drawn up from hell that burned through metal and rubber and wood and flesh alike, scorching a path of destruction.

The army that was waging war was a bizarre one that shimmered like Rumpelstiltskin had once upon a time. They were all garish exaggerations of the monster he’d been while Rumpelstiltskin still loomed at the far side of the cavern. He hadn’t aged. Or changed from his Storybrooke form. He was still the shrewd little man clutching his cane and surveying all he possessed with a wicked smile.

Curiously those eyes didn’t even pause on Regina. Instead they followed her son.

Henry was busy pushing Rumpelstiltskin’s soldiers back and freeing people from debris. He’d lost his coat and vest and was in suspenders, pants that were far too tight and a little too short, and a white button down that had come untucked, the tails of it flopping about as wildly as his hair. The blue bandana wrapped around his face made him look like some well-dressed anarchist at a protest.

She too tracked his movements with a sense of pride—even as she quietly worked at the smoke filling the cavern and pushing it back. She wasn’t ready to present herself grandly just yet, and kept her hands at her sides as she worked her magic.

Dorothy didn’t waste time either. As soon as she’d let Regina go she was popping in and out of the cavern, grabbing the people Henry had freed and disappearing again. Sometimes she’d grab him too and they’d reappear in front of one of Rumpelstiltskin’s soldiers, dispatch them with a flurry of movement, and disappear again. It was perfectly choreographed havoc.
Lovers of one mind. Moving in sync.

It ached to watch her son so casual and gifted in a fight and so intimately aware of a stranger like Dorothy Gale. Ached as much as his strength and quickness hit flooded her with pride.

Yet the crux of their group wasn’t Henry or his new wife.

It was Emma.

She ignored the injured—leaving them for her son and daughter in law—and blazed through the golden soldiers. She didn’t move with the speed of a human. It was something beyond a mortal woman. Her magic seemed to fuel her, supporting muscles and tendons that should tear and bones that should shatter. She was ruthlessly efficient as she snapped necks and crushed ribs with a strength that surpassed most gods.

If Henry and Dorothy were angels, flitting through the carnage to protect and save than Emma was a devil, a wraith cloaked in blisteringly white magic that chased her every movement. They were efficient. She was ruthless.

Regina knew something of teamwork now and because of it she found herself drawing endless comparison between the four thieves that stole their way across lands of myth and the righteous three before her who fought not for purpose or love or hope, but for survival.

It was gritty and brutal and bones crunched and victims screamed and even Regina—even Regina—felt something awful quail inside of her at the tableau.

It wasn’t right.

The crack of magic and scent of ozone. Emma moved again.

It wasn’t right.

Her one hand gripped the man’s shoulder and the other went over his chin and she pulled and he snapped.

It wasn’t right.

Another crack. More ozone. More dead men and women with skin like gold.

A pop and Henry and Dorothy were breathless beside Regina.

“It’s Gold,” her son gasped, pulling the bandana away from his nose and mouth and sucking in deep breaths of smokey air. “He’s never attacked like this before.”

Emma launched a woman into the wall and she smacked wetly against the stone.

“This isn’t like him,” Dorothy agreed. “He usually doesn’t enjoy it this much.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s dark eyes now followed Emma. His face pulled into the cruel smile of a mask. Something was so wrong it wafted in the air. The pungent odor of magicks familiar and foreign.

“Are the survivors evacuated,” Regina asked.

Her son look surprised, “Y—yeah.”

Surprised that she would be concerned. As though she hadn’t one been a queen with subjects or a
mayor with constituents. As though she hadn’t once been good.

Another crack. Emma was standing before that grinning bastard. Her hand was on his shoulder—Rumpelstiltskin hated to be touched—and her other hand was balled into a fist and launching towards his jaw with all the power Emma possessed behind it.

It wasn’t right.

So Regina teleported into the fray to fix it.

####

Henry knew his mother used magic. He’d seen her use magic in those few weeks before she’d disappeared through a portal and been lost for ten years. It was still incredibly incongruous with his personal image of her to see her disappear in a puff of purple and reappear between Emma and Gold.

She snatched Emma’s wrist from the air and halted a punch so vicious it would have destroyed a normal man. Gold didn’t even react, just kept grinning wickedly. And Emma—it was like all the anger that fueled her left her at the touch. One minute his mother vibrated with her deadly wrath and the next she was still, staring impotently at Regina who grimaced but said nothing.

“What are you doing,” Emma finally hissed.

“This isn’t right,” Regina protested.

“Isn’t it,” Gold asked.

“Shut up,” both woman shot back.

Dorothy snorted.

Regina then did something strange. Ignoring everyone else still in the cavern—even Henry—she lowered her voice and stepped even closer to Emma, speaking in an intimate tone he’d never heard from her lips before.

“You can’t do this.”

Emma stepped into Regina’s space. “He attacked us—”

“For a reason,” she glanced at Gold, “and not the one you think. I know Gold. A frontal assault like this isn’t his style,” she looked over at the man—arching an eyebrow in challenge, “is it?”

Gold continued to smile.

“You knew Gold,” Emma countered. “It’s been ten years.”

“And I knew him for decades longer. I was his apprentice, and raised by the apprentice before me. I’d dare say there is no one that knows that despicable imp better.”

Gold laughed. “You know very little, child.”

“No,” Henry said. His mom was right. It wasn’t Gold’s style. He’d left their home beneath Storybrooke untouched for years despite knowing it existed. He wouldn’t attack like this and if he
had attacked it would have been with far more of his little gold soldiers. Things were clicking into
place quickly in Henry’s head—bits of a puzzle slotting into their rightful homes, “No, Mom’s right.
Gold wouldn’t come at us like this. It doesn’t make sense. Hell, it doesn’t even feel right.”

Especially the funny buzz of magic in the air that Henry, of all people, could feel.

“Don’t curse dear,” his mother demanded. She continued to study Gold with that cruel gaze she’d
always saved for her lessers. “What are you?” She smoothly stepped fulling in-between Emma and
Gold, using her own body as a shield, while never letting go of Emma’s wrist. Facing Gold she
cocked her head and stared him down imperiously. “What little gift has Rumpelstiltskin sent me?”

His hand shot out, something shining in the palm of it. He reached for her shoulder and all Henry
could see was the bastard’s triumphant grin and all he could feel was the rush of anger at his mother
being taken from him again.

He’d lost her once and found her against all odds and now Gold was stealing her away and winning.
The bastard was always winning.

Then Gold lost. Or, more accurately, the man who wore his face did.

Regina reached up with her free hand and snatched his wrist, twisting it so sharply he dropped to the
ground in pain. One moment Henry was watching his world be pulled away and the losses mounting
and the next his mother was standing over the stranger, holding his wrist in a savage grip and holding
Emma’s behind her in a tender one.

She laughed. It was a deep guttural expulsion that sent a shudder through Henry. Her eyes danced
with malicious joy and curiosity and her lips were curled up into an evil smile that was the Evil
Queen, but her other hand still held onto Emma’s and there was present a dichotomy. The gentle
woman who had hugged him and seemed almost eager to help, and the monster Cora had beatified in
her ten years of rule.

She squeezed Gold’s wrist so tight something cracked, her knuckles turned white and Gold
screamed. His hand popped open. The shiny bit of metal he’d meant to attack Regina with fell from
his exposed palm, but stopped in midair before hovering first at Gold’s eye level, and then at
Regina’s.

“You were going to use it to abduct me.”

The coin lurched forward as if on a rail, rolling through the air until its edge struck the man’s
forehead. “Do you know what this is,” she asked no one in particular. “Gold would know, and he’d never be
stupid enough to attempt to use it on me. He has far too much respect for me to try.”

She squeezed again and the man who looked like Gold cried out once more. Dorothy tensed up
beside Henry—like she might try and put a stop to the piece of theater being performed before them.
Henry wordlessly reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together and stepping close to his wife.

The metal was a coin, a silver coin that flashed gold in the firelight. It dropped back down and
hovered just in front of Gold’s forehead, spinning slowly.

“This is a piece of silver from Charon’s purse. Buys the holder passage anywhere.” The coin
stopped, its edge pointed towards the man’s forehead. “You were going to use it to abduct me.”

The coin lurched forward as if on a rail, rolling through the air until its edge struck the man’s
forehead.

And then, then the man flinched and Henry’s mother, like a cat cornering its prey, smiled wider.
He’d committed the gravest sin Henry knew of. He’d stared down his mother, and he’d flinched. There were some you could show weakness to. Some you could reveal your fears to. Regina Mills was not that person. She thrived on weakness of others. She claimed all ground exposed.

She leaned in, her eyes consuming every bit of the man who really was identical to Gold. “Where were you planning to send me?”

The man crossed his eyes looking up to keep them both on the coin, then he looked back at Regina and said nothing.

She dropped Emma’s wrist and seemed to turn even nastier. Curling the pointing finger of her hand as though she were calling a child towards her. The coin rolled gently through the air again, beckoned by that one crooked finger.

“It’s no matter,” she said flippantly. “I can guess where you were sending me. The more curious question is who sent you. The mother missing her daughter? Or the mad imp she commands? The imp would, as we’ve discussed, not be so stupid usually, but my mother—she has always underestimated me.”

She crouched down in front of him. He was sweating profusely now, and his arm was still held up above his head by Regina’s hand. His other hand held Gold’s cane limply and he didn’t even try to use it as a weapon or support.

How strong was his mother that she could exact such pain with a touch? Henry tried to creep closer just to better see, but Dorothy’s hand in his stopped him and he glanced back to find his wife watching the interrogation with wide, shocked eyes.

“Mom,” he said, “we should have this conversation elsewhere.”

Regina’s eyes did not waver.

“Henry’s right,” Emma agreed softly, “this is not the place to be interrogating this guy.”

Regina sighed. “Do you hear that? They want me to question you elsewhere. Perhaps where those who sent you can’t watch? But I rather like this space. Gives my mother such a lovely view.” She squeezed again and the man screamed in pain.

“Regina,” Emma warned.

“Need to know that—” He screamed and Henry ducked his head. Dorothy pulled him close to avert his eyes.

His mother was murdering the man who looked like Gold. Burying a coin in his skull and smiling
excitedly as she did it. He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to forget the sight—not of the carnage, but of his mother’s cheshire grin.

But her words were still lurking in his ears. Dark words said with tremendous promise. “I will see her soon.”

He heard the body fall to the ground. Fires crackled. People moaned. He could hear Dorothy’s heart beat. Could hear his own heart beat.

He cracked an eye open and found Emma in awe and his mother looming over the man’s body. Her hair was mussed and had fallen into her face. She ran her hands through it and shook her shoulders, divesting herself of a persona she’d put on as effortlessly as a hat.

The smile she then gave him wasn’t that malicious one. It was genuine.

Earnest.

“Now,” she said puckishly, “who would like to help me wage a revolution?”
The body shifted as it fell. The face of Rumpelstiltskin faded to dust to reveal the now slack visage of the Sheriff of Nottingham. He’d lost his heart at some point. Traded it to Gold for something that could never be worth it.

It was a waste of a man who’d never been good or loyal but had always fought hard for his desires. She looked at the wide dead eyes of the corpse with pity. He’d been twisted by the deal with their shared devil. Lost his autonomy and now, his life.

But honestly, her mother had sent a fool after Regina. Who on earth did she think she was? Regina had been a queen. She’d ruled Storybrooke for nearly three decades as mayor. She was an archetype of evil to the people outside Storybrooke and her mother was a joke. To send the Sheriff of Nottingham wasn't just foolish it was infuriating and, most importantly, insulting.

And to kill and harm so many in her quest to claim Regina?

That riled her almost as much.

Her mother was trying to manipulate this world’s inhabitants in the baldest of manners and her clumsy attempts were not only offensive but destructive.

If her mother had meant to claim Regina with her little foray into Storybrooke’s underground she’d failed.

Oh yes, Regina would put an end to her. She’d unseat her vindictive troll of a mother, and she’d dismantle this absurd dystopian kingdom and she’d shatter the portals and bring her friends over and she’d teach her grown son how to ride a damn horse and not gape as he currently gaped at her.

“Now, who would like to help me wage a revolution?” She grinned and were Killian or Aurora there they’d roll their eyes.

Emma shook her head, either too flabbergasted or tired to say anything.

Dorothy looked at the body at Regina’s feet. “If you weren’t on our side that little show would have terrified me.”

“Oh yes, Regina would put an end to her. She’d unseat her vindictive troll of a mother, and she’d dismantle this absurd dystopian kingdom and she’d shatter the portals and bring her friends over and she’d teach her grown son how to ride a damn horse and not gape as he currently gaped at her.”

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Emma shook her head, either too flabbergasted or tired to say anything.
“Would you rather I self-flagellate? Or perhaps stick myself in a cage and never trust myself again.” Like Emma. Her eyes flickered over to the blond, who now had a hand on her forehead and was beginning to sag.

“I would rather you not be so frickin’ evil,” Henry demanded.

She sighed. Back not even a day and her son was already tossing the “e-word” around. “Henry,” she said carefully, “I hate that I have missed ten years of your life that I should have been there for. Nevertheless you are an adult now. Which means I have no need to hide things from you, and it also means I will not make apologies for the methods I use to keep you safe.” She stepped closer and grasped his chin, forcing him to look her in the eye. “So try not to be so naive.”

Her son’s entire jaw stiffened beneath her fingers. He and Dorothy were holding hands, their fingers intertwined and Regina saw the way they grasped one another for comfort. She saw the way her son glared and the way his wife’s expression turned opaque.

They disappeared. Popped right out of existence leaving Regina empty handed and alone with a flagging Emma and a cavern full of Gold’s dead minions.

“Growing pains,” she said to no one in particular. Maybe the naive accusation had been a bit much.

“I think,” Emma panted, “he gets the heavy handed moralizing from his grandmother.”

“My mother is hardly a moralist.”

“Mine, jackass.”

Regina’s voice went flat, “Oh. Right. Snow.”

“You should apologize.”

She waved at the point her son had recently occupied, “He judged me.”

“You went hot Magneto on that guy in front of the son that’s idolized you for the last ten years. You didn’t think there’d be, maybe I don’t know—a couple of hurt feelings?”

Regina blinked, “What on earth are you talking about?”

“The coin? Hot Magneto killed a guy that—do you not watch movies?”

“I do. But certainly not ones with someone named Magneto. What on earth sort of name is that?”

“Really? Your old mentor is named Rumpelstiltskin and you want to make comments about names?”

“If they’re idiotic names then yes—and you’re putting me on a tangent. Stop it.”

“You put yourself there Miss Mills.” Emma stood straight and her spine cracked loudly when she stretched. “I was just trying to point out that Henry being upset is totally normal. You drilled a hole through a guy’s head with a coin.”

“And yet you’re not upset.”

“I’m nearly forty. And I’d be a hypocrite after what I did in here today. Thankfully our son is not.” Emma cocked her head to the side, “it’s kind of nice don’t you think? That he’s stayed so good?”

“Being judgmental does not equate goodness Emma. It just means a moral code exists,” she
snapped.

Instead of arguing further Emma nodded. Like she couldn’t even muster an argument.

“You’re looking the worse for wear.” Regina was being polite. Emma looked atrocious.

“I’m kind of vibrating with magic Regina. Keeping it in is a little exhausting.”

That would make sense. Emma’s method of controlling magic was exhausting just to think about. Let alone put into practice. Still, Regina frowned because it meant— “You want to go back to the cage.”

Emma scanned the far side of the cave, where survivors were slowly filtering in and gawking at the destruction, which, to be honest, wasn’t that bad. The place had been a hole before the attack.

“It keeps people safe,” she said assuredly.

“It’s a crutch,” Regina countered. A dangerous and offensive one.

“It’s all I ha—“

Regina silenced her with a touch. Lacing their hands together was all it took. The connection between them blossomed. The magic surged through her—causing her to gasp more provocatively than she would have liked. And with it came all that agony Emma had internalized. All the grief and regret that were an anathema to Regina’s self.

But it gave Emma control too. Enough that she rejuvenated before Regina’s eyes, and then looked down at their hands, “What the hell—“

“I said I’d teach you how to control the magic.” She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. “You’ll learn more this way than wallowing in your cage.”

Emma continued to stare at their hands, where magic visible only to the gifted could be seen pulsating through the connection. “Is it safe?”

“It’s safe enough.”

Emma clearly wasn’t fond of that statement because she tried to pull away, but Regina held firm. She stopped pulling long enough to demand, “Okay, let go.”

“No.”

“You’re acting like you’re five, Regina.”

Emma immediately made her own statement absurd by pulling again. In fact it was she who looked five, reminding Regina of the way Henry used to tug on her hand while they walked through the annual fair in Storybrooke. Regina liked to stop in the middle of a crowd then, forcing Henry to pull with both hands and all his might. His birth mother mirrored his pose. Grabbing Regina’s wrist and tugging.

“Come…on,” she grunted.

Regina barely wavered, but noted, “People are watching.” Lots of people. More and more coming into the cavern and poking through what hadn’t been demolished. And many of them were then focusing on Regina and her infantile companion. Their whispers too soft to be clear, but loud enough
to create a hum of curiosity.

Emma stopped long enough to see the people. “See the terror on their faces,” she could—and it mirrored the terror lurking in Emma’s tone, “that’s why I want to go back to the cage.”

“I’d presumed it was for me,” she responded haughtily.

“Don’t flatter yourself your majesty.” She used their clasped hands as an anchor and pulled herself back towards Regina—far too close for propriety’s sake, “And let go.”

Regina could not. She dropped her voice to an intimate level she was unaccustomed to using, “This is safer than running.” Couldn’t she trust her on that? Running was a sign of weakness. As was hiding. The people, the good and the bad, needed to know Emma was not weak.

Emma’s voice cracked, “Not safe enough.”

She was so terrified. Regina could taste it. For once—for once another’s terror didn’t taste so sweet. It was an unpleasant and metallic bitterness.

“Emma? What’s going on?”

The terror ebbed at the sound of the voice. Red’s voice. They both turned to watch the approaching woman, who slipped through the crowd lithely and jogged up to them. She no longer dressed like Ruby had, in microscopic skirts and busty tops. Though the tight leather pants she wore did remind Regina of thirty years of micro-skirts. The red hooded jacket? Less so. It hid most of her face.

“What are you doing out,” Red asked quietly.

“Cora attacked us,” Emma said cagily. Her eyes were on the crowds behind Red, the ones closing in on them. The terror was like a trapped animal’s.

“I know, I came as soon as I—“ she seemed to notice Regina and Emma’s hands finally—and Regina herself. “The Queen?”

She raised an eyebrow but smiled, “See someone finally let you off your leash.”

“How—“ her eyes leapt back and forth between Emma and Regina, “You’re dead.”

“Take a whiff dear. Quite alive.”

“Emma?”

Emma shrugged, “Henry found her a few hours ago.”

“And she’s not—“

“A mirage? A ghost? A trick?”

“I was going to say Cora,” Red answered.

“No,” Regina said evenly.

Emma quickly filled Red in on what had happened, allowing Regina the opportunity to inspect the frequently furry other woman. And notice the glint of something on Red’s face…staples? She reached out to touch them and Red slapped her hand away absent-mindedly.
Looking down she noticed more staples on her hands—holding her together, and the distinct mottled tones of dead flesh. Red was…held intact by actual staples.

“You two should get out of here,” Red said, “I’ll get David and we’ll handle cleanup.”

Regina didn’t care about the clean up. Or the people actually crowding them and starting to notice not only Regina’s presence, but her identity. She was still focused on how the werewolf was pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle.

“Regina,” Emma called.

How on earth had it happened? Had she been caught in a thresher? Ripped apart? And what did she look like when she was running around on four legs and peeing on sofa cushi—

CRACK.

The smell of ozone, the sensation of nausea, and the fact that they were standing just outside Emma’s cage told Regina that they’d just—“You teleported?!”

Emma was busy opening the cage, “Yeah. You were too busy staring at Ruby’s ass to do it.”

“The woman looks like she was attacked by a Swingline stapler. I was distracted—you teleported!”

Emma held the door open, silently inviting Regina in. “So?”

She followed her, “So every time you do that horrific little trick you tear a whole in space and time itself. You don’t think that might be a little dangerous?”

“It’s worked—“

She rolled her eyes, “Exactly what the idiot who plays Russian roulette would say.”

“Well, I’m sorry my way of teleporting doesn’t agree with you Regina. I was just a little busy running from your mother for ten years to learn a ‘better’ way.”

“You’re being sarcastic.”

Emma feigned surprise, “I am? I had no idea.”

“If you want to be a sarcastic twat go right ahead—but do it on your own time. Right now I need you to promise me—promise me you won’t teleport again.”

Regina’s own urgency deflated Emma, “You’re serious.”

“What you do is dangerous. Far more deadly than whatever magic incidents you’ve had before.”

“Can you teach me how to do it without tearing holes in—“

“Time and space? Of course.”

“And without pink smoke.”

Emma was far too focused on the smoke aspect. Almost like… “Please tell me the reason you teleport that way isn’t to avoid pink smoke.”

Emma looked abashed.
“You’re threatening nature itself because of the color pink?!”

“The thunder thing is cooler—“

“The destruction of all life on this planet. Everything dead, because you don’t like pink smoke.”

“Hey wait. No fair. I have to fight your mom okay? And she and her cronies all have cool powers and everyone listens to them and poofing in in a puff of pink? Doesn’t exactly endear me.”

“Well, if you’re endearing the people then,” Regina threw her hands up. “By all means. Go! Threaten all of existence!”

“I will!”

They stared at one another, each breathing a lot faster than they’d intended. Emma backed down first. Her shoulders sank and she flushed a deep red.

“Oh no,” she muttered, defeated, “I won’t.”

####

“Jesus. You actually let them into our room?”

Dorothy was pissed and her being pissed usually trumped any anger Henry was clinging to. Like the anger at his mom for going full on Magneto on the former Sheriff of Nottingham.

Their room had been thrashed. Dorothy picked through some of Henry’s laundry, carelessly thrown on the floor, and then turned to give him the angriest evil eye he’d ever been privy to.

“Why the hell did you let your mothers go through our room?”

“They needed to work?”

She motioned to the disarray, “Clearly.” She kicked one of his dirty shirts up into her hand and threw it at his head. “You’re cleaning this up.”

He caught the shirt and sighed, “Yes ma’am.”

Her head snapped up so fast he thought he heard something snap. “Did you just ma’am me?”

“… Maybe?”

“If the plan is to alienate every single women in your life in under an hour you’re doing a great job.”

“Oh come on—“

“Called Mary Margaret old lately? Told Emma she’s in love with Regina? That ought to cross the rest of them off your list.”

“She’s not old—and my mom isn’t in love with my mom.”

Had that sentence just come out of his mouth?

“Emma doesn’t love Regina,” he elaborated.
That wasn’t much better. Dorothy raised an eyebrow.

“I’m serious.”

She picked her way back over to him and took his wrist, lifting it up to mimic a punch. “Hand on the wrist. All it took to stop a woman we usually put in a cage because she can’t control herself.”

“That means—“

“It means something Henry. Even if you don’t want it too.”

He knew it meant something. He knew it when his mom made him leave so she could go in the cage alone. Knew it when they made eye contact and seemed to understand each other like he’d never seen someone understand either of them. Knew it when Regina killed a man so Emma wouldn’t have that blood on her hands.

But knowing it meant something and saying it aloud were two different things.

He wasn’t ready to say anything aloud when it came to them.

Not so soon.

Maybe not ever.

“Can we go back to you being pissed I invited them in here in the first place?”

She grinned and ducked her head, “Yes, yes we can do that.” She kicked another shirt into her hand and snapped it like a towel at his stomach. “Our room Henry! What if they found my vibrator?”

“They’d try to give me an incredibly awkward talk about pleasing women?”

That gave her pause. “Both of them?”

“Probably Regina. Emma gave me a book in lieu of a sex talk.”

She’d sat next to him on the floor while he’d been doing homework and delicately laid the book in his lap. When he’d looked at her in complete confusion she nodded all sagely like he would understand and then patted him on the back, made a loud oof noise, pulled herself up, and walked away. Any attempts to ask her why she’d given him a book on male puberty or how she’d come by it were rebuffed with, “Read the book, kid.”

“Yeah,” Dorothy sighed, “me too.”

And that explained that long simmering question.

“I’m sorry they went though all your junk.”

She shrugged, “It’s cool. It’s not like it was my comic book collection they manhandled, and it looks like they only touched one of my shotguns.”

“I shouldn’t have been so chicken shit though.”

Dorothy led him to the bed, kicking her slippers off before sitting down and inviting him to join her. He flopped down instead and she had to twist on the bed to continue to look at him.

“This is a pretty big deal you know. It’s okay to be a little chicken shit.”
“I threw you—us—under the bus to avoid dealing with Regina.”

“Right, but your mom just show up after ten years and you were a little shell shocked.”

“You’re being way too understanding.”

“I have to be. I couldn’t even imagine trying to tell my aunt and uncle I was alive, let alone married,” she pinched him, “to a white guy.”

“Reverse racist.”

“To a dead white guy. Who clearly still needs a lesson in what racism is. You know a white guy hit on my aunt once and my uncle was nearly lynched when he told him to shove it right?”

He hadn’t. And a story like that was the rare reminder that despite all the magic and blimps and craziness of their lives his wife had grown up on the edge of the Dust Bowl, raised by tenant farmers. Yeah, she’d lived in Oz where time moved differently. Yeah she was his age. But really? She’d been born almost seventy years earlier and the first years of her life had been spent in a world more foreign to Henry than Oz even.

“Sorry.”

She patted his thigh, “Different time I guess. Though Cora’s Aldous Huxley bullshit isn’t much better.”

“Good thing we’ve got an Evil Queen to help us overthrow it huh?”

Dorothy laughed and twisted to lie down next to him, dangling her legs off the edge of the bed. “Right? Jesus. You gotta admit it was pretty badass when she made that little declaration.”

“All the ways I dreamt about my mom showing back up again in my life and I failed to picture that one.”

They lay together in congenial silence until—“You think my mom’s badass?”

Dorothy sat up, “Sure. That coin trick was incredible.”

“—Ly evil. Dorothy stop liking my mom.”

The command wasn’t even out of his mouth and he knew it was a dumb one. One, even one possessing a matching wedding ring, did not simply “command” Dorothy Gale.

She was watching Henry like he was a bug she was thinking about stepping on.

“Please,” he squeaked out.

“I’d be mad, but massive mommy issues are really adorable on you. Now come on Mama’s boy. We need to go see what kind of damage your moms did and help clean it up.” She hopped off the bed nimbly and offered her hand.

####

After extracting an oath from Emma so solemn the other woman asked if she needed to bleed to seal it, Regina found herself sitting in Emma’s cage watching the other woman practice control.
The original plan had been for them to speak with Snow and Charming and maybe, just possibly, for Regina to catch a few moments alone with her son. Moments where they could sort out the insane emotions and just…talk.

But Charming had found them first and explained that the clean up from the attack was an all hands on deck affair that she and Emma were not invited to.

So she sat in the cage—feeling far too imprisoned for her own taste—and watched Emma.

"Should I—I don't know—bend my knees or something?"

"You're not doing squats at the gym. You're practicing control."

"And I feel knee bending would help."

She waved for Emma to proceed. Emma squatted like an Olympic lifter.

Regina tilted her head, "Is it helping?"

"No, I feel like I'm—"

"About to have a bowel movement?"

Emma shot her the finger and went back to grunting and squatting and looking like an idiot.

With little else to do Regina was forced to reflect on her own path to learning control. Because thinking about her son, or her mother, or even the woman across from her, was too much at the moment. Thinking about control—about helping Emma learn it—was far easier.

For creatures like Rumpelstiltskin or the fairies control came naturally. For humans it was not so simple. It was a battle against nature to restrain the power.

But Regina had. She’d been born with power—immense power—and she’d felt it pulling at the seams of her daily as a child. Whispering in her ear to cut loose. Holding her mother up as an example of the strength found in magic.

Regina had repressed it instead. Bottled it up so tightly that over time she’d forgotten it even existed in her. Because her mother was an example. An example of how magic twisted and vilified a person and as a naive child Regina had abhorred the idea of being anything like her.

She’d learned to control the magic much like her temper. Kept it hidden lest her mother notice. Played the part of powerless and doting daughter and hidden all the anger and the magic in her quest to play that part.

Emma had not had the luxury of a lifetime under the iron thumb of Cora Mills. She had been born with magic but spent twenty-eight years cut off from it. And now her every waking moment seemed devoted to the idea that she could keep it all buried inside of her.

It exploded out again, racing across the surface of the cage and sneaking up into Regina. Forcing her to gasp with its potency.

Though this time, instead of throwing a tantrum Emma sighed. Her shoulders slumped and she shuffled over to sit beside Regina, collapsing down not unlike a sack of potatoes. They sat in companionable silence watching the excess magic dance around the cage.
Emma broke the silence first. “How do you do it?”

“Put up with you?”

She frowned, “Control it.”

“I thought I gave you a handy lesson on control earlier.”

“No, you sounded like a Jedi meditating on a mountain top. I’m talking about you Regina, because you get just as mad as I do.”

She stiffened, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You put a quarter through a guy’s head because your mom insulted you.”

“That was different.”

“Really? What about the time you punched me in the face? Or the time you tried to put me in a coma to keep Henry? Or the time you trussed up Bluebeard like a turkey?”

“Those were…”

Emma raised an eyebrow and waited, choosing not to offer any sort of fodder for Regina to latch onto. Forcing her to verbalize her thoughts.

“They were isolated incidents,” she said weakly.

“Regina.”

She closed her eyes to keep from looking at the open face married to that soft voice.

“Please.” Begging but asking all at once. “I need help and you’re the best I’ve had.”

Regina let her neck go slack and her head struck against the cage, the light of Emma’s magic bouncing away from the contact and forming a soothing wave of light that rolled through the cage.

Her eyes unfocused to the point that all she could see was the glow and the shadow of shapes and the faint movement of a body beside hers. “When I first used magic it was the day before my wedding. My mother was…restraining me—forcing me to agree to the wedding.” She told the story in a flat voice. It was easier to distance herself from it. From Cora. “And that was actually very normal. She’d always exerted control like that. But that one day, for a lot of reasons, I was finally angry enough to do something about it. I lost my temper.”

Emma didn’t move. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Emma’s striking silhouette framed in the delicate glow of magic.

Her throat was dry and she tried to swallow to lubricate it. Kept her eyes unfocused too. Anything to keep from turning her head and facing Emma directly. Anything to keep from seeing her face when she uttered truths best kept locked up.

“For me the magic is easiest to control when I’m angriest.”

“Oh.” Emma sounded surprised. Like a polite debutante learning she’d been stood up.

“That’s how every sorceress I know does it.”
Emma took the news poorly. Shivering and looking more despondent even then when Regina had first found her in the cage. “So I’m broken. I vaporized forty-two people and now I’m screwed for the rest of my life.”

She hadn’t known the number. “You were upset?” She didn’t even know how it had happened.

“Cora kidnapped Henry and left me for dead. I was livid.” The anger brushed against Regina. Hot and familiar. Anger was giving up power. Giving control. The trick Regina had found, was to take it a step further. Only in losing all control in the violence of anger had she’d learned to—“Channel it.”

She snatched Emma’s hand and squeezed firmly. Emma tried to interrupt but Regina squeezed again to stop her.

“You know how already. Every time you fought me. Before? You were channelling all that anger. That’s what we do. We direct everything inside of us to a point. We make it tangible.”

“I tried,” Emma looked away in shame, “and forty two people—“

“Can’t be brought back. Let them go.”

“If it were that easy don’t you think I would have done it by now?” She’d breached some point in Emma, and tears were bright in the other woman’s eyes and she turned to angrily look Regina in the eye.

She wondered how crooked the conciliatory smile she gave Emma was. She’d never been one for crooked smiles. They were too casual. Too familiar. But Emma seemed to only trade in those and the incandescent kind, and at the moment the other woman needed that familiarity.

“Of course not. Emma as gray a world as you grew up in you’re still the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. Honesty. Goodness. They’re in your veins.”

“Good people don’t lose control like I did. Good people don’t kill forty-two innocent people because they’re angry.”

“Maybe, but good people don’t usually have magic either. In our world there are good fairies. Not sorceresses.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Emma, you’re something new. There’s never been anything like you.”
"What do you mean?"

It wasn't Emma asking the question, but Snow, hidden in the shadows beyond the cage—with just the glint of her wide eyes reflected back at them. Regina had no idea how long she’d been there lurking quietly.

Spying.

"What are you saying to my daughter?"

"Mom—"

"What I would have thought was obvious even to a Luddite like you Snow." Regina stood quickly and raised her chin defiantly. "Emma isn't an ordinary sorceress."

"No kidding," muttered the object of discussion.

"Think," she glanced between mother and daughter, "both of you. When have you ever met a 'good' sorceress?"

"Merlin," Snow challenged.

"The son of fairies and far from altruistic."

"So because I only accidentally rip people apart I'm special?"

Regina pursed her lips, looking down at the still seated woman, "No. Because you're the product of True Love and the Savior and the possessor of immense magical reserves you're special."

Neither other woman bothered to speak. A swath of metal mesh between them and yet identical expressions of thoughtfulness on both their faces. It would have been amusing if it weren't an infuriating reminder that Emma was the daughter of Snow.

“You’re telling me no one has ever pointed this out?”

“When would they have the chance,” Emma asked, “Mother Superior and the fairies are all locked up and the only other magic users we know are evil—“

“And that didn’t strike you as odd?”

She shrugged. “I just figured you left all the good guys in the Enchanted Forest.”

“There were no ‘good guys’ to begin with.”

Regina herself had never considered the why of it before. In the Enchanted Forest—before the Curse
—it has just seemed natural. One made a deal with a devil or one prayed for a fairy. There were no magnanimous witches or wizards to seek out. At best one could hope for an especially morally gray individual like Merlin or a self-titled trickster like Rumpelstiltskin.

Emma, and her power, turned all that on its head. Emma was good. It was an unavoidable part of her makeup. In their world—in the Enchanted Forest—there had never been anything like Emma. She was an anomaly. A terrifying new development in the fundamental makeup of their world.

“Emma’s special,” Snow said proudly.

“Yes,” Regina looked down at the woman beside her. “She is. And maybe that means that the magic in you is special too.”

“Pink,” Emma said skeptically.

Of all the— “Control is emotion for all sorceresses. I’m saying that maybe for you,” Regina crouched down, “its different kind of emotions.”

She searched the Emma’s face. Her own mind working over the puzzle fastidiously.

It was the puzzle component of magic that had elicited her in those long few years when she’d been queen of all and Snow had been nothing and she’d felt like she’d won. Being evil and exerting control had held no allure, but the mystery—the problems of magic not so easily solved with a wave of the hand or a heavy heart—that kept her going.

“I control with anger,” she admitted. In the shadows Snow snorted loudly. Regina did her best not to snarl reflexively at the woman. “Yet you’ve made it quite clear you’re incapable of that. So my question is: today, when you were killing those men and women and protecting all of us and in complete control what did you feel?”

“I was mad.”

Emma glanced at her mother.

“What did you feel,” Regina asked again.

“I was angry they were attacking. Angry that Henry was in danger. Angry that—“

Regina caught her hand. “No,” she said slowly, “beneath the anger. It wasn’t driving you. What was?”

“L—“ The word caught in Emma’s throat. She looked down abashedly. Regina stroked the top of her hand with her thumb. She had to be careful. Emma Swan was a reticent woman when it came to her own emotions. And one in particular she approached timidly. As though she had an aversion to it.

It was an emotion that consumed Regina daily. One she understood far too well. So Emma’s reluctance concerning it had, even from that first day when they’d shared a cider and Emma had insisted she was just passing through, given Regina pause.

She pleaded silently with her—begging her to say the word.

Finally Regina spoke again so softly she was sure Snow could not hear. It was nearly a command she uttered. There was enough steel in her voice to make it so, but the tone she chose was soothing. “Say it.”
Emma closed her eyes, the defeat consuming her entire frame even as the word she drew out of herself should have heralded triumph. Even the hand in Regina’s—even it—slackened as that word was said.

Such a simple word. But one saddled with portent and as vital and fated and imbued as the woman who said it.

“Love.”

Something desperate cracked in Emma. Reminding Regina of that day in the hospital when the Savior had finally believed.

So she smiled in commiseration. “That’s your gift. That’s where your magic lies.”

Emma’s eyes were bright, if confused. “But you gave me the locket. It doesn’t use the magic that way.”

No. It could not. “The locket was made by my magic. Anger is what drives me Emma, not you.”

“I’m sorry.”

It took Regina a long moment to realize the apology wasn’t in regards to the things Emma had done. It was a reflex. An expression of sympathy. For Regina.

The true surprise were the words Regina said aloud.

“I’m sorry too.”

###

The wrecked bazaar was blisteringly hot and Henry had taken off his shirt to better manage the heat. He’d rolled the legs of his pants up a few inches too, and his bandana had been turned into a head band to keep his hair out of his face. All prompting Ruby and Gramps both to call him a hipster—a subculture that didn’t even exist in Storybrooke.

Anyhow, he figured that with his undershirt clinging to his skin and his suspenders dangling from his waist and the giant protective gloves on his hands he looked more like a well-dressed steel worker… who was stuck on clean up duty: sorting wrecked shacks into garbage and salvage.

He was trying to muscle a giant sheet of corrugated aluminum into the salvage pile when cool hands slipped under his shirt and wet lips whispered in his ear, “Have I ever told you sweaty bare arms manual labor Henry is my favorite kind of Henry?”

That was way cooler than well-dressed steel worker. He hip-checked Dorothy and craned his neck to get a look at his wife—who was far from sweaty. Being the closest thing to Nightcrawler that the real world had made her clean up job less about manual labor and more about popping people and things in and out of the cavern.

“Is that a fact,” he asked.

She shrugged coquettishly, “I’m also fond of noble hero Henry, scholar in reading glasses Henry and demon in the sack Henry.”

“I’m fond of silence,” Gramps grunted. “Really, really fond of silence.”
Gramps was at the other end of the giant sheet of metal Henry was lifting, and with Henry distracted he’d taken more of the weight on himself. His face was redder than the time Henry had walked in on him and Grams when he was twelve.

Dorothy put her hand on the metal, “Where’s this going?”

“Salvage pile.”

And with that it moved the thirty feet to the pile in an instant, landing loudly on the top and startling August, who’d been surveying the pile like a pudgy wooden general.

“You want to do the rest of the clean up,” Henry asked. “Gramps and I could do with a break.”

Dorothy surveyed the room, “I think we’re pretty close to done actually.”

Gramps stretched and groaned when something popped loudly in his back, “It’s the rebuilding that’s gonna be the problem. Convincing folks the bazaar is safe and getting it in working order is going to be a nightmare.”

“We could get my mom to help.” A pair of brown eyes and one blue eye stared balefully. “She could rebuild this place with a wave of her hand,” Henry argued.

“And then we’d owe her a favor,” Gramps countered.

Dorothy wasn’t quite as against it as Gramps. “It’s not like she’d be wheeling and dealing. Henry’s her son.”

“It could wind up exactly like that,” Gramps said. “That woman is not known for her altruistic streak. She’s know for all the evil…stuff.”

Henry rolled his eyes. Gramps, like Emma, was not known for flowery speech. Henry had clearly gleaned his own ability to put a sentence together from his adoptive mom.

“It’s still worth a try okay? Worst thing she’ll do is ask for my soul or something, which—“ he cut off Gramps before he could interrupt, “I don’t plan on giving her.”

“It belongs to someone else anyhow,” Dorothy snaked her arm around her his neck, tugging him in and laying a loud messy kiss on his cheek.

“I’ve seen disemboweled trolls less disgusting than that,” Gramps monotoned.

“Oh please, how many times did Henry and I walk in on you when we were kids? This here is payback.” Dorothy punctuated her sentence with a loud raspberry on Henry’s neck.

“Now I’ve got to go gouge my one good eye.” Gramps pressed his palm into it for emphasis. “And then I’ll be blind and have to go around using Ruby as my seeing eye dog.”

Ruby was on the other end of the cavern poking August in his wooden belly and reading him what looked like a riot act. She heard her name all the way across the cave and her head snapped up. She narrowed her eyes at Gramps and made a quick slicing motion over her throat.

He gulped, “Think she heard me?”

“She’s a cybernetically enhanced werewolf David. She can hear a pin drop in Cora’s bathroom from down here.”
Henry would have liked to think his wife was exaggerating. But knowing her and her surrogate big sister they probably had tested the limits of the powers Ruby had had forced upon her.

Gramps squinted then squared his shoulders like he was accepting a challenge. “Ruby we’re going to go eat dinner and harass the Evil Queen. You in?”

She didn’t even cock her head to better hear him. She just nodded like she was right next to them and then gave them a thumbs up.

“Do you want red or white wine with dinner,” he continued, still watching Ruby hawkishly.

She’d returned to her conversation with August, but plucked at her red jacket purposely.

“Can you bring dessert?”

She nodded.

“And, this is critical Ruby.” She held her hand up to halt her conversation with August and turned to face them. “Can you,” Gramps lowered his voice, “do the hokey pokey?”

“And shake it all about,” Henry asked reflexively. He caught his granddad’s eye and they both grinned then high fived.

Dorothy groaned loudly and Ruby scowled.

“Jesus, how you two can be so handsome and so stupid I’ll never know,” Dorothy lamented. Judging by the baleful look Ruby gave she agreed.

####

They made their way upstairs, Emma’s hand safely ensconced in Regina’s to ward off “another spell.” Regina had maybe been a little too pleased with the pun. Snow had scowled and Emma had looked exceptionally chagrined when she finally found the perfect moment to say it.

After Emma’s admission there’d been an unspoken agreement to take a break on the magic lessons. Regina had been there less than a day and had spent nearly the entire time in Emma’s company—pushing and prodding her towards revelations concerning her own powers.

They were both tired from the effort. Besides Regina had other concerns. Her mother. That barrier keeping her out of the Enchanted Forest.

Henry.

Things were clearly not as okay between them as she’d hoped.

He was at the sink scrubbing his face when they arrived upstairs. His—Dorothy was sitting at the dinner table with her chin resting in her hand and her eyes drifting open and shut. Red, shrouded in her jacket, mirrored Dorothy’s position at the opposite end of the table. Charming was standing next to Henry in the kitchen with a hand towel tossed over his shoulder quite domestically.

“You’re still awake,” he said, not looking up from the vegetables he was mincing.

Emma let go of Regina’s hand long enough to flip a chair around and straddle it. “And miss this
meal? Are you insane?"

“Mom,” Henry warned.

“I’m sorry,” Regina said, a little confused.

Henry picked up a bowl of pasta and brought it to the table. “Mom’s being an ass.”

Emma sniffed at the pasta, but with her free hand grabbed the open bottle of wine on the table and poured herself a very large glass.

“I am not,” she said. “I’m hungry.” She took a big gulp. “And thirsty. It’s been a long day.”

The link between them, developed by the locket and enhanced by touch, didn’t allow Regina access to Emma’s mind without permission. Like sitting in the street between a fine restaurant and a bakery she just got intense whiffs. Little tantalizing moments where she felt Emma’s emotions.

In this case there was anticipation, and unbridled glee.

Emma kicked Dorothy’s chair and the other woman slipped, caught herself and sat up straight. “I’m awake,” she shouted.

On the opposite end of the table Red stirred then yawned. The sound quite similar to that of a dog’s yawn.

Regina motioned to the woman, “I didn’t know you let the pets sit at the table.”

Red perked up immediately, and though Regina couldn’t see her face she was positive she saw some hackles rise. “What did you say?”

“Don’t your kind usually just gnaw on some bones by the hearth?”

“I’m sure your femur would be delicious,” she growled.

It was really too easy with the woman. No sense of humor whatsoever regarding her condition and a condition that lent itself to all manners of puns and snide remarks.

“My,” she said, “ten years and the poor dog’s gone feral.”

###

Henry had gone back to the kitchen to get the salt and pepper and turned around just in time to absorb the tableau before him before it all went to hell. One mom was straddling a chair, grinning like a loon, kicking back wine and holding the other one’s hand. They looked disturbingly…content. Natural. Regina was still standing—and that was about the only thing keeping them from looking completely like a couple. She had a matching grin on her face. Only he was sure Emma’s was from the delight of getting to watch Dorothy and Regina finally interact. Regina’s was clearly from the rise she was getting out of Ruby.

The werewolf woman had stood, her chair clattering back loudly, and she was almost growling.

His wife shot him a quick helpless look before sitting up straight. “You guys ready for David’s salad,” she asked, “because it’s really good.”
When all else failed, diversion tactics.

Emma must have realized that a battle royale between a sorceress and werewolf wouldn’t go so well tugged on Regina’s hand until she sat down next to her, “Yeah Regina. You ready for my dad’s salad? Dorothy loves it.”

His mother narrowed her eyes, “You’re trying to prod me into a confrontation with Ms. Gale here and out of one with the mutt.”

Ruby did growl then.

“Am I?”

“Yes,” Henry said. On one hand he was grateful. On the other he wanted to throw something at his mom’s head.

“Dorothy and I have already met, and we get along splendidly. Don’t we dear?”

“We talked for half a second and didn’t try to murder one another.”

“See,” Regina said. “That’s more than I can say for at least three other people in this room.”

“You didn’t try to murder me until ten years after the fact,” Grams grumbled.

“Yes, but I tried to murder your husband very soon after I met him,” she glanced at Ruby like she was a disgusting bug on a shoe, “and I’ve never cared for you pet.”

“Feelings mutual.”

From the kitchen Gramps argued, “You didn’t try to kill me. You locked me up in a cage.”

“And yet,” his mom held her finger up to make the point, “Dorothy and I get along wonderfully. No cages. No murder. I haven’t even commented on the fact that she’s an infant herself and yet thought it was a good idea to marry my child or that you idiots let it happen or that the idiot I’m currently attached to still thinks it’s okay that two children without a high school degree between them are fine to get married.”

“I don’t have a high school degree either,” Emma said.

“And you were pregnant before you were eighteen. We’ve established how unfit you are as a role model already. What about you Dorothy? Where are your parents?”

“Dead in 33 and 35 respectively. My aunt and uncle are the ones that raised me. She died in 15 and he in 06.”

“Long lived aunt and uncle.”

Dorothy leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms, “Lot of vitamins down on the farm. What about you Regina? Your family murdered anyone we like lately?”

His mother with this group of people was like grenade. Like a live grenade at the dinner table. And the grenade was filled with shit. And it was everywhere.

Regina didn’t miss a beat though. “I don’t know. Does what happened today with Rumpelstiltskin’s soldiers count as murder?”
“Huh?” That was Emma, voicing the question suddenly on every other person’s mind.

“Because I assure you, the only family I have in Storybrooke is in this room.”

Gramps brought the salad over and took a seat opposite Regina. “That’s wonderfully touching Regina.” The sarcasm dripped from his every word. “You believe in family now.”

“It was a formative two and a half years Charming. When I’m not being betrayed by those I trust I’m just a regular sponge for knowledge.”

It was the “two and a half” years that shifted something in Henry’s grandfather. He could be smug when he wanted to. Noble. Dorky. Yet every once in a while he’d become focused. That one eye would hone in and nothing could escape it. Henry had dreaded that focus when he was younger and his mother, with her coy grin, seemed totally unprepared.

“Two and a half years. So how the hell did you get here now?”

It had been the one question Henry had purposely avoided asking. All he knew was that it had been two and a half years for her—not ten. But how she’d penetrated an impenetrable barrier he had no idea. Because the barrier was impenetrable. Ever Dorothy’s shoes couldn’t get around it. She had to sneak through the portals like everyone else.

His mother had just popped into existence. Suddenly there and confused and impossible.

“Magic,” she said.

“You know that’s not what David asked,” Grams snapped. “There’s a barrier around this whole town. No one can get through. So how did you?”

His mother tracked his grandmother. Her face turning stony. The black look he’d expected had finally appeared. That was the mother he was accustomed to. The one who bottled up her rage and stewed in her anger and waited, patiently. He shot a look at Dorothy—she’d seen it too.

“I searched for a way. I finally found it. I came back.” Her voice was flat, “That’s all you need to know.”

“Mom,” he wiped nervously at his pant’s leg, “we’re just trying to figure out—“

“If I will betray you. Yes, I gathered that Henry.” Her eyes were still on Grams. “You see this isn’t anything new between Snow and I. In fact, we’re both much more comfortable with distrust aren’t we?”

“Your mother could have brought you back Regina. Sent you to spy—“

“Of course. Of course. The woman stabbed me and left me for dead but she shows up out of the blue and invites me back and turns me against my own son. That’s precisely what happened.”

“Hey,” Emma interjected, “we had no idea what happened to you, and no offense, but your mom’s pulled crap like this before. So pardon us if we’re suspicious.”

“Oh it’s we,” Regina feigned surprise, “not just Snow?”

“Mom, us asking isn’t a big deal…”
It was a very big deal.
Not Henry’s curiosity over where she’d been.
But the distrust in the room.
Henry didn’t trust her.
Emma didn’t.
Even Dorothy, who didn’t even know her, distrusted her.

“What would you like to know,” she asked sharply. “My mother has nearly ruined this town and its inhabitants, you’ve spent ten years barely surviving, and now you have one of the most talented sorceresses in existence ready to help stop her. But by all means, let’s discuss my bowel movements for the last two and a half years.”

“That’s not what we’re asking,” Emma pleaded. Her hand was still wrapped in Regina’s and she actually had the audacity to quickly stroke her hand with her thumb. “We’re curious.”

“There was a time for curiosity. All of you serving it together with a heaping spoonful of judgement at the dinner table isn’t it.”

At the head of the table Dorothy Gale leaned forward, steepling her fingers together and eyeing Regina over them. “How about you stop deflecting this conversation and tell us exactly what got you through.”

Her ankles were hooked together, the sparkly red shoes twinkling in the shadows cast by the table. Those red shoes. A more potent version of the silver ones Regina had used. Those shoes could take Dorothy to any point in the world.

Except, perhaps to Storybrooke.

While Dorothy carried a hefty dose of suspicion in her tone Regina could respect the woman’s curiosity. More so than anyone else’s at the table. Particularly Red, who was quietly sniffing the air like she could smell any truths Regina spoke.

“Hermes’ cap.”

Dorothy frowned, “You stole it?”

“I did.”

“That’s interesting, because the story of its theft is kind of popular. I’ve heard it a couple of times when I’m not in Storybrooke,” she leaned in, “and I don’t see three other thieves with you.” Those sharp eyes of hers missed nothing.

Regina raised an eyebrow, “So you’ve heard of the Four Thieves?”

“Like the movie,” Henry asked.

“Yes,” she and Dorothy said at once.

Emma looked skeptically at Regina, “What does some crappy movie have to do with anything?”
“You wanted to know what I’ve been doing? Your local multiplex has a highly inaccurate version of events.”

“You are not one of the Four Thieves,” Dorothy stated emphatically.

“And how would you know?”

“Because I’ve been hearing about them for the last two years in every land I go to and if our Evil Queen was one of them I’d think I’d know.”

Oh. Oh now that was interesting. The girl had somehow grown up alongside Henry yet travelled out into lands where only two years had passed.

“Tell me,” Regina said, “what exactly do you know about the Four Thieves?”

“They hate Sinbad and they’re good people.”

“So I can’t possibly be one of them?”

“Maybe, but that’s pretty unlikely don’t you think?”

“List them off.”

Dorothy said nothing.

“No, go ahead. Tell me who they are.”

Warily she started, “They’re a reformed pirate, a princess, a warrior and a—“ Her face fell just a fraction.

“Sorceress.” She turned to Emma, “Who, besides myself, was left behind?”

Emma frowned in thought. “Mulan, Aurora and Hook.”

Regina grinned and ticked them off, “Your warrior, princess and pirate dear.”

Dorothy still wasn’t quite convinced, “You’re telling me you stopped Circe, outwitted the Monkey King and killed the Kraken.”

“Well I don’t want to brag…”

Dorothy laughed. An abrupt peal of laughter that bordered on madness. “Of course. Of course. It’s not enough my husband’s grandparents are Snow White and Prince Charming or his birthmother is the Savior of Storybrooke. Now Adoptive Mom’s not only the Evil Queen but one of the Four Thieves who are wanted for crimes in nearly every single land in existence. Because why not!”

The Charmings, Red and Henry all stared at Regina instead of Dorothy—like they’d see proof of the claim tattooed on her skin. Red even took another loud sniff.

Regina shrugged, "If people didn't want us killing all their monsters they shouldn't just leave them out like that."

"The Four Thieves are criminals," Emma asked.

"Depends on which land you're in. The people of Agrabah and Aeaea call us heroes."
Snow scoffed loudly.

“And who precisely have you saved lately Snow? Seems to me you spend all your time castigating your betters and sitting on your lily white a—”

Under the table Emma dropped her hand and grabbed her knee, digging her fingers into the flesh of Regina’s leg.

###

His mother jumped, his other’s mother quick movement to halt the tirade of venom working better than expected. Then she flushed and Henry heard Dorothy’s stupid teasing about “love” fluttering in his head.

He slapped his hand down on the table startling every other person. “So,” he said quickly, “that settles it. My mom was fighting the good fight and now she’s here. And you’ve got experience facing monolithic evil. Right?”

“Besides her own soul,” Gramps asked.

Regina ignored Gramps. “I do have some experience. Both being the evil,” she nodded at Gramps, “and putting a stop to it. You should be excited you’ve got me on your little team.” She clapped her hands together. “Now normally I have a horse when I’m adventuring. Do you think we can just saddle Pongo Senior here?”

The only thing that kept Ruby from wolfing out and leaping over the table was Gramp’s steady arm. He stuck it out in front of her and stared down Henry’s mother. “It’ll take more than a couple of stories to get anything resembling trust from us Regina.”

“Good thing I don’t need trust. Just your help finding my mother and stopping her. And, I suppose, a form of conveyance that doesn’t pee on the furniture.”

Henry quickly spoke up before Ruby’s usual temper of steel snapped, “And your friends?”

She looked wistful. “Hermes’ cap is powerful, but not enough to bring them over. We’ll need to get the barrier down first.”

That was something they’d been attempting for years. A mission Emma had spearheaded before her magic had become too unwieldy.

She’d wanted to find Regina—if only to leave flowers at her grave.

“So no help from the other thieves,” Emma asked. “Convenient.” Only Emma could have pulled that retort off without offending his mother further. She somehow managed to sound smug and sarcastic and polite at once. Ruffling Regina’s feathers and soothing her in the same breath.

Love.

Nopé.

Nopé that wasn’t what he was seeing. He was just seeing to similar women sharing a very platonic understanding.
After a reasonably productive dinner that apparently amused Regina far more than anyone else at the table she’d been dragged back to Emma’s cage. Clearly Snow and Red wanted her there so they could keep her prisoner. But Emma had begged her too. “You make it easier,” she’d admitted.

There was the additional benefit of being very, very far from Snow. She’d agreed and Henry had presented her with a bed roll and blanket.

Then she and Emma had tried to go to sleep. Only…

"This is my first slumber party," Emma whispered.

Henry being a very private child, and Regina being raised in the Enchanted Forest meant it was her first one too.

"You grew up in the 80s and 90s and didn't go to a single one?"

Somewhere to Regina's…right Emma tugged at the sheets on her bed. "I was the kid sneaking out of the house to TP the houses holding the parties because they didn't invite me."

"Nice to know those accusations about delinquency I've made weren't unfounded."

"Sold cigarettes to Laura Petersen when I was twelve and lobbed a whole string of Blackcats at the vice principal when I was thirteen."

"So the girls not inviting you were all very smart."

"Yeah, regular bunch of uppity genius valley girls," she said sourly.

Despite her proud outlining of her pre-teen record there was still a touch of wounded pride in her voice. The sort of ache Regina felt uncomfortably bound to assuage. "As your very first slumber party how does this rate?"

Emma laughed, "There's two of us, no talk of boys, no consumption of popcorn while watching Beavis and Butthead and not a single question of Truth or Dare."

"We could talk about Henry."

She could hear the eye roll. "Talking about our son does not count."

"We could talk about…David."

"And I threw up. Thank you for that."

“Ruby’s short temper.”

“If your boyfriend murdered your grandmother and then used you in his experiments you’d be testy too.”

Oh. “I didn’t know that.”

“We’re just happy she doesn’t eat most of the people who piss her off.”

“Was your mother also tested upon?”
“Nope. That’s just Mom now. Must have been your curse lifting, because she’s been this way for just about forever.”

The curse would have merged the two consciousnesses into one. Some of the victims would have been…unsettled by the lifting of the curse, but Regina couldn’t see how it would turn Snow into such an angry little woman.

Emma moved again. Regina turned her head to look in Emma’s direction and thought she saw eyes looking back. “Truth or dare.”

Regina tugged her thin blanket up to her chin. “I am not playing that.”

“Come on Regina. It’s just us girls and you get to ask me after.”

Her own curiosity about certain manners drove her to say, “Dare.”

Emma said nothing.

“Well?”

“I was hoping you’d say truth,” she huffed, “hold on. Let me think of something.”

“This game is riveting.”

“All the times I’ve seen people play Truth or Dare the dares involve exhibitionism and lewd acts.”

“You’re not getting my top off with a dare.”

“I’ve got other ways to do that.” She sat up, “I dare you to say Truth.”

“That’s not how the game goes.”

“Like you know. Come on. Do it.”

“No.”

“Okay. Then I dare you to run through the entire cave system naked and screaming.”

“You’re asinine.”

“So Truth it is,” she said triumphantly.

“Why don’t we just play Truth then if you’re not going to use reasonable Dares.”

“Because I might want a Dare and I don’t want to take them off the table. So. Dare you to say Truth.”


“Why are you playing Truth or Dare with me?”

“Because you seemed upset over never having the chance before and I wanted to be nice. A sentiment I now deeply regret.”

“Why?”
"You already had your Truth."

"Regina."

Because two and a half years with Mulan and Aurora and Killian had taught her that being nice could have rewards. That forming relationships not based in spite or cruelty could be satisfying…

"Because I’m hoping you’ll say Truth and I’ll get some answers of my own."

From the sound of it Emma flopped back down onto her bed. "You’re awful at this."

"Truth or Dare."

"Dare."

"Asshole."

"That’s not a dare."

"I dare you to be honest."

"What the hell’s that supposed to mean?"

"You know precisely what it means."

Emma sighed, "So what burning question is it then?"

There were so many flitting around in Regina’s head she had difficulty choosing just one. There were questions relating to the near kiss. Questions relating to the countless people Emma had killed. Questions about Snow’s peculiar new nature. About Red’s “boyfriend.” About Charming’s eye. About their son.

Yet of all the questions churning around in Regina’s head the one she finally voiced sounded silly coming from her lips. “Should I be worried about Dorothy tomorrow?”

“You two pounding the pavement alone and looking for ways to bring the barrier down? What do you think?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

If you follow me on Tumblr you know this was supposed to be a monstrously sized chapter. It got too monstrous and thus got split into two AWESOME halves (only one of which is done).

Chapter Eight

Henry woke up to an empty bed and the only assurance he had that the world hadn’t ended and he’d been left all alone in it was the smell of coffee luring him out from between the sheets. Dorothy’s side was cool to the touch and her usual accoutrements for going above ground were absent.

He scratched at his bare torso and scrounged around for something to wear. It was Emma’s “no shirts, no service” rule—one he figured Regina would support as well. Settling on a sweater from the “should probably wash soon” pile he tugged it on while fighting a whole series of satisfying yawns.

He padded barefoot up into the great room that served as dining room, living room and kitchen. His grandmother was standing at the counter pouring her coffee and blearily glaring at it like a scary enough glare would keep her from falling back to sleep. Her short, dark hair was sticking up in every direction and she’d pilfered Gramps’s robe but had it on inside out.

“Rough night,” he asked.

He regretted the question. Her glare must have been boiling the coffee all by itself because when it was directed at him it was positively scalding.

“Don’t poke the grumpy bear,” Emma said from behind a giant box of cereal at the table. “Someone kept sneaking down to my room in the middle of the night to make sure Regina didn’t kill me in my sleep and now she looks like one of those flying baboons.”

Grams’ eye twitched.

Henry did a surreptitious look around the room but saw neither his wife or his other mother. Emma took a bite of her cereal and said casually, “They’re not here kid. Left at the butt crack.”

“I wasn’t—“

Her spoon paused a few inches from her mouth so she could take a moment to stare at him.

“Checking on them,” he finished.

She shoved the heaping spoonful of cereal in to her mouth. “Like grandmother like son.”

“They didn’t even wake me up.”

“To say what? ‘We’re off to get to know each other and form a healthy relationship absent you?’”
Dorothy had said **that** much the night before. And also some stuff about figuring out the barrier and how to bring it down.

Still. “It would have been nice.”

Emma waved her spoon dismissively, “You going would have been clingy. This way they get to have a no holds bar **super** bitch fest and we get to avoid all the fireworks and break them out of jail when they’re inevitably arrested.”

“So you’re not actually worried?”

“We’ve got enough other things on our plate.” She ticked them off her fingers, “Getting things ready for our original plan to stop Cora before Regina showed up.”

“Operation Blood Dragon.”

Instead of keeping one finger up and adding a second, she just flipped him off, “Figuring out exactly how the hell Gold knew Regina was here—“

“Operation Pyrite.”

“And seeking professional help for my son who has an obsession with giving every plan a name.”

“Operation Code Words Work and Always Have.”

“You are twenty-one, married, and yet the bulk of your strategic knowledge appears is gleaned from G.I. Joe.”

The benefit of growing up in a town magically behind the times meant Henry’s cartoon knowledge was a good twenty years behind every other kid his age. He flopped into the chair beside her, “Well,” he grinned cheekily, “the more you know.”

Emma seemed to consider flicking her next spoonful of cereal at his face, but hunger won out at the last moment and she jammed her spoon into her mouth, the metal loudly grazing her teeth.

Grams, finally caffeinated, spoke up for the first time that morning, “Are you sure you’re okay to be investigating so soon after your,” she lowered her voice, “incident.”

Emma shrugged, “I feel okay. That conversation with Regina yesterday helped. Besides figuring out exactly how Gold knew she was here is important. The only way he—or Cora could have known was…”

Someone told them. Which meant a mole. One of them. Or Ruby. Maybe someone in the bazaar…or his Grams was right and Regina was working with Cora. Though why she’d go back to the woman who tried to kill her was beyond Henry.

“Fine,” Grams said, “your father and I will help with the bazaar rebuild today and see what we can find out there.”

“Mom and I can poke around above ground. See what people have heard.”

His mom smirked, “You just want to go so you can accidentally run into Regina and Dorothy.”

“You can aways stay in this pit with Grams and Gramps.”

She paled.
“Promise me,” Grams said, “that you two won’t start anything while you’re up there.” She gave them her old school teacher look for emphasis.

“I can vouch for myself, but the kid is pretty squirrelly.”

“What about squirrels,” Gramps asked, lumbering into the room in Gram’s robe. Like Grams he’d also put it on inside out, and his hair, just an inch or two shorter than her’s, was sticking up in a nearly identical fashion.

“Yikes. Did you get any sleep last night,” Emma asked.

Gramps scratched under the strap of his eye patch. “I tried, but someone kept getting up in the middle of the night.”

“Nothing was stopping you from checking on them David.”

“Sleep was stopping me Mary Margaret. I was nearly blown up yesterday and had to sit through you and Ruby trying to kill Regina all through dinner. I was tired.”

Henry glanced at his mother, but she’d ducked her head, studiously avoiding the fight percolating between his grandparents.

They’d been like this ever since the curse. It had been little moments of bickering at first. Quick snipes. Sometimes a short temper. Ruby used to tell him it was probably because they were two people in their heads—put the fairytale perfect couple off balance.

But measure by measure it was getting worse.

The toll of their war with Cora.

####

Sitting outside a bright little cafe on a well maintained cobblestone street and sipping the creamiest and most potent espresso of her life Regina had to admit that her mother’s dystopia wasn’t entirely bad.

She pulled off a piece of the flaky croissant on her plate and let the delicate pastry dissolve slowly in her mouth before taking another fortifying sip of espresso.

It was better than anything she’d had at Granny’s in the last thirty years. More transcendent, even, than some of the meals she had in her travels as one of the Four Thieves. And some of those meals had been shared with gods.

She took another bite and moaned so loud the business man in a suit at the next table twisted in his chair to stare.

“Eyes back on your paper Pops,” Dorothy said. She was sitting across from Regina, sipping an iced coffee through a straw and watching Regina consume her meal with wide eyes.

“Not a lot of croissants on your boat?”

“Not a lot of croissants ever.” She held up another piece as an example. “These were not part of Granny’s repertoire.”
Dorothy shrugged, “You could have just cursed the recipe into her head.”

Good point. Excellent one in fact. Though she suspected it was meant more as a slight towards Regina.

She popped the piece of croissant into her mouth with a not quite to the eyes smile. “I’ll have to remember that for next time.”

“Is that what you plan on doing? Cursing everyone until you get a world you like?”

She said nothing, sipping her espresso instead.

Dorothy huffed and sat back in her chair. She reminded Regina a little of Emma. There was this youthful inability to sit still, this gangly handling of her limbs. The woman across from her could never be characterized as a girl but she also didn’t carry herself like any of the princesses or queens Regina had known.

Changing tactics Dorothy leaned forward again, putting her arms on either side of her iced coffee and sucking it up through her straw. She continued to watch Regina with those eyes of her. As dark and sharp-eyed as a falcon’s.

“You know I grew up hearing stories about you?”

Regina raised her eyebrow.

“My daddy took me to see Snow White when I wasn’t much more than a baby. Sat in his lap the whole time. It was a treat. Poor as we were back then just going to the movies was a treat. So I remember it. About the most memorable moment I have of my daddy. He held me tight when Snow White went running through that forest, and he tucked my little head into his shoulder when that queen—you showed up at the cottage with the apple. You used to give me nightmares as a kid.”

“Yes, I’m sure a cartoon was terrifying.”

“To a little girl? You bet your ass. But that movie wasn’t the only version of you I had to go on.”

Regina crossed her arms defensively and looked away, “Is that a fact?”

Dorothy sat back up, taking her straw with her and gnawing on the end of it. She twisted the other end around her finger, stretching the plastic with a long tug. “When I wound up here in Storybrooke Emma and Henry used to tell me stories about you too. Henry in particular.”

She reached out to spin her small cup in its dish. “My son is a gifted storyteller.”

“I know. One of the reasons I married him,” Dorothy said with a smile.

“Because of his horror stories about me?”

“Because of the stories about the two of you baking pies together, or sitting out in the yard digging in the dirt. Or how you used to take him hiking out into the forest overlooking the town.”

The memory whipped through her, forcing a smile out of her reflexively. His hand, small and damp and dwarfed by hers. The way he’d run ahead swinging his walking stick like a sword and going deeper and deeper into the woods, to where the only smell was of damp earth, and the trees blotted out the sun and even the birds would grow hushed out of respect for Regina and her child.
Dorothy pulled the straw out of her mouth with a smack and just as swiftly pulled Regina from her reminiscence. “Point is, I got an idea of you.”

“Clearly.”

“And I’m gonna snipe, because I was raised to tell the truth and call the spades spades, but I know you’re not just that old lady peerin’ in the window plotting to kill an innocent girl.”

Something about the statement and Dorothy’s conviction, and maybe even still the memories of the squirming child in Regina’s lap, affected her. More deeply than she would have liked. Her voice cracked, “She was anything but innocent,” she said. And then swallowed and looked away to keep the fissures inside of her from growing.

Fissures that awful woman across from her saw so clearly with those sharp, sharp eyes.

“She killed your true love with good intentions. Don’t see how that’s anything but innocent.”

Certainly. Absolute innocence. An example of the dangers of extremes. Everyone was so busy castigating Regina for her own extremes and failing to see how their opposites could be just as deadly.

“Let the person you love die at her hands and then try to lecture me.”

Dorothy rubbed her hand over her face. Her shoulders sagged as if defeated. “Come on. I got a town to give you a tour of and listening to you moan about a forty year old grievance ain’t part of the plan.”

Grievance. Like Daniel’s death was a tree extended over the property line or a neighbor’s dog that wouldn’t stop barking.

Regina stood and followed Dorothy away from the coffee house. They fell into step and Regina tucked her hands into the pocket of her coat.

“Dorothy dear, just a quick thing before you lead me on this lovely tour.” Dorothy paused and Regina took the opportunity to lean in. “Call the murder of my fiancé a grievance ever again? And it won’t matter who you’re married to.”

####

“Regina and I played Truth or Dare last night.”

That one sentence was all it took to send Henry stumbling a few feet while his brain short circuited at the idea of his moms and the game that happened to lead to his first kiss.

“Don’t be such a perv, kid.”
How—how could he not be a perv? Truth or Dare was, by its very nature, pervy. He’s seen penises because of Truth or Dare. Watched a girl unbutton another girl’s shirt with her teeth. He only knew what dry humping a chair looked like because of the game.

Damn it.

Now he was seeing his mom dry hump his other mom in a chair and—Jesus Christ!

He slapped himself so loud the crack echoed through the tunnel and Emma winced.

Then narrowed one eye at him accusingly, “Get your mind out of the gutter.”

They were actually standing in a gutter when she said it. Questionable water racing past the ankles of their matching boots as they made the underground trek to the way station.

“You’re the one talking about Truth or Dare.”

“Yeah but I can talk about it without picturing,” she waved at him, “whatever leads to slapping yourself in the face. Which—“

“I’m not telling you.”

“You’re picturing Regina and I,” she said in alarm.

“You’re the one talking about Truth or Dare!”

“And your mind goes to your mothers having sex?”

“How can yours not?”

“I don’t—” She stopped. Squinted as if looking at something in the distance. “Oh,” she said, “Oh, I see it now. Wow,” she elbowed him, “We’re hot.”

“Shut up.”

“No. No. Regina is doing this thing with her tongue…“

“Please stop having mental sex with my mom.”

She bumped him again with her elbow, this time playfully. “You started it.”

“No, you did with all the Truth or Dare talk.”

“I was trying to tell you that we played Truth or Dare and it was almost exclusively Truths and Regina was…normal.”

Henry raised an eyebrow.

His mom continued, “She seemed different. She was, I don’t know, funny? And not just mean.”

“She doesn’t do funny. She does snarky, nasty and sarcastic, but not funny.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I have vivid memories of the woman pre-Cora. Which was why I’m kind of surprised. She seemed almost nice.”

Another word Henry would never attribute to his mother. “Mom,” he warned.
She looked alarm, “What?”

The two of them (and Cora, who did not count) had been the only ones to really miss Regina. What had sunk in over the years was that as much as Henry missed his mom, Emma had always seemed to miss her more. “I know you and Regina…bonded over there, and you’re excited she’s back here with us but be careful.”

“You’re telling me to be careful. I haven’t dated in ten years so I could stay focused on you and keep you safe but I need to be careful.”

“With her? Yeah.”

They came to the end of the tunnel they’d been moving through. One wall separated them from a bathroom in the way station. On their side it was dank cement, streaked brown and green with rust and mold. The other side would be brass and green glass and sparkling white tile. It was the path he and Dorothy usually used to sneak past the guards that surrounded the nexus of portals in and out of Storybrooke.

Henry flipped his bag around and rooted around in it for the wand, but his mother grabbed his arm and stopped him.

“What’s with all the suspicion kid? I thought you were excited about her being back.”

He was. “I am.” But every moment she was back in his world more and more of the gauze of optimism he’d shrouded memories of her in was torn away—revealing not the hero Emma had told him stories about and the mother who’d adored him, but the whole woman.

Memories he’d given abandoned were surfacing. Starkest among them the memories of why he’d sought out his birth mom in the first place. Memories of the woman without magic but every bit as scary as the one who’d drilled a hole in a man’s head with a dinar.

“So what’s the problem,” Emma asked.

Could she even understand the problem? She’d never built as many bad memories as good ones with her parents. Never felt the love and hatred at war in her chest. Never longed for her mother’s arms only to be repulsed when they were around her.

“It’s complicated,” he said.

“Hey, woah,” she squeezed his arm, “what’s going on?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Kid we talk about everything. Especially when it comes to your mom.”

“I know! I know. But there’s some stuff that’s…it’s just between my mom and me. And now she’s back and it can, you know, not just be an excercise in my head. It can be a real thing we sort out. On our own.”

“I want to help.”

He reversed the grip so it was his hand squeezing her arm. “You’ve helped a lot already.”

She didn’t think so and her mossy green eyes were suspicious.
Henry flashed an encouraging smile. “Come on. You have. I swear.”

It cracked through. Her suspicion wavered. “Yeah, I have been pretty awesome.”

“Super awesome. Now put on your hat so they don’t recognize you out there.”

She whipped a dark ball cap out of her back pocket and pulled it down so the brim shadowed her eyes. Her good eye glasses had a giant crack in one lens that would have been noticeable in public so she switched them for a big nerdy hip pair that forced her to squint.

Henry tapped the wall with his wand. It vanished without a sound and they stepped carefully into the brightly lit bathroom. Another tap and the wall was there again.

Emma winced at the brightness.

“You know,” he thought aloud, “I bet we can get my mom to fix your glasses.”

“I’d rather she magic me some contact lenses or Lasik.”

Emma had always been nearsighted, a fact no one knew until she got an eye infection from wearing the same contacts for four months. Unfortunately getting to an optometrist without Cora finding out was, not surprisingly, impossible and she’d been stuck wearing glasses stolen from people on the street. It gave her a permanent squint most days.

Henry shoved his wand back into his bag and they carefully crept out of the bathroom, each watching for the guards that watched over the way station.

It wasn’t the most guarded building in Cora’s Storybrooke. The focus of the building was less about security and more about collecting a toll from every single traveler. Consequently only the entrances and exits were heavily guarded.

It made moving around inside fairly easy (as long as your mother wasn’t popping into existence in the middle of a crowd in a bright plume of purple smoke). And that made their task that morning, learning what Cora knew about Regina’s arrival, that much simpler.

No one gave them a second glance as they approached the cordoned off area his mother had appeared in the day before.

As he’d expected Cora’s police force was at work and surrounded by a crowd.

“Lot of gawkers,” Emma observed.

“The woman the station is named after pops into existence right under her statue. I’d gawk too.”

People were taking photos, of the statue, the surrounding area, and of the two women standing inside the cordoned off zone. Henry shivered and pulled the collar of his coat up to hide his face.

“Looks like Cora sent her big guns to investigate,” Emma said.

She’d sent the wicked witches. Two sisters. One green and the other an unnaturally pearlescent white. Lilith and Leila. In Oz they’d ruled the West and East respectively. Dorothy had defeated them both, but they always came back, courtesy of the gift of immortality bestowed upon them by their patron, Cora.

Henry didn’t dare get close enough to hear what they were saying. Emma didn’t bother either. Instead she continued to squint at them, watching their lips as the formed words.
“What are you—“

“Reading lips. Shh.”

After a moment trying to figure out what the wicked witches were doing was no longer necessary. Lilith snapped her fingers and a brass cage, six feet tall at least, and looking like something someone would keep a giant bird in, appeared in the exact spot Regina had arrived in the day before. Lilith and her sister laid their hands on it, funneling magical energy into the device. It glowed a deep purple.

But Emma grabbed his hand and dragged him away.

“Wait—we have to stick around. See what they’re doing.”

“No need,” she said. “That cage is one of Whale’s. They’re probably collecting evidence so he can analyze it and figure out how Regina got here.”

“Okay,” Henry said, “but—“

“But that cage and its contents will be sent to Whale when they’re done. And seeing as it’s a special request from his good pal Cora he’ll work on it late into the night. You and I are going to be there to make sure whatever he learns, Cora never finds out.”

###

Travelling around on a boat and horseback for the better part of two and a half years had meant setting aside Regina’s love for pencil skirts. As much as she adored them they weren’t practical when launching Killian up into the rigging to amuse herself or racing Mulan through a forest on Gauvin’s back.

For her meandering tour through Storybrooke with Dorothy she’d happily turned her pants into a black pencil skirt and her given her knee high boots a nice high heel. Which Dorothy immediately noted.

However she said nothing. Likely because she was walking around in sparkly red shoes that were at complete odds with her utilitarian pants and military style jacket.

“Does anyone ever comment on those things,” she asked, nodding down at the shoes that glittered with every step.

“Emma figured out this spell to put on them when I was a kid. Makes it hard for people to notice them.”

Regina studied them. Having been told about the spell she could now see traces of it. A bastardized version of the one she’d put on herself back in Bluebeard’s lair. It was like how a child would trace their parent’s handwriting with crayon. Crude, but sweet.

“So you…lived with them?”

Dorothy nodded, “They took me in almost as soon as I met them. Oh! But Henry and I came much later.”

Regina raised an eyebrow.
“Just in case you thought it was really Wuthering Heights or something. We started seeing each other much, much later.”

“Not that much later as you’re still essentially an infant.”

“Compared to who? You’re younger than Emma.”

“That’s from all the virgin’s blood I bathe in. I believe,” she thought about it a moment, “I’m over sixty.”

“Not counting the way time in Oz moves differently I’m over eighty.”

Regina’s mouth formed a flat line of distaste, “That’s doing nothing to endear you to me dear.”

Cradle robber. That was the only word forming in her head.

Dorothy was pleasant enough. She had a dark streak to her humor that Regina could enjoy and she was very intelligent. But she was married to her son, and every time Regina thought she had a handle on her horror and irritation the woman would say something that had her wanting to incinerate her.

Like that the woman was in her eighties.

Regina deserved a damned medal for not turning her into cinder.

They drifted back into silence, their heels clicking in rhythm on the pavement. Their day had been spent touring the city and slipping into little shops to gather information. Regina let Dorothy do the talking. She had an ease with people that left Regina envious. They’d blossom in Dorothy’s presence, letting slip all the secrets that were best kept close.

“One would think you used magic,” she’d said at one point.

“Being nice and a little charming is just as effective most days,” Dorothy had responded.

By the end of the day Regina’s feet were aching more than she’d let on. They’d crisscrossed their way across a town that was entirely foreign to her. They’d eaten noodles with a family in a floating shack on the harbor, and had a cup of tea with a book seller residing in the basement of a building forty stories tall, and Regina had watched from the corner as Dorothy flirted with a guard before promising to get a letter to his family outside the barrier.

Just as the stories had told her Dorothy was an everywoman at ease with the peasants and soldiers and even, Regina had to admit, with a queen.

The sun was low in the sky and mostly hidden by dark clouds rolling in off the ocean. Dorothy assured her that their next stop would be their last. It was on Storybrooke’s former Main Street. A run down garage at odds with the giant buildings that towered over it. A single building, the last bastion of the Storybrooke Regina had built.

“I thought it was all gone,” she said in awe.

Dorothy glanced at her, “The original owner didn’t want to sell. Bound and determined to keep his little piece.”

She remembered the man. An obstinate woodsman with obstinate children.

“They killed him. Then Cora decided to leave the shop where it was.” She held the door open for
Regina, “A reminder.”

A reminder of what obstinace was met with. And, knowing her mother, a ploy to show her own benevolence. Cora had never understood that kind words and rare good actions were no salve for the bitter grief she wrought.

The man sitting behind the desk, dressed in dirty coveralls and with hands blackened from spending so many years in an engine, used to be a mouse. The second was that in her new world he’d driven the tow truck.

And when she stepped in he immediately recognized her. Not with the foggy eyes that others in the city had. They knew her from pictures and hideous statues He recognized her from the times he’d towed her car to the shop for repairs and the times he’d averted his eyes when she sat down the counter from him at Granny’s.

One of the old guard—an original inhabitant of Storybrooke, and the only one she’d seen so far that had changed little in ten years.

His quick mouselike eyes darted to Dorothy.

“She’s okay,” Dorothy said without preamble, “she’s on our side.”

“But she died.”

“Proof standing before you to the contrary,” said Regina.

“She wasn’t dead, she was just trapped by the barrier.”

While certainly a man, there were still so many qualities of a mouse in—she glanced at his coveralls—Gus. He had that rigidity like a mouse spied by a predator. Regina leaned onto the desk separating them, mindful of how she appeared like a prowling cat to his nervous eyes.

“And I expect that as Dorothy has brought me here to you that you know something about the barrier.”

“As much as anyone.”

Dorothy sighed, “Gus, I know I’ve never pressed you too hard for information, but we both know you know more.”

“Why—“

“You’re only mechanic in town and you’re one of the few people that’s regularly at Cora’s palace. You have to have heard something.”

He shook his head.

He knew something. Some tiny speck of knowledge that could help. That much was clear. But Dorothy was being kind. Trying to soothe him until he gave them what they needed.

“I can pull it out of you,” Regina said conversationally. She raked her eyes over him. “Like plucking an errant thread from a sweater.” Or the hair off a mouse’s back.

“You’re not torturing Gus.”

“If you want to torture someone go after Whale.”
The horny town doctor?

“Whale’s Cora’s crony, but he’s also under her protection.”

Really? That was interesting.

“Not anymore,” he said. “Whale still works for her but he’s protecting himself now. They had a pretty big fallout this morning.”

Convenient.

“Over what,” Dorothy asked.

“He wanted more hearts. She said no.”

A shock of cold raced up Regina’s back. The fine hairs on her neck—on her arms—stood straight up. She locked her jaw less the cold emotion seeping through her showed on her face.

Once upon a time Whale hadn’t been a womanizing doctor, but a stiff and frigid scientist, and he’d been obsessed with the hearts Regina and her mother and Rumpelstiltskin could procure with a touch.

She tried to keep the tremor out of her voice, “He’s continuing his work?”

The mechanic glanced at Dorothy and then looked at Regina like she was stupid. “Yeah.”

“Whale is Cora’s pet scientist. He does what she asks and he gets all the resources he wants for his experiments.”

Experiments. That explained the werewolf. He chopped her up and put her together again. And Emma’s cage—Henry had said he’d been the original designer.

“It would appear Doctor Frankenstein has been very busy.”

The conversation after that quickly turned useless. The former mouse squeaked and worthless information came out of his mouth. Regina and Dorothy said goodbye and stepped back out onto the street.

The dark clouds had turned into a brewing storm, rolling low and slow towards Storybrooke and preceded by a thick fog that had turned everything gray. The tops of buildings, the streets themselves, all disappeared into it. They’d stepped into Gus’s shop while the sun still shone, but stepped out into a wasteland.

Regina hitched up her collar and Dorothy flipped the hood of her jacket over her head.

“You want to speak with Whale now don’t you?”

“I do,” Regina admitted.

“You know it’s a trap.”

“Whale splits with my mother the day after I arrive? Clearly. The question is who is laying it?”

“Does it matter?”

Frankenstein had his reasons to want Regina to himself. But her mother, or more likely
Rumpelstiltskin, could be involved as well. Their first attempt to procure her had failed and they’d moved on to a more elaborate plan.

But in the end? Did it matter?

“No.” It did not.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

But seriously. I kill what you love. To make up for it things are about to get tender next chapter.

Whale lived in a castle.

Where most of Cora’s little cronies had gone modern with massive estates or high rises built on the blood and sweat of Cora’s slave labor force Whale had built an entire castle. A giant one set on an outcrop of rocks overlooking the bay. Rough waves, not yet diminished by the calming physics of the surrounding land, struck the rocks below it and a fine white spray painted one side of the castle every few minutes. Its hundreds of gargoyles and rough hewn dark stone made it a monstrosity, but the thick lightning rod jutting obscenely up out of the enormous central tower was the castle’s centerpiece.

“That thing is the architectural equivalent of a dick joke,” Emma observed.

Henry said nothing. He knew from an experience related to the stealing of the plans for the monstrosity towering before them that saying something would only send Emma into a whole stream of jokes about penises and Whale. Usually with a few zingers related to Grams sleeping with Whale during the curse.

“I’m pretty sure those two new turrets at the front of the castle are supposed to be its testicles.”

He closed his eyes. Looked like just being quiet wasn’t going to help.

“How do you think he even presented this design to the builders? You think he just dropped his pants and said “but bigger?””

“Mom. Please.”

“But I can do this all day,” she whined cheerfully.

“I know. Yet this storm blowing in is giving us the cover we need and I really don’t want to miss our chance because you’re twelve.”

The storm was a mass of grey clouds rolling in off the Atlantic and getting closer and darker every moment. They were standing in a band of thick forest that separated the castle from the rest of the city and the wind moving the clouds rustled through the trees overhead.

Eerily it was the only sound. The city seemed distant. The creatures of the small forest were silent.

Emma was unconcerned. She pouted, but thankfully didn’t drop another joke. Instead she squatted down next to him. “So what’s the plan kid?”

“Sneak in, find Whale and don’t die?”

She crossed her arms and unloaded the kind of Mom eye he hadn’t seen since he’d showed off his
and Dorothy’s matching wedding rings. “That’s a terrible plan.”

A third voice piped up, “Agreed.”

They both spun around to find Regina and Dorothy quietly pushing through the brush to approach them.

“What are you doing here,” he asked.

“Looking to interrogate Whale, you?”

“Same,” he told his wife.

“And you guys didn’t kill each other,” Emma said. It was a joke, but the way she raised her eyebrow and appraised them hinted that it might have been a little serious too.

Regina ignored Emma’s teasing and came to stand next to her so she could properly look at the castle herself. She braced her back with her hands and leaned back. Her eyes started at the base and moved up, and then down. She drank in the entire building, not in awe, but in study.

“So that’s Whale’s castle?”

“Yup.”

“It’s certainly compensating for something.”

“Right?”

Dick jokes. The way Henry’s mothers bonded.

#####

Frankenstein had always had a love of the dramatic. Building a giant castle that was regularly struck by lightning and surrounding it with thick, thorny brush and high evergreens instead of a more reasonable moat or, maybe, a wall was par for course for a man who’d come of age in a black and white world with vampires, wolf men, mummies and a science so powerful it verged on magic.

The castle was a moody monstrosity that evoked an unnatural sense of dread in Regina even as she was intellectually impressed by its creation.

“This is a first for us,” Emma said softly, “we usually don’t wage direct war on Cora’s cronies.”

“This particular crony is inviting us too,” Regina said. “He’s had a falling out with my mother and returned to that to lick his wounds.”

“He’s trying to lure us in,” Henry asked.

“Not us dear. Me.”

Out of the corner of her eye Regina saw her son and Emma share a look.

“It’s not like I’m being egotistical,” she said in defense, “He breaks from my mother and makes himself a perfect target the day after I arrive.”
“And he knows you’ve got magic right? So don’t you think part of his plan involves stopping your magic,” Emma asked.

Sure. Yes. She’d definitely thought of that.

“His knowledge is a good ten years out of date…”

Emma was no longer sharing her irritating knowing look with Henry. Instead she was giving it to Regina.

“Okay,” Emma said, clearly not giving stock to Regina’s words, “so how about we work on a plan to get in there that *doesn’t* hinge on you sashaying in and demanding things from him.”

But…that was an **excellent** plan. Regina had consumed the magic of a **god** since then! Frankenstein didn’t know that.

Regina sniffed, “You’d be surprised what a little well performed theater gets you.”

“Would you like me to count the number of times your plans have worked? We have the True Love potion which ended with you getting tied up. We have the magic hat that got me stuck in the Enchanted Forest. That time we had to run from a herd of centaurs. Our sojourn at Bluebeard’s. And who can forget the time we went up against your mom and you ended up shivved and bleeding on one side while we ended up with your mom in a Regina suit on this side.”

“No one died.”

All three of them stared.

“No one that matters,” she amended.

Henry winced and Dorothy turned away.

Emma ignored her. “I’d like to avoid prison, torture or a centaur lobbing a spear at my head, thanks.”

“So what do you suggest? Because your plans have hardly ever been subtle—when you actually bother to come up with a plan. When was the last time you came up with one?”

“How about we sneak in,” Henry interjected. “Dorothy’s got her shoes. She can get us through.”

“Not through those castle walls,” Dorothy said. “I already tried. He’s got something laced through the stone. I could probably move around inside, but not through that rock.”

Regina shrugged. “I could sneak in fairly easily.”

“We already said you’re not sashaying, Regina.”

“Birds or mice or cats don’t *sashay* Emma—well cats do—but that’s beside the point. I can transform myself and sneak—“

“Into a trap,” Henry interrupted. “We need to get to Whale without giving you up Mom. And we’re not going to leave it to chance.”

“How is me going in alone to get him chance? He has no idea what I’m capable of. The last time he saw me use magic I was practically a **child.**”
“Oh my God,” Emma groaned, “assuming he’s unprepared and your super prepared and hoping it all works out is exactly what chance is.”

“Fine. We can all just sit here then and twiddle our thumbs.”

“Or,” Dorothy spoke, her voice perfectly even, “We’ll take a play from your book Regina.”

“Sashaying,” Emma asked.

“Turning us into rats,” Henry said at the same time.

Dorothy rolled her eyes. “I’m talking about her and the Four Thieves. You guys have a particular style.”

“Yes, but the outfits were Aurora’s ideas.”

“I mean when it comes to raiding fortresses. How many have you four taken out?”

Regina never bothered to count them all. It would have been a great deal. Sinbad had had a unique knack for finding impenetrable fortresses guarded by giant monsters and they’d developed a very good routine for dealing with—

“Oh.” She got it now. “You want to cast yourselves as Killian, Mulan and Aurora?”

Dorothy shrugged. “It’s worked for you before.”

“It did…” The problem was she’d found a rhythm with those she’d left behind. They hadn’t needed words. They’d relied on intuition, on knowing each other after spending every waking moment together on a boat.

These three were disparate. There was the mysterious woman from Kansas, that son who was more stranger than child, and Emma, who had to live in a cage so she didn’t destroy the world.

“You’re saying one of us isn’t as good as the girl who lost to a spindle,” Emma asked in offense.

Accurate.

“Fine, we’ll do it your way—our way—my way. You three sneak in.”

“And what do you do Mom?”

She looked back at the castle. Perfectly still. The brief calm before the darkening storm reached them. Regina would be the object of ire. The focus of the mobs that lurked behind those walls. Regina would do what she was often told she did best.

“I’ll be the distraction.”

####

Regina didn’t wait.

There was a cloud of purple smoke and then she was gone.
Then she was there again. Far ahead of them, standing just before the gate to Whale’s castle. As if commanded by some unseen director the storm chose that moment to reach them with a mighty gust of wind that whipped at her hair and tail of her coat.

For one moment. Just a flash. Henry saw the hero Emma had told him of. His mother was Achilles before the walls of Troy. Waiting.

He thought he saw a smile even from a distance.

Eager.

Then the gargoyles moved. Coming to life—to action—with deep groans.

No. Not gargoyles.

Whale’s victims. Their mottled flesh had turned gray and black. Their heads were smooth—free of all hair. Male. Female. They all looked like they were carved from stone.

They leapt from their perches, thirty, forty, a hundred feet in the air and landed all around Regina. Impact craters bloomed, dust shrouded them. His mother turned, faced each one in turn, that smile never leaving her lips.

The world exploded. A cascade of riotous magic in perfect time with the first peal of thunder from the storm.

His mother was poetry then. A dancer. Katherine Dunham or Eleanor Powell or Gwen Verdon on a stage. She found a kind of grace in the violence and a note of joy in the chaos. She was fast, a cloud of purple darting between Whale’s experiments, and then she’d stop. A fireball would leap from her hands before the smoke had evaporated from her clothes, or with a touch a monster would disintegrate. A wave and a whole wall of them would fly back and with a snap the ground would rise up to devour them.

“That’s—“ The words hung in Emma’s throat.

“Terrifying,” Dorothy whispered.

‘Breathtaking,’ Henry thought.

This wasn’t the conniving Evil Queen. This wasn’t even the woman who had raised him. This was…a force of nature bound to earth. An angel or a devil or something inbetween.

And she was on their side. Risking her life with barely a thought to help them.

“Come on,” he said, “let’s not waste our time or her distraction.”

Dorothy didn’t need more encouraging. She grabbed Henry and Emma both by the shoulder and flashed them forward into the heart of his mother’s macabre performance. Where the air was oily and thick with the scent of burnt flesh and the spray of salt from the sea. Then they flashed forward again, inches from the closed gate. The iron and wood monolith seemed to mock them with it’s stillness in the chaos. Emma, closest to it, didn’t even try to budge it.

Another flash.

They were standing at the edge of the wall where there was only a sliver a ground between it and the sea. Then they were standing on nothing and as gravity began to tug them down to the rocks far
below they were darting ahead again. Dorothy flashed them up and down and all around searching for an entrance that wasn’t that giant gate.

“Side—“ Emma started.

Another flash.

“Door,” she finished.

They flashed once more, back to where they’d just stood, and sure enough there was a door tucked into the dark stone and looking more like a shadow then an entrance.

Emma broke away and inspected it.

“Just a plain old door,” she called. She pushed and the door started to open. “Not even locked.”

“Guy usually has a few dozen soulless monsters guarding it,” Dorothy said. “Probably doesn’t need a lock.”

“Maybe.” Emma didn’t push it all the way open. Instead she ran her fingers along its edges. “Whale is a narcissist and a psychopath, but the guy isn’t,” her face brightened, “stupid. Look.” She pointed at something.

Dorothy nodded. “An alarm.”

Henry squinted but still couldn’t see anything. His wife quietly grabbed his hand and pulled him over a few inches. Enough for him to see a white box up on the door frame on the other side of the door.

“Kid, you got a magnet in your bag of tricks?”

He did, he rooted through his bag and pulled out a small refrigerator magnet, shaped like a pineapple. Half the paint was chipped off of it. It had been from his old house. A rare keepsake.

“These alarms use magnets to keep the circuit close. Break the circuit and everyone in the neighborhood knows.” She carefully aligned the magnet with the box, then slow opened the door, moving the magnet into place at a snail’s pace.

“You go slow and steady you can keep,” she winced, “the circuit closed. Then you just get inside and turn the stupid thing off like…” she hissed nervously as she moved the last few millimeters. “This,” she said.

She switched the alarm off and tossed the magnet back to Henry.

“See kid, I still know a few tricks.”

He returned the magnet to his bag. “I never said you didn’t.”

“Yeah, but I don’t take on a hundred of zombie guys either.”

“Most people don’t,” said Dorothy. “In fact most people would think that was kind of nuts.”

A loud boom shook the stones all around them. Dust from cracked mortars rained down on them.

“Think she’s winning,” Henry asked.

“If she’s really one of the Four Thieves she’s probably annihilating them,” Dorothy answered.
Emma pulled a flashlight out of her pocket, it shined on more rough hewn walls and bare floors. She held it steadily at eye level and squinted in an effort to see the end of the corridor. But only shadows could be seen. Soled them deeper into the castle, and said conversationally, “I don’t get what’s so special about these Thieves guys. So they kill a bunch of storybook characters. That just sounds homicidal.”

Henry only knew about them from the movie he’d yet to see. They looked like heroes. Like the people he’d dreamt of when he’d set out to break the curse. A group forged in despair that rose above it and battled villains and had swashbuckling adventures.

The irony of it all was not lost on him.

“They travel between realms raising hell, taking names, and saving some lives in the process,” Dorothy said. “And they’ve got people scared. Not the common folks, but folks like Cora and her witches.”

Another boom.

"They're taking the status quo of a lot of lands and changing them. Good for Munchkins and peasants and princesses imprisoned. Not so good if you think you're the top of the food chain."

####

It had been almost two whole days since Regina had last really used her magic and even then Falak hadn't been that difficult. It was a fire breathing serpent that exploded quite neatly when ignited from the inside.

A hundred monsters made of former human beings? That was a challenge.

Only…her magic didn’t feel quite the same.

It was her first attempt at the big showy magic since she’d disseminated Hermes’ cap and absorbed it and her magic felt—it felt more potent. Every spell she cast landed with a precision and strength she’d never even fathomed before.

She unleashed a shockwave that sent every monster onto their backs. The magic coursed not through her but over her. In awe she brought her hand slowly up to eye level, watching magic, deep purple and fringed in gold, race over her skin. Like seeing the currents of the air itself move over her.

A monster, female by the looks of it, clambered to its feet and charged with a primeval scream.

Her hand, still glowing, extended out towards the creature.

“Stop,” Regina said.

And the monster froze.

“Kneel.”

It dropped to its knees.

Hermes’ cap had given her more than the ability to move between worlds. It had given her access to control—to power—that she doubted many mortals had ever grasped.
More magic welled up out of her pores and danced across her skin. She wasn’t even out of breath yet. Not the least bit fatigued. Even her feet, jammed into her high heeled boot, felt less sore.

What all could she do with the increase in power? Power that erased her former limits. What other monsters could she force to kneel with a flick of her wrist?

The light danced merrily before her eyes before it was all sucked back into her. She couldn’t remember feeling this powerful in years.

She had no idea what she was capable of, but it was time to find out.

#

They emerged from the tunnel and found themselves in a what had to be the main hall. There was a massive staircase nearly fifteen feet wide at the center of the room. Plush black carpet woven with thick bands of silver thread covered the steps of the staircase. A single bit of luxury in a room otherwise notable for its severe austerity.

Whale stood at the top of the stairs, his thin wire framed glasses reflecting the light from the cool fluorescents overhead and completely masking his eyes.

“My first successful monster was created out of love.” He looked down at them, and then ahead again.

Henry rolled his eyes. This was a monologue. He could feel it.

“My brother was dead and something about that loss drove me to do things I had not thought myself capable of. I used a heart ripped from the chest of some innocent from your world and I made life.”

These guys all loved their stupid monologues.

“The creatures you make aren’t alive,” Emma argued.

“What is life? They cannot taste. Or feel. Their emotions are wild when unmanaged and the atrocities they commit are horrific. But they breathe. They sigh. Their hearts beat.”

“Not their hearts. Hearts of Cora’s victims. Your murder people and then use Cora’s hearts to bring them back.”

“I make them stronger. Faster.”

The mad man was trying to justify his actions. Too crazy to realize how far from human he’d veered.

Emma reminded him, “You make them into monsters Whale. You made your girlfriend into a monster.”

Ruby had stumbled home in tears. He'd watched from behind Emma as she'd pulled her hood away to reveal the damage the man who claimed to love her had done.

“I made Ruby better.” He looked down again. “Is she why you’re here?” His voice, for just a fraction of a second, possessed emotion. Some kind of hope married to melancholy.

“We’re here to ask you some questions,” Dorothy said. Her voice was tempered steel and it helped push away that image of Ruby—one he knew that haunted them all.
“How is Ruby?”

“How is Ruby?”

“Better off than most your monsters. Now—“

“I do miss her.”

Emma approached the stairs, laying her hand on the rail. “Whale, you need to come with us.” Emma was perfectly calm. The old sherriff.

He looked back down at her again. The castle shook as Regina’s battle waged outside. “Is she outside?”

“No.”

“So…” He looked back up, like he could see through the wall itself. “That’s Regina then.”

“Yeah. She’s alive. And I don’t think she’s too crazy about you.”

“She tore me from my brother in a petty act of revenge. The feeling is quite mutual.”

“Only she’s good now. Scary, but she’s on our side. If you come with us whatever she’d like to do to you she won’t.”

He smiled, “A creature like that is never on any side but her own. Your goals are similar, so she helps you.” He tugged his coat down. “I’d hoped she would come alone. Her mother has…designs on her and I hoped to have my access to her first.”

So he had laid the trap.

“I spread a lie regarding Cora and myself and I was positive she’d come wandering out here to speak with me.”

The eerie serenity was falling away from him. Giving Henry a glimpse of a kind of mania underneath.

“I’ve never had access to a sorceress before, and I was looking forward to working on her.” He looked down at Emma again, his joy bubbling but at complete odds with his cool efficacy. “But she’s outside, and you’re inside Emma. So you’ll have to do.”

Monsters stepped out of every shadow. Pale eyed creatures that had once been woman and men. Crude thick stitches and heavy staples held them together, and their hearts beat loudly, a hundred drums beating all at once.

“Regina’s taking on twice this many outside. There’s three of us in here. What makes you think they’re going to win,” Emma asked.

Whale shrugged, “Honestly I couldn’t tell you who will win. But as a scientist I do enjoy the experiment.”

#####

Regina had never enjoyed violence. Rumpel had encouraged her to relish the blood and screams of pain, but Regina had preferred the look of horror as she claimed everything a person loved. She preferred power. Not pain.
That had not changed since teaming with Killian, Mulan and Aurora. What had changed was that she was far, far **better** at the violence. Once upon a time taking on a hundred man-made monsters would have, at the very least, given her pause. But after a hydra and a fire-breathing monster and a few gods Frankenstein's monsters were a warm up. They got her muscles loose and her blood flowing.

And dealing with such consequence free creatures—devoid of hearts or even souls—was actually kind of...fun.

She sent three through the wall of the castle. The rock crumbled, the mortar turned to dust and the monsters' bodies wound up inside Frankenstein's lair.

She stepped over a long stretch of stone sill anchored to the ground and found herself in a sterile looking great hall. Far from what she'd expected there were no chandeliers or tapestries or suits of armor. That cold white light from utilitarian lamps overhead and a few very tasteful and modern pieces of artwork on the walls.

"I was expecting more torches," she mused aloud, "maybe some tapestries."

A grand staircase took up the center of the room. Frankenstein, dressed in a white lab coat, stood at the top of the stairs. His pale eyes were wide with not horror, but mere surprise.

Emma, Henry and Dorothy stood on the ground floor, each frozen in the middle of a fight with another group of his monsters. Even the monsters, their rotted brains possessing the mental faculties of bugs, knew to be, at least a little, awed by her entrance.

"Now," she said, "let’s be done with all this fighting and just have a nice and friendly chat."

Whale looked at her. Looked at the destruction she knew was just behind her, and then instead of being logical and surrendering like a good little scientist, he ran.

It was something out of a comedy so it felt only natural that Regina laugh. It wasn't one of her full throated evil laughs, or the cackle she and Maleficient used to practice as young sorceresses. Frankenstein running, the fight, it was all FUN.

Emma, Dorothy and Henry seemed to have their own fight well in hand so Regina followed Frankenstein up the stairs. She teleported to the top of the landing just in time to see him turn a corner. She teleported again and found the corner twisted into a spiral staircase, no doubt leading to the giant erection of a tower that dominated he castle's design. She trailed her hand along the curved stone wall.

"Come now doctor," she called ahead, "I'm just looking for a second opinion on a particular problem I have!"

Magic, purple and gold, leapt from her fingertip and into the wall. It moved like lightening across the surface of the wall, racing a head of her and splitting into a hundred beautiful paths.

The light reached the door at the top of the stairs before her and ran along the frame of it, leapt onto the door hinges and then onto the door itself. It grew bright as the magic split again and again, joining itself and setting the whole door ablaze with light. Then the door shattered.

####
The whole plan was to keep Regina away from Whale. So what did Henry's mom do? She went chasing after the guy and left them with the monsters.

"Is this how it works in the Four Thieves stories," he asked.

"Nope," Dorothy grunted. "Definitely not."

"Those stories suck," Emma shouted before using her magic to send for monsters smacking into the stair railing.

"We need to go after her," Henry said, a feeling of dread washing over him. His mother had looked so happy as she'd walked up the stairs. Like a villain in a horror film.

He was growing less and less concerned with what Whale might do to her and more and more concerned with what she might do to him.

"Gimme a sec," Emma said, "And I'll drag her stupid sashaying butt out myself."

####

The frame was still smoking when she stepped through it. Frankenstein had sought refuge at the top of that ridiculous tower. The lightning rod jutting obscenely out of the roof extended past the ceiling and stopped in the center of the room. Its tip hovered directly over a raised platform lit by giant medical lamps that cast bold patterns of light and dark throughout the room.

This was where he did his most depraved work. This was where he ignored all natural law and formed his own. Where he made life where only death had resided before.

He held his arms out, his chest heaving from being out of breath. “You found me.”

“Wasn’t very hard.”

“Did you ever wonder why?”

“I expect it has something to do with a trap. Am I right?”

He pulled on a chain near his head and a metal grate sealed off the doorway she’d come through. She raised an eyebrow.

“Very,” he gasped.

“So you’ve locked me in here with you?” Regina ran her hand along a tray. There wasn’t a speck of dust to be found. “Not very smart. Here I thought you were a genius.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what did you think my plan was?”

She shrugged, “Capture me. Torture me. Maybe a few experiments. Hand me over to my mother when you’re done.”

“So you didn’t believe the story about our falling out.”

“The story doesn’t matter. If my mother learned you had me she’d take me back, whether you wanted her to or not.”
“That’s faith,” he observed.

“My mother’s love.” She held her hand over her heart dramatically, “I can always count on it.”

“You know you aren’t the only one she loves.”

What?

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cora had no other loves. She was incapable of them. She couldn’t even muster affection for Regina’s father.

“You don’t know?”

“No, but you do.” She threw him back into the wall with a wave of her hand and teleported directly in front of him. She didn’t stop to give him a chance. She reached out and buried her right hand in his chest, her fingers wrapping around his heart and squeezing. “You know all my mother’s secrets,” she said darkly. “Now it’s time to give them to me.”

She squeezed again and Frankenstein only closed his eyes in pain. Droplets of sweat formed on his brow.

“It’s not that difficult doctor. I ask questions. You answer them. You don’t answer I rip the heart from your chest and,” she tightened her grasp, “I squeeze the answers out of you.”

Instead of a show of fear Frankenstein laughed.

How mad was he that looking over the precipice incited laughter?

“Threatened by the lost girl all alone in a world that isn’t her own. How naive are you? You think the heart in my chest is my own?”

She ran her thumb across the muscle.

“Your family has a nasty habit of controlling people with their hearts. So I hid mine. The one in my chest belongs to some girl Gold had a thing for.”

Hearing the words she could see the implicitly foreign nature of the muscle. Feel the righteousness and absolute strength of a girl who bargained with a devil to save her kingdom.

“You killed Belle?”

“I killed many,” he sneered. “And brought even more back to life.”

Something moved behind her. The otherness of its presence raising all the hair on her neck.

“Rip the heart from my chest and my monsters will just replace it with another.” He leaned in so close she could smell the fish on his breath and see the blackheads on the tip of his nose. “You come into this world and into my castle and you think you know the score because once upon a time you ruined all our lives? We claimed this world for our own Regina. We molded it to our will. You? You’re a virus. You’re an infection that I have spent years plotting the demise of.”

A low moan from the creature behind her sent a shiver straight down her spine. Regina was not one to scare easily, but seeing that once resilient girl turned into one of this man’s monsters was disturbing.
enough to make her reluctant to face her.

"Turn around," Frankenstein implored, "I built the perfect device to destroy you, and I'd have you look upon it before it did."

"Why?"

"You took me from my brother. Snatched me away and twisted my head. You warped me so the only thing that moves me as dearly as science is...a woman. You made me love a sex I would prefer to hate."

“And working with my mother?"

"A means to an end." He reached up with his hand, it shook and was cool, the circulation in it wrecked by Regina's hand on the heart in his chest. Thumb and forefinger gripped her chin and tilted her head. "Look Regina. Look at what I made for you."

She did look. And the sight took the strength from her knees, any remaining smile for her lips, and, for just a moment, the breath from her lungs.

It was not Belle who lumbered into the light.

It was Daniel.
Feedback, especially long involved feedback, is like crack for this particular writer and will be met with vigorous discussions too nerdy for most eyes.

WARNING: There is some Regina/Daniel stuff in this chapter. While it's totally my bag I can get why it wouldn't be other people's so I thought I'd give you a head's up. I mean, it can’t really be avoided or ignored for story purposes, but yeah, warning. There it is.

They met in the stable. He was brushing down a horse that was not Rocinante and she was sneaking away from a music lesson for a ride. She was guiding Rocinante out of his stall when she realized she wasn't the only human in the stable. She'd frozen, as had he. They'd stared at one another. Then he'd cocked his head to the side.

"Would you like a saddle, miss?"

No recrimination for the lack of saddle or for the messy braid she'd pulled her hair into that was decidedly inappropriate for a girl her age. But there was a little sarcasm in his tone, just enough that his question lacked deference.

She'd bristled.

"I don't need one."

"I know," he'd said solemnly.

"You know?"

"I used to see you riding through the hills. You're quite talented. Though you always ride without escort." He'd leaned against the horse he’d been brushing. Resting his head on his arms like a dreamer. “Rare for a princess.”

She'd laughed, "I'm the daughter of the fifth son of a king and a miller's girl. I'm no more a princess than you a prince."

He'd come around the horse, approaching carefully, his words soft, but sure. "You're more beautiful than a princess."

That had caused her to snort. "Princesses aren't all beautiful. My cousin is second in line for the throne and looks like a toad."

"In the stories the princesses are always the fairest in the land. But you're fairer still by far."

"You put too much stock in appearance."

He'd nodded, "You're right. Should I tell you how I like that you rarely use a saddle? That I find the way you fidget in church charming? Or that I love that you sometimes come to town with hay in your hair."
His hand leapt to her braided hair. Her mother **hated** hay. Said it marked the peasants from their betters.

He took another step. "You know I sought this job to meet you."

"You're stalking me?"

"Is it romantic?"

"No. It's odd. Who **are** you?"

Instead of reaching for her hand to lay a kiss on it, as she expected, he held it out, offering it like she were her father and they were about to make a deal.

"My name's Daniel. I'm the new stable boy."

She looked from that hand, to that gentle smile to those gentler eyes to the single strand of hay in his hair. He was hardly threatening despite his admission.

And if she was honest. She'd seen him too. They'd shared a smile at church, and one time he caught her when her boot slipped in the mud.

Tentatively she offered her own hand and they shook heartily like old companion.

"And I'm Regina."

###

"You know me."

Her voice wavered. Cracking. Her voice never cracked. She never shed tears. She was a monolith. A rock.

But the mere presence of Daniel turned her to gravel.

He lurched forward, his movements sluggish and disjointed. His face, once beautiful and knowing, was torn into a grimace as if the whole of him was fighting himself. The man who'd given her a ring and the monster created in her absence.

"Daniel," she said his name like a plea.

The war waged inside of him was lost and he crossed the last few feet between them smoothly. His hand wrapped around Regina's throat and he picked her up. There was now only a furious snarl on his lips.

She tried to kick out but it was impossible.

This was Daniel.

She'd cared for others. She thought... she had feelings she'd never faced for another. But this was the man she'd loved. This was her True Love. Love eternal. Snuffed out by a simpering child and her own mother's sure hand.

"Please," she gasped.
"Drop her," Frankenstein commanded.

Like an automaton Daniel did as commanded. His grip loosened and Regina collapsed to her knees.

"Stay," Frankenstein as though speaking to a dog.

Daniel stood perfectly still.

Frankenstein studied him, the light from the medical lamps glinting off his glasses. Hiding his eyes and making him as inhuman as the creatures he’d forced life into.

“He’s gorgeous isn't he?"

Regina pushed herself up so at least her back was straight. She couldn't yet try to stand. She flipped her hair to better look at him. "Somehow I don't think you're talking about his cheekbones."

Frankenstein nodded, a small smile on his lips. "Of course. Humor. I've noted that before. It's how the weak try to survive impossible circumstances."

"I'm not weak."

"Aren't you? The very sight of your dead lover has you on your knees," he observed.

A spell boiled on her fingertips. “I’m not. Weak.” Her hand lashed out, the spell started to fly from it, but Daniel grabbed her wrist and it evaporated in an instant.

“Wha—""

A jolt of painful electricity tore through her system.

“I built him for you Regina. As long as he touches you your magic is useless.”

“How,” she asked through gritted teeth.

Frankenstein knelt down next to her.  “Science,” he whispered in her ear.

Daniel gritted his teeth and another wave of electricity coursed through Regina.

It was excruciating.

#####

The scream rang through the entire castle. It echoed off the walls and vibrated through Henry’s bones and was a cacophony in his ears.

Even the monsters they were dispatching paused to listen.

“What was that,” Dorothy asked.

Emma had paled. “Regina,” she said softly.

The cries were incongruous with the woman he knew. His mother was put together. Impervious. She was a titan. That scream. Followed by another. And another. Those were the screams of a mortal. A mere human.
He shoved a knife through the eye socket of a wailing monster and let gravity pull the creature off his knife. Dorothy flipped another then, carrying the motion forward, wrenching its arm out of its socket and slamming her ruby heel into it’s exposed neck.

Emma sent her whole fist through one’s chest and shoved it off casually. She was now less focused on the fight and more on the tower above, where Regina’s screams sounded ominously.

She was so focused she dispatched the next one rushing her in the same fashion. Her fist went straight through, ichor, black and pungent coated her hand.

“He’s torturing her,” she said distantly, her mind so far from the battle at hand she might as well not have been there at all.

Dorothy brought one to its knees, caught the knife Henry threw, and plunged it into its neck. “We’ve got this,” she said. “Help Regina.”

Emma flashed away in a puff of pink smoke entirely different from her normal thunder crack.

Henry turned back to help Dorothy, and only after they’d nearly completed their job did he realize he’d never even offered to help save his own mother.

###

“I think my favorite love story is… your parents!”

She groaned. “Oh. Don’t say that! My mother bought my father.”

“You your mother learned magic in a single night so she could save her life and win your father’s hand.”

“It’s not as romantic as you make it sound Daniel.”

He sat up on his knees and pulled her up too. His hand went around her waist and held her steady. “It is though!” He looked into her eyes. “Your mother fought nature to be with your father.”

“So did that princess.”

He raised an eyebrow.

She shoved his shoulder but he held on tight. “You know the one,” she laughed playfully. “She fell in love with a fairy and fought to free her. They defeated the laws of magic. That trumps nature.”

“Magic is nature Regina.” He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her neck. “Magic is what binds us. It powers us. It’s love. It’s our love.”

There was a fervency in his words that matched her mother’s own passion for magic, but the fervency was for love too, and she’d never heard the word uttered with such ardor.

“You believe magic—love—is so powerful?”

“Magic is power, and love, true love, is the most powerful magic of all.”

###
Please.

She couldn’t form the words.

Please.

They were stuck on a tongue swollen and dry.

Please I love you.

Words when shared meant to cure all, but even thinking them did nothing. Daniel held her and silenced her and pained her in every way and Frankenstein watched with dry malevolence. He motioned and Daniel dropped her wrist. She collapsed onto her hands and knees and gasped.

“I…” she promised, “will kill you.”

“You can still speak?” He was so confident in his defeat of Regina he actually turned his back on her. Walked away to sort through instruments on a tray. “I knew you’d be more resistant. Magic users tend to be.”

“Thought I was your first.”

“First human magic user. Cora’s given me access to a near endless supply of fairies. And yes, I suppose technically they are human in this world, but they’re also not like you. You have the magic inside.” He turned and held up a long scalpel, “and I’d like to see it in action.”

He waved his scalpel like a conductor directing his orchestra. “Daniel, place her on the table.”

There was no indication that Daniel had heard him, or that he could even register words. He continued to loom over Regina, his blank eyes staring through her.

For half an instant Regina allowed herself to see something besides a monster. To see that stable boy with rough and gentle hands and kisses she’d never dare compare to any others. She thought she saw him and she thought she saw…saw her own pain mirrored there.

As much as it hurt her she could not even imagine what Daniel, sweet and innocent Daniel, would think if he’d hurt her.

It would kill him.

“I can stand on my own,” she said.

She had to hold her side and breathe deep, but she stood and didn’t even reach for support for the golem man in front of her. She shuffled slowly towards the table. Drawing each step out and biding herself more and more time.

They had to have heard her screams earlier. Her throat was raw from them. Henry. Emma. They’d come for her. She just had to give them enough time.

Frankenstein frowned, “I’ve had test subjects with no cartil—“

BAM.

It was a loud crash of something hard against the gate that barred off the room. So loud that even Daniel turned to watch the gate flex against its hinges.
“Regina,” Emma shouted.

And Regina had never found such comfort in someone screaming her name. Her own misery, shock, even the sensation of her still twitching muscles evaporated at the sound. She smiled.

“She can’t make it through,” Frankenstein said confidently. “This castle is built to keep your kind in or out. The walls are impenetrable.”

She stood tall. The sound of Emma attempting to come to her rescue bolstering her own resolve. “The walls may be, but what of the windows?”

Lightening flashed against one such window. It was, curiously enough, stained glass. Bright and chaotic. The light from beyond the tower cast shadows of blue and purple and red and green with each flash of lightening. The piece was abstract in nature, there was no one figure held together by the lead cames.

In the absence of light the window was a wall of black glass, barely discernible from the stone walls surrounding it.

“The glass protects this room as well as the walls,” he said pridefully.

Regina limped towards it, never letting her eyes leave the two men in the room with her. “Maybe,” she said. “But I suspect the glass only works when intact.”

She threw her hand out towards the window and fire, hotter than any she could remember conjuring, boiled in her hand. It arced away from her, tracing the lead cames that framed each piece of glass and turning it red hot.

“I’ll be curious,” Regina growled, “to see what happens when there is no glass.”

The window began to sag. The storm outside began to rage. The lightening became more frequent. The wind beat against the tower. The rain beat against the searing hot glass. Regina’s heart beat against her chest.

And Daniel reached for her again.

####

They were making their way up the narrow staircase leading to the top of the tower when his mom screamed again. Henry picked up his feet, dashing up the last thirty some odd stairs. Emma stood at the top, throwing her shoulder against an inflexible metal gate.

“They’re locked in,” she shouted.

Henry pushed her aside and threw his own shoulder against the gate. The collision of metal against his shoulder painfully twisting the joint.

“Can’t you magic through,” Dorothy asked.

“I tried.” Her shoulder glowed with enough energy to take out a herd of centaurs and she threw herself against the door again. The magic evaporated at the touch. “It sucks up whatever I throw at it.”

“Here,” Henry said. He pulled his wand out of his bag. “Maybe fairy dust will work.”
On the other side of the door Regina’s pained cries continued.

“Hurry,” Emma urged.

Henry didn’t need to be told twice. As upset as Emma was it was his mother apparently being tortured, and he was damned if he was going to sit and listen to that.

He did a flourish just like the fairies used to and struck the tip of the wand against the gate.

Nothing happened.

“Shit,” he said aloud.

Emma charged up another wave of magic and slammed her shoulder against the immovable gate again. “Damn it.”

“Wait,” Dorothy said, “I got an id—“ She flashed out and then back again “—ea.”

Henry blinked. “Where the hell did you find a hammer?”

It wasn’t even a hammer. It was the giant cousin of a hammer. The thing’s handle was a good four feet long and the head was nearly a foot wide. Dorothy couldn’t even pick it up. She tried and ended up moving it about a half an inch.

“Found it downstairs. I figure Emma can use her magic strength and—“

Emma didn’t wait for the rest of the plan. She wrapped her hands around the end of the handle and pick the entire thing up like it weighed a pound. “Stand back,” she said, and without waiting for them to listen she swung the hammer back and smashed it into the gate.

#####

The sound was deafening.

Daniel let go and stumbled backwards. His hands went to cover his ears and he groaned loudly in both pain and irritation.

Regina had bitten her tongue when Daniel had grabbed her and sent a few thousand volts through her and she had to wipe the blood off her lips. She was hunched forward again but with her free hand she reached back to touch the stained glass behind her. Its surface scorched her fingertips but the pain was nothing compared to that pain written so clearly on Daniel’s face.

Outside Emma struck the gate again and again and within the tower it sounded like being on the inside of a bell.

Daniel’s discombobulation, and the sound of impending heroes was enough to make Frankenstein falter.

“Nothing can break through that door.”

“No fairy maybe. No centaur. But on the other side of that door may be the most powerful magic creature ever born.”

He paled.
“And on this side you have a monster meant to stop magic, but you have a monster steeped in it too.” Once more fire flowed out of her hand and raced across the carvings. “You didn’t plan for me well enough.”

“You’re all I planned for! You shouldn’t be able to stand, let alone use magic.” The final word was spat like a curse.

Another clang and light from the stairwell peeked through torn hinges on the gate.

“Hubris Doctor. Always the downfall of us villains.”

The lead turned to liquid. The wind was a gust against the glass. And everything shattered.

###

The way the moonlight reflected off the water, and the fires flickered in the windows and the fireflies glowed at odds with the stars. It was like shattered glass. But they called it Firefly Hill.

“They should call it Glass Hill,” she’d said with confidence.

Daniel had laughed. “Maybe. Or maybe,” he’d leaned back on his hands to stare up at the stars, and then coyly dropped his head onto her shoulder. “Lover’s Hill.”

She’d playfully bumped him. “That’s disgusting.”

“Why?”

“It makes it sound like every set of lovers come here. I want this to be our hill. No one else’s.”

“And to the people that disagree?”

“I’ll learn how to turn them into toads,” she’d promised.

He’d laughed again. “A feat I’d like to see.”

“I’ll turn you into a toad.” She’d nuzzled her nose against his.

He’d kissed the corner of her lips. “And then each night you’d return me to myself with True Love’s kiss.”

She’d pulled away with a frown. “Do you really think True Love’s kiss is so powerful?”

“It conquers kingdoms Regina. It unites the disparate.” He’d reached out to cup her cheek with his hand. “It brings comfort to the lonely.”

She’d closed her eyes. Her own loneliness aching hollowly within. It was only with Daniel it seemed to temper.

She’d darted forward and kissed him again, ending any departure into the maudlin that their conversation might take. “But I wonder,” she had to climb onto her knees so she could tower over him for once and he looked up as if worshipping a goddess. “Is it powerful enough to get me out of this awful corset?”

He’d grinned and placed a kiss against her breast. “Maybe not, but I am.”
An hour later, sated, and naked and wrapped up in a collection of blankets stolen from the stable and smelling of horse sweat and hay they rested entwined, their fingers laced together and their legs a happy knot.

Regina lay her head on Daniel’s shoulder and stared up at the myriad of lights from organisms as close as her hand and from worlds forever beyond her reach.

Given long enough even the heat of her lover couldn’t keep the dark thoughts at bay. “Daniel, what happens if True Love wanes?”

His chest had jerked with a sudden laugh. “It doesn’t.”

“Even if I get old and fat?”

“True Love endures.”

She turned to face him, her chin on his chest, “And if I die?”

He ran his fingers through her hair. “It’s True Love Regina. If you die, I die with you.”

####

Emma forced the door open with one last blow at the exact moment a giant window across the room shattered. Thousands of shards of colored glass rained down on Regina and a strange man. The cuts created were bloody, but superficial, and his mother didn’t even notice. Her eyes were fastened to the man before her.

Apart from them stood Whale in mute shock, a scalpel clenched in his fist.

One almost certainly meant to cut through his mother’s skin.

Henry stalked across the room towards the bastard, but Emma flashed there first and before the pink smoke had even left her clothes her fist was lashing out and Whale was slumping unconscious to the floor, his jaw loose and a trickle of bright blood on his lips.

“God,” she moaned, shaking her bruised hand, “this son of a bitch made it way harder than he needed to.” She turned back to Regina, “now let’s take care of Frankenstein number two here and be do—“

“No,” his mother shouted, her eyes never leaving the monster’s face. “Stay back.”

“Regina—“

“Mom—“

“Both of you! Back. Now.”

“Regina,” Dorothy asked softly from the door, “who is he?”

“Daniel,” she whispered so softly, like the name itself would break the monster, or her, or even maybe the tower in which they stood. His mother’s face, always either serene or brimming with anger, was instead fractured. A soft, foreign look in her eyes and lips he knew to be so still instead quivering. There was a strange ache in Henry himself at the sight of his mother so struck by emotion.
All he could remember was waking up from a cursed sleep and seeing Emma, and then his mother’s cool hand clasping his and her assurances of love. An assurance she’d never made, and certainly never meant, before the curse broke.

That. That was what he saw on his mother’s face as she looked at the dead man Whale had made living.

Love.

####

There were the three of them in silhouette, only illuminated when the lightening screamed through the sky. Their chests rose and fell and they breathed and even spoke. Not that she could hear them. She could hear the wind at her back. She could hear her own heartbeat.

She could hear Daniel’s heart beat.

It was so loud. Loud enough to make her wonder why she hadn’t heard it before. It was like the thump of a mallet against a bass drum. The beat of his heart vibrated through her bones.

But he didn’t breathe. There was no movement in his chest. Or in any other part of him. Not even a twitch. He was perfectly still, his mouth turned down into a pitiable frown and his brow glowering over eyes that had only ever looked at her with fondness.

There was no evidence of life but for that impossible heart in his chest.

He didn’t even sway with each gust of wind off the sea.

“Daniel,” she said his name softly. As if to coax the man into the shell Frankenstein had given life to.

Lightening arced through the sky and his sallow eyes gained focus. His head tilted perversely as he seemed to see her.

He reached out.

No.

Lashed.

His hand wrapped around her neck and he slammed her back against the broken window. More glass rained down on them and she heard someone behind him cry out and the awful power Frankenstein had given him lanced through her ever nerve but she still—she still found the strength to shout, “No.”

“Mom—“

“Regina he’s killing y—“

“He’s my fiancé!”

The electricity he could conjure with a touch didn’t hurt as much as it had before. Was some internal battery waning? Or had her own strength risen up to finally protect her?

It was Emma, naturally, who dared come closer. Her voice delicate as she said, “Regina.” She
chanced a single look a the other woman and was met with wide and imploring green eyes, “I have
to believe your fiancé wouldn’t hurt you.”

Of course he wouldn’t. But he’d been killed by her mother and resurrected by Frankenstein and he
couldn’t help himself. He was lost. A ship lost out in the storm beating against them all.

“He doesn’t know—“

“Because this isn’t him—“

Daniel dropped Regina and fast as the lightening flashing in the sky had his hand around Emma’s
neck. His frown had turned into an all out snarl and his knuckles were white as he dug into her throat
with his fingers.

She couldn’t even scream. A gurgle of alarm as she clawed at his hands and kicked at legs
impervious to pain—or perhaps even sensation.

“Mom,” Henry shouted. He unholstered his wand and fired bolts of light that fizzled like fire in the
rain against Daniel’s skin.

“He isn’t himself,” Regina promised Emma. “He’s confused. But I can fix him. I can fix this.”

Emma wide eyes only spoke of her alarm. No understanding. But no recrimination either.

“I will fix this,” Regina said.

####

They were halfway across the room when Regina and the man, Daniel, disappeared in a puff of
purple smoke. Emma dropped to her knees and rubbed at her neck coughing violently.

“What the hell happened,” Dorothy asked. She’d arrived at Emma’s side first and helped her to
stand.

His mom’s voice was a rasp, “He had some magic going on. It was like I was being tasered and
choked.”

Whale sat up suddenly and from across the room crowed, “Science.”

“No, science is my foot up your ass Whale. What the hell’d you do to that guy?"

“I gave him life.”

“He was dead,” Henry asked, already knowing the answer.

“And now he lives.”

Emma pushed past Henry, “You call that living? The guy’s a step away from a zombie!”

Whale straightened his coat. “I’m sorry your definition of alive is so far from the biological truth.”

“Can he be fixed?”

“Fixed is a crude term.”
She stalked closer to him, and the word stalk was never more appropriate. Her power, and the anger that drove much of it, radiated off of her, vibrating against the walls and causing the bulbs in the lamps overhead to dim and brighten rhythmically.

“Can it be done,” she growled. The words coming up from low in her throat.

“He is all he can ever be.”

Henry was, himself concerned, but not like his mother. Emma’s face searched Whale’s. “Can’t he be fixed…with magic?”

“Magic couldn’t even bring him back to life.”

“But you could. Why?”

“She ripped me from my brother. So now, something has to be ripped from her.”

Emma let loose a quick right jab that caught Whale in the nose and sent his head smacking back against the wall. He slid bonelessly to the ground unconscious.

“You two take him back home. Keep him locked up, and keep Ruby away from him.” Her knuckles cracked noisily and she flexed her fist.

“What the hell are you going to do,” Henry asked.

“Get Regina back.”

She vanished.

“Jesus,” Henry said. “Is there a single woman in my life not,” he waved his hands, “popping in and out of existence?!”

“Say woman like that again,” Dorothy said, “and you can carry Whale’s hefty ass back home by yourself.”

####

She took them as far down the shore as possible without going through the barrier. Magic didn’t exist in the world outside and though Frankenstein was quick to say “science” had given Daniel back to her she wasn’t going to test the claim by pulling him through.

The point she’d found for them was on an outcropping of jagged rocks that bit into the soles of her boots and caused the ever stalwart Daniel to stumble.

He didn’t attack again. The rain, driven by a blustery wind, bit into their skin like needles, Daniel leaned into the sensation. Closing his eyes and letting the rain lash at his face and sting in the bloodless cuts from the shattered window.

She’d noticed that in the tower. The way her cuts bled and his did not. She’d noticed other things. Things that away from the fury and insanity of Frankenstein’s tower she could consider. Understand. And the most critical thing was…

Daniel was cold to the touch.
Dead flesh animated.

“Daniel.”

His head tipped forward and she thought the monster might reach for her again, but the hand that reached out was held low and begged only for a shared connection. He didn’t—couldn’t face her.

She took it tentatively, grimacing against the pain of it.

“It hurts you doesn’t?”

Whatever pain there was that seemed to tear apart her very nerves it could not compare to the balm of that sentence. Not the sentence itself, which only added to the ache.

But the words coming from his lips. Formed by his mind. Expressed with his love.

She said his name again, her voice cracking at the syllable.

He dropped her hand.

“Touching you hurts you.”

“I know. But we can find a way to fix it. We have Frankenstein now, and I have magic, and Henry, Henry has friends. He’s my son and he’s clever. I don’t know if you saw him, but you’d love him Daniel. And he’d love you. He never had a father, or even a father figure, and I think you’d be a good one—“

“Stop.”

How could she? When inevitability floated towards them on the tide. A promise of an end for a romance only just renewed.

“I can’t.” The words were all inside and needed to be outside.

His teeth gritted noisily. “Regina. It...hurts.”

“I know but we can—“

“I spent ten years f—fighting this—this urge to kill.” He turned suddenly and the hand that had bruised her neck was gentle on her throat. “I want to kill you.”

She covered his wrist with her hand. “He programed you,” she said earnestly, “we can deprogram you.”

“I can’t.”

“Daniel—“

“A—all I wanted was to see you again. And the moment I did I nearly killed you.”

“I’m stronger now. I’m alive.”

“Because you fight.”

“And I want to fight for you. I want to fight for us!”
His other hand rose to her neck. The nail of his thumb grazed the skin, the thinnest of barriers between her life and oblivion. “I fought for ten years. Finding a way to bear this…existence.” He leaned forward. His cool and damp brow pressed against hers and his voice was hushed, “It hurts to fight.”

God. To even breathe hurt. Agony. Every day. “It’s hurt every day without you.” She seized his hair by the roots to keep him from moving. Hoping that maybe he could feel the loss he’d engendered. “I’m lost without you Daniel.”

“If you love—if you love me you’ll let me go.”

There it was.

Inevitability. As sure as the tide would rise with the moon.

Death. It came only once for most, but twice for them.

To have him back. To have him in her arms. It was a dream she’d never dared to dream. She’d given up the ghost. Memorialized him. Fought. Struggled to move on. And now he smelled like hay and sweat and salt water and he was here and he wanted to go.

“I can’t.”

“Please.” His nails bit into her skin. The promise of the monster he held back. The monster Frankenstein had birthed from the man she loved. “Let me go.”

“How—how can I go on without you?”

“You have a son?” He nodded his voice breaking with the word. A son they should have had. Dark hair and a quick smile. A boy born in the saddle. A warrior. Or a poet. Maybe just a miller. A future crushed in her mother’s hand and again on Frankenstein’s table.

“You have a life,” he insisted.

But she shook her head. “Not without you. I’m alone Daniel. No one else. Never anyone else.” They warmed her bed and chilled her heart because they weren’t him. No one had stirred inside of her and taken root like him. No one ever could.

“You’ll love again,” he gasped. “True Love. The kind to die for.”

She’d shattered glass that day. Shattered walls. She’d broken monsters. And she herself had been brought to her knees physically and emotionally.

But those words were her undoing.

His bittersweet smile at the truth she’d never realized.

She loved Daniel.

But she hadn’t died for him.

She wouldn’t.

Forced to answer a question no lover should she saw the truth and words escaped her.

His hands cupped her cheeks. His thumps brushed her lips. “You will love again.” Before she could
protest. Before lies she needed so urgently to speak could fall from her lips he kissed her.

As the truths undid her the kiss built her up. His lips, familiar. Sure. The first lover she’d ever had. Not awkward. But the same as her. The same press and pull and little gasps. They’d learned to kiss together and when she brought her hand to his chest and stopped his heart and turned him into dust it was herself she said goodbye to too.

The girl who thought she’d had True Love.

And the Stable Boy who died to prove her wrong.

###

Rain.
The chill.
Cool lips.
Tears like tracks of fire.
A voice. Soft.
“Regina?”

She turns and Emma Swan stands before her. And in two quick strides Emma has closed the distance and wrapped lanky arms around her.

And she cries.
Because it is all she can ever do.
She mourns the life she had.
The life that never was.

And the forty years spent in revenge for a man she could not die for.

And Emma holds her close and she’s warm.

Right.

And True Love is a fucking asshole.
Chapter 11

She pressed the heel of her hand gently into Emma’s shoulder and the other woman’s arms slackened around her. She stepped back, her heel catching on the craggy rocks. Emma reached out and caught her by the elbow.

It was difficult to look at Emma, and when she did finally glance at her face she saw that Emma was having the same trouble and looking anywhere but at Regina.

Small favors from fates that usually conspired against her. The woman who’d found her was the rare one who wouldn’t suffocate her.

She pressed her hand into her eye to wipe away any lingering tears. In the pouring rain it did little.

“Thank you,” she said.

Emma’s flat smile was condoling.

“Mary Margaret told me about a guy? That was him wasn’t it?”

Regina turned away and wrapped her arms around herself. The Atlantic was beating against the rocks and the rain came so hard it pelted her skin. And the spot where he had stood was empty. Not even ash remained.

“Once.”

“I’m sorry.”

She had to keep looking away, out towards the violent gray sea. If she didn’t look at Emma, if she didn’t look down at the rocks where Daniel had stood then maybe the tears would stop.

“It’s fine,” she said almost angrily. More tears blurred her vision. Emma said nothing. Stood perfectly still even.

Finally Regina swallowed and rubbed away another tear and took a deep breath, cleansing her insides and trying to erase the last twenty minutes from her mind. She rubbed her hands uselessly over her sopping wet sleeves. “Did we at least get Frankenstein?”

Regina furtively glanced back at Emma and saw that she’d jammed her hands into her pockets and was staring out at the water. Her blond hair was being whipped around by the wind and it brought to mind Botticelli by way of Stephen King perhaps.

“Henry and Dorothy are taking him back now.”

“Good.” She was righteously angry, but the severity of her tone was muddled by the tears.

Emma came abreast. “If I’d known—“

“I know.” Even Snow would have sought justice for Daniel. “Thank you.”

Emma laughed derisively, “For what? All I did was bruise my fist on Whale’s face. I didn’t save your fiancé, or Belle. I couldn’t even save Ruby.”

Truths, as self pitying as they sounded. Regina just nodded. They continued to watch the sea smash
against the shore and the lightening splinter across the sky.

“You want to…go get a drink or something.” Emma asked.

Yes. Regina very much wanted a drink. Almost as much as she wanted to find Frankenstein’s heart, wherever it was, and force him to dance on hot coal for eternity while she squeezed it.

They needed him alive though. So, “Yes. A drink would be a very goo—“

And they were somewhere deep in the city. The rain, still coming down in sheets, was warmed by the garish lights overhead, and steam rose up off the pavement in the alleyway they were suddenly in. Emma had teleported them!

She shrugged when Regina spun around with an open mouth and a plan to scold.

“Figure it was just easier taking you instead of walking here. Come on.” Hands still in her pockets she stepped out onto the street.

“Someone could have seen us,” Regina hissed, chasing after her.

“And then Cora would send someone and we’d get to punch them.”

“Clever.”

“After what she and Whale did I’d think you’d want to punch someone.”

“What I’d like to do to Frankenstein has nothing to do with punching,” she said darkly.

“And Cora?”

Was an entirely different matter.

“She stabbed you and left you for dead,” Emma reminded her, as though the litany of her mother’s offenses needed further discussion.

“And your mother dropped you in a dresser and hoped for the best,” Regina snapped, “I’m well aware of who my mother is, and while you’ve shared her company for ten years I don’t need to remind you that I shared it much longer. I will deal with her, but how I see fit. So can we just avoid her as a topic of conversation?”

Emma stopped, the rain plastering her hair to her scalp. “I’m trying to help.”

“How exactly is talking about her helping?”

“Because you’re angry you need to—“

“I need to drink. Something strong preferably. And somewhere quiet and,” she looked up at the sky overhead. Thunder boomed and the rain pelted her face, “dry? Maybe where neon lights are making my eyes bleed?” She crossed her arms, ”Or is that too difficult a task?”

Emma frowned but snatched her hand and tugged her along, “Right, come on.” Her grip, wet from the rain, was cooler than usual. She was accustomed to Emma’s touch being like fire, but for the moment she felt merely…human. After the events that night that touch of humanity was a salve.
Grams and Gramps were sitting at the table nursing matching cups of steaming coffee and looks of irritation. They were only barely mollified when Dorothy and Henry popped into the room with Whale between them.

Then Grams’ eyes widened comically. “Did you kidnap Whale?”

Henry and his wife, of one mind, dropped Whale at the same time. He collapsed to the floor with a groan.

Dorothy said, “We had some questions to ask.”

“So you kidnap one of Cora’s most well known allies?”

They shared a look and nodded. “Yeah,” Dorothy said.

“Seemed like a good idea,” Henry finished.

Gramps left the table and came to crouch next to the doctor. He grabbed him by the hair and tilted his head back to examine his face, noting the dark bruise forming along his jaw. “Did anyone see you?”

“Define anyone.”

He sighed, “Does it have our fingerprints on it?”

They’d all but left a card with their names on it. “Possibly, but—“ Henry was quick to add, “its not that big a deal.”

“Cora’s sent Gold’s men down here yesterday and now you two retaliate by kidnapping Whale and that’s not a big deal?”

“We went with Mom.”

Gramps rolled his eye, “Well that makes it better.”

“Both moms,” Dorothy clarified.

“Cora isn’t going to retaliate if she thinks Regina was the one leading the charge,” Henry said.

“What makes you think that,” Grams asked.

Because Henry knew both his mother and his grandmother. As evil and malicious as Cora was she still held a warped sense of affection for her daughter. It was why she’d put statues of her up all over town. Hell, the whole point of the awful world she’d crafted was to create a paradise for Regina to live in.

If she thought Regina was the one leading the charge into Whale’s castle she’d turn a blind eye. Much as she turned a blind eye when Henry stole dust from the minds or publicly took out a multitude of her soldiers.

“Family sticks together,” she’d cooed once, looming over Henry and stroking his face in a gross exaggeration of maternal care, “And you are my family.”

Henry suspected that the only reason his other mother and grandparents weren’t behind bars or turned to stone or strung up in public somewhere was because once upon a time a lonely Regina
Mills had adopted a three week old infant from Arizona. It was the scantest bit of protection from Cora’s wrath and infinitely reliable.

“As crazy as Cora is Regina is her weak spot,” he said aloud, “she’s been waiting for her for ten years and she’s not going to throw that all away over Whale.”

“Kid’s got a point,” Gramps said.

His grandmother seemed less than convinced, and her eyes were narrow with suspicion while her mouth was a thin line of consternation.

Whale, still held up by Gramps’ hand, moaned.

“We need to put him somewhere,” he said.


“You just want to get back at her for going through your stuff yesterday.”

“Maybe,” she said petulantly, “but it’s also an actual cage. He can’t break out and Cora can’t just break in.”

David nodded, “She’s right Henry. The cage is perfect.”

“You can tell Mom when she gets home.”

Grams looked around, “Where is your mother? And Regina for that matter.”

“They’re—“

Dorothy sighed, “Whale had some monster in his back pocket, used it on Regina and then she ran off with it. Emma went after her.”

“What kind of monster,” David asked, his voice carrying that authoritative tone that irritated Henry. He glanced at his grandmother, knowing full well how she’d react. “Daniel.”

Gramps frowned, “Regina’s dead fiancé?”

“Her what,” Dorothy asked.

Gramps quickly explained while Grams stood stock still looking horrified. The horror was tinged with anger though. While the color had been leached from her face her black brows were knitted together forming a dark shadow over her livid green eyes. “Daniel,” she said, her voice surprisingly cool. “Whale brought him back?”

“As ‘back’ as Whale can,” Dorothy said. “The guy was just another one of his monsters for the most part, though he had some kind of anti-magic thing working for him. Regina and Emma both had trouble using any when he was touching them.”

Mary Margaret’s eyes focused and swiveled to look down at the still unconscious mad man. “All his insistence that he’d stopped developing anti-magic technology was a lie then.” It had been a major announcement. On the radio and everything.

“Wonder if Cora even knew.”
Gramps picked Whale up threw him over his shoulder with a grunt. “If she didn’t she’ll know soon. Come on Dorothy, you can help me get his squared away. Henry find Ruby and let her know we’re going to need her ears. If this guy’s been pulling one over on Cora then I want every tool available to make sure he doesn’t do the same to us.”

####

She took them to a basement bar that was more a traditional dive than anything that had been in Storybrooke during Regina’s tenure as mayor. Every piece of furniture must have been salvaged from a dump somewhere. The walls were painted black, and it looked like every time a large swath of paint had chipped away they’d just slapped another coat of paint on.

Emma led Regina to a dark corner booth tucked into the back of the bar. The only light came from a green-glassed lamp that cast them both in a sickly olive glow. Regina was too numb to be irritated by the water stains or the split wood of the table or even the large pit in the foam of the booth’s cushion.

It was a difficult thing to grasp and when she wasn’t being lured into a fight with Emma her thoughts returned to it—him. She’d found Daniel and lost him again in the span of twenty minutes. It had happened so fast that it seemed more like a dream than a memory. She twisted the ring on her finger in contemplation. It wasn’t his ring. She’d given that one up to keep Henry. It was just a bit of metal wrapped around her finger. Something familiar.

Emma went to the bar and returned with two clean bar towels. She ran one through her own hair and gave the other to Regina. “I’m gonna call home and let them know we’re okay then get something from the bar. Beer okay?”

“Old fashion. Whiskey.”

Emma looked amused, her towel pausing mid motion, “Really?”

She looked up at Emma. “Something the matter with my drink order?”

“I figured you for whiskey straight, or the blood of virgins or something.”

“And yet you suggested beer.”

Emma shrugged, “Beer is a constant. A bartender can’t screw up a beer.”

Regina nodded to the shelf behind the bartender. “If he’s got a selection like that on his back wall he probably doesn’t screw up traditional cocktails often.”

And he didn’t. The Old Fashion arrived potent, clean, and unmuddled by half a dozen garnishes.

Regina used the time alone to dab uselessly at her clothes with her towel and do anything but think about Daniel.

It didn’t work and as soon as the tumbler was on the table she was tipping the glass back and drinking the whole thing.

Emma had barely sat down and brought her own beer to her lips when Regina finished. She eyed it. “Want another?”

Regina had to bite back a wave of nausea from all that alcohol hitting her empty stomach but she
managed a “yes” and Emma went and got her another drink… and a glass of water, which she pushed across the table first.

"Thank you," she said quietly, and if Emma was surprised by her good manners she didn’t comment.

####

“Grams talked to Emma,” Henry called ahead. “They’re both okay and getting a drink somewhere.”

He stepped into the cage’s room and found that Gramps and Dorothy had left Whale handcuffed to the side of the cage while they worked quickly to divest it of all of Emma’s things. Nothing but mattress and a blanket would be left behind. The box springs were already leaning against the cave wall beyond the cage and Gramps was hunched over an apple crate piling books into it.

Henry noted that Whale, who had been slowing coming to when they’d brought him down, was out again, his left eye already swelling shut. He raised an eyebrow and glanced at his wife.

“He disparaged my gender,” she said flatly.

“Between you and my mom he’s gonna get brain damage.”

“Would that be so bad,” Gramps asked. “He’s spent ten years using any genius he had to screw us all over.”

Dorothy held her finger up, wagging it haphazardly in David’s direction, “He has a point.”

“I don’t know about everyone else in this cave but I was raised to not punch my way out of problems.”

“By who,” two voices of incredulity cried.

“Emma punches the toaster when it doesn’t give her toast fast enough,” Dorothy exaggerated.

“Somewhere between evil queen and whatever she is now Regina was pretty good about raising me to be decent.”

Gramps snorted. “I will never understand that,” he said. “It’s like a sociopath teaching a class on empathy.”

Henry rolled his eyes. He’d learned very quickly to ignore ninety percent of what his grandparents said about his mother. Most of it was exaggerated as Dorothy’s jokes about Emma’s violence. But with David in particular it seemed like an actual joke. One he shared almost exclusively with Emma.

Whale groaned and all three of them redirected their attention to the bound up man.

“No,” Henry said, cutting off the question he knew his wife and grandfather were both going to pose. “We need some of those braincells working if we’re gonna get any information out of him.”

Looking eerily like Emma, they both pouted.

####
After the second drink the silence settled in. Until Emma finally interrupted Regina’s complete lack of thoughts to bring up Cora again. “Do you think your mom knew,” she asked gently.

Regina looked up from her drink, “No, I don’t think she knew.”

“Any reason you’re so sure? Or just mother-daughter connection?”

“My mother hated Daniel. Murdered him to keep him away from me. Why on earth would she allow someone to bring him back?”

“Cruelty?”

Regina shook her head, “Not my mother’s brand of cruelty. There is always purpose in what she does. Like stabbing me so she could come here to do,” she waved her hand around the dark room, “this.”

“She thought you’d stop her?”

She frowned, “The woman built statues of me.”

Emma took a long gulp of beer and then toyed with the lip of the glass, running a single finger across its edge and staring into the gold liquid. Regina stared down at her own glass. The whiskey had melted deep crevices into the large block of ice in the center of the glass and the run off had diluted the liquid on the surface, leaving it a paler shade than the amber beneath.

“Small favors huh,” Emma asked.

“What?”

“That Cora probably didn’t know what Whale was doing? It makes her slightly less awful.”

“Maybe,” she rolled the glass and watched the chunk of ice bang against the side, “but Daniel was there because of her all the same.”

“And not Mary Margaret?”

Regina frowned.

Emma elaborated, “Mom told me…about what happened. Why you did everything. You blame her for his death.”

“Because it was her fault,” she said reflexively.

Emma’s voice was surprisingly gentle, “But it was your mom that killed him.”

Regina twisted in the booth so she could look at Emma directly, “You’ve hinted in the past that you understand precisely what my mother is. Anyone who spends half an hour with her should understand that. She’s a snake Emma. She’s deadly, but only if provoked. And Snow provoked her, even after I warned her not to.”

She sighed and dropped her head onto the table in defeat, “I don’t want to get into this with you…”

“But you brought it up dear. You’re the one eager to talk about my mother, about Daniel—“

Emma shot back up, “Because I thought it would help you!”
“How precisely?”

She stared back down at her half empty beer, “I don’t know. My parents talk about everything ad nauseam and they make this big deal about talking feelings out.”

“How precisely?”

“Well—“

Regina smirked and took a sip of her drink. “One of the things I’ve always liked about you is that despite being related to those two idiots you are, yourself, not quite so irritating emotionally. I’d hope just ten years in their company wouldn’t change that.”

It took Regina a moment to register the precise assortment of words uttered that led to Emma’s sudden sly grin. And as it dawned on her that she’d let slip something she’d prefer Emma not know, Regina noted that she had, in fact, heard, “Like huh. All this time acting like I’m the Antichrist and you ‘like’ me.”

“You make it sound like I’m five.”

“No, no you’re the one that said ‘like,’ and really it’s not inherently a kid’s word.”

Regina raised an eyebrow, impressed that Emma would use a word like inherent.

“Like just means you harbor affection. And now you’re embarrassed that I know you harbor affection,” she lowered her voice, “for me.”

“You’re an ass—“

Emma reached out, stroking Regina’s hand with her knuckle. “Hey. It’s okay.”

Regina would have liked to comprehend those words but she was too busy staring down at the bit of Emma touching her. Looking at the long fingers. The veins and tendons that ran just beneath the surface of her skin. The strength, that seemed not just to be contained within the hand, but exuded by it.

It barely touched her own hand. The knuckle just grazed her skin. It should have been nothing more than a ghostly sensation. But it was distractingly not.

She dared looked up again. Her hope that Emma had been teasing, that it was a game, an attempt at the sparring that had made up their relationship until that point, was immediately dashed. There was nothing playful about the look in Emma’s eyes. The smile that turned up the corners of her mouth was not teasing. It was consoling. She was consoling. Encouraging even. Saying it was okay to… “like” her.

Regina could find no words. No riposte. She could only stare.

Silence enveloped the booth. Heavy with portent.

Emma was the first to break through it. She pulled her hand away and downed the rest of her beer in a single long gulp. “Well, I’m going to get another drink. You want one?”

Emma wasn’t trying to act like a moment hadn’t developed and been shared. She didn’t seek to erase it. Like Regina herself she seemed more content to move past it. She awkwardly scooted out of the booth and stood.
“Regina?”

She swallowed. Held her glass up. “Yes please. Another.”

That was when Emma actually cocked her finger like a tiny gun and pointed it at Regina, “Right. One old fashioned like it’s 1942.”

She dashed to the bar and Regina raised her glass to her lips and finished off the rest of her drink.

###

Whale sat cross-legged on the mattress and stared up at the three Charmings towering over him. He jangled the cuffs around his wrists.

“Are these permanent?”

“What do you think,” Dorothy said.

He looked from her to Henry and then to David. “Just the three of you? I was certain Regina would be here.” He didn’t smirk. He just projected condescension. Sniffing haughtily like he was better than them.

Henry crouched down so that they were eye level. “Here’s the thing Whale. I want to kill you for what do you did to my mother, and David? Dorothy? I don’t think they’d stop me. The only thing keeping you alive, is I need information.”

“About your mother’s friend?”

“We all know about Daniel,” David said. He crossed his arms, the muscles in his forearms bulging. “We want to know about Cora.”

“Then ask her daughter.”

Dorothy systematically cracked each knuckle in her right hand, “We’re asking you. What the hell’s she up to? Why’s she half-assing all of this with Regina?”

Whale laughed, ducking his head in an attempt to reign in his amusement. “All these years and you all still haven’t figured it out yet? With Cora Mills and Rumpelstiltskin,” he finally looked up, “nothing is as it seems.”

###

“Emma, how did you find me?”

Regina had had enough to drink that her brain could work again. It could form thoughts and not just react to those of others. And of all the thoughts forming in her head that was the one at the forefront.

Emma’s hand fell to the chain around her neck. She traced it with her finger, stopping when it struck the locket. “Handy for more than the Charming clan.” Like a small child she started to play with the locket and its chain. Running the bauble up and down the chain’s length and then pulling the chain into her mouth. “Works on the maker too.”
Regina knew the locket had formed a…link between them back in the Enchanted Forest. She’d been protected from most of it because she’d learned to shield her mind from intrusion decades ago.

Truth be told she thought the link between them was nothing more than a conduit for energy now. She could draw on Emma’s power and vice versa but that was the limit of what could be done. Not so.

“How,” she asked.

“Remember how I was seeing two of you for a while?”

“I believe you called her Head Regina,” she said, faintly amused—and embarrassed too. “Head Regina” was in fact Regina’s own subconscious, leaking into the conduit between them and she wasn’t crazy about the idea of part of herself just wandering around talking to Emma Swan.

“I saw her. She was asking for help—“

“—She wouldn’t do that.”

Emma raised an eyebrow.

“She is…me,” Regina explained, “and I don’t think even my subconscious would go crying to you.”

Emma looked offended. “Look, I don’t know what the hell this other Regina is, but she’s who I saw and she’s who led me to you.”

“No.”

“No,” Emma laughed. “We’re just going to refuse to except reality now?”

“When it comes to this yes!” She hunched down over the table, “You’re saying I was so distraught my subconscious went and found you and asked you for help.”

“I guess,” Emma’s eyes hunted for something in Regina’s own. “Yeah. That’s what I’m saying.”

“And I’m saying no. Do you understand what a subconscious is? What it does and doesn’t do?”

Slowly another sly smile appeared, “I understand this time it says you wanted me there, and that conscious and idiot you is horrified by that.”

“I don’t want—“

“You kissed me remember?”

“Ten years ago!”

She held up two fingers. “Two for you.”

“Yes. Fine. Two years. Long ones Emma.”

“Regina why can’t you just accept it? You kissed me once because you wanted to, and just now you called out for me because the worst thing imaginable was happening and you wanted me there to help.”

“Right. The worst thing. I just killed my fiancé and now you’re using it as an opportunity to make a
“No.” Emma groaned loudly. “Jesus. No. I’m just—“

“What?”

“I’m trying to talk and talking to you is always this little,” she put her hands together like she was throttling someone, “circle clusterfuck thing. Because yeah, I would love to hit on you Regina. I’ve spent ten years thinking about you and that stupid kiss and if there’s one thing I’m really fucking good at it’s holding onto a relationship way the hell past expiration, but Jesus. The man you loved just died! What the hell kind of monster goes hitting on someone an hour after they have to kill their fiancé?’”

Regina had done something like that. To Jefferson once.

Emma angrily dragged her hand through her hair. “I’m sorry I flirted. Okay? You’ve had this experience today and this,” she waved around them, “should be about you. So can we start over?”

Regina spun the ice in her glass.

Another reboot. It sometimes felt like Regina’s life was one of Henry’s awful comics. Things would spin beyond her control and the world would turn awful and to fix it she’d just…reboot. She’d force a smile on her face and become a queen, or an evil despot or a mayor or a thief. Put on a new face. Put on a new life. She’d changed so many times it was a wonder Daniel had even recognized her. For she wasn’t the girl he had proposed to or even the woman who sought to resurrect him. And it was as if he’d known.

“True Love,” he’d said, “the kind to die for.”

She swallowed, “You know Daniel told me to start over too. Before I…helped him he told me we weren’t each other’s True Loves. That he wasn’t mine. Told me to go out and find it. Start over. Act like everything we shared was for nothing. And the worst part? The absolute worst part of what he said Emma? Was the part where I agreed.” Emma’s eyes widened in surprise. “Daniel told me to start over and I thought it was a good idea.”

He died and she didn’t. She couldn’t.

Emma slid over the last few inches separating them. Their knees bumped together before Emma pulled her into a hug. She was damp still from the rain and sticky and cool in the bar’s air conditioning. But her arms held Regina up, and her magic lapped at her senses, offering strength and consolation.

She did not reciprocate the hug. Her arms did not snake around Emma’s waist and as inviting as it appeared she did not drop her head into the exposed crook of Emma’s neck. It was easier to just let someone hold her. To let someone try to impart a bit of comfort.

It was Emma Swan holding her. Emma Swan, who tried to run from the curse to avoid responsibilities. Who reacted to intimacy like a child. Ten years had left the world hard, but Emma somehow whole. Sharp edges but a soft touch. A person capable of more than rejoinders and snarls. Emma’s breath brushed against her ear. “I was just talking about the conversation,” she mumbled.

And Regina laughed, pushing away, but not too far, and brushing her hair out of her face. “Yes, then Emma,” she said smiling, “we can start over.”
“Good.”

They were still sitting close and Emma was smiling a little too, just a quirk upwards at the corners of her mouth and eyes. Hardly a declaration of amusement.

Their knees were touching and Emma was leaning forward.

In that moment it felt natural as breathing.

Regina was a reserved woman not given to bold romantic actions—not when they involved Emma Swan. But it felt so natural to just lean forward and kiss her cheek.

“Thank you,” she said.

And she didn’t sit back immediately. Not when Emma’s hand found it’s way to her knee or her own hand found Emma’s on the table and squeezed those long fingers. They shared a look.

An inscrutable glance.

And the thing was, the glance didn’t need to be. The pregnant moment didn’t have to be. They didn’t have to dance around understandings. Her eyes darted from Emma’s to her lips and then to the locket. It was a conduit. A path from her mind, her consciousness to Emma’s. And all she had to do was

Let it flow.

####

Dorothy sighed, “You know, Oz makes more sense than this guy and that place has talking spoons.”

David scratched his eyebrow above his eye patch, “Whale you want to give us something actionable here?”

“Why,” he asked, “you’re planning on killing me.”

Dorothy and David nodded in agreement leaving Henry to be the frowning one, “No we aren’t.”

“Whether we kill you or not shouldn’t be your impetus to talk.”

Mary Margaret emerged from the shadows, a wolf growling at her elbow. Whale’s reaction was immediate. He bristled and tried to put space between himself and the woman and the werewolf even though there was already the thick metal of the cage’s bars between them. Mary Margaret grinned maliciously and her hand fell into the wolf’s ruff.

The wolf’s one eye glowed as red as freshly spilt blood, but otherwise there were no signs of the damage Whale had wrought. Until Ruby moved further into the light. Dark streaks ran through her fur like thread piecing her together and one entire rear leg clanked each time it struck the floor. It was like brass, but moved as smooth as flesh.

Ruby continued to growl and Mary Margaret, a little canine-like herself, slowly cocked her head to the side. “I’m asking Victor.”

And Whale, who until that point had been irritatingly unflappable, swallowed.
Dorothy tentatively stepped between the enormous wolf and the object of its ire. She and his grams were about the only two people he’d ever known crazy enough to get between an angry werewolf and its prey.

They were both like sisters to Ruby. Grams having grown up out in the forest with her and Dorothy having glommed onto her her first time in Storybrooke and it was that sense of a familial bond that probably made them so bold, and improved their chance of survival.

“Are you sure you should be here,” she asked.

The wolf snarled and Henry reflexively flinched. He knew Ruby wouldn’t hurt his wife. That was something that had unfortunately been tested when he was younger. He also knew that when she was angry her control slipped. Five pale scars across Henry’s back were proof of that.

So his hand dropped to the wand he kept close. Dorothy caught the movement and shook her head, her eyes only briefly leaving Ruby’s. It was enough.

Ruby prowled closer to the bed, where Whale was scrambling backwards and pressing himself as flat as he could against the cage’s side.

“Let her go,” Grams said. “He’s not worth it.”

“Mary Margaret.” Gramps wasn’t demanding from her as he did so many others. It was a gentle plea. “This isn’t right.”

“Really,” her eyes seemed to flash with anger. “You know what he did to Ruby. What he did to all the others. You know about the heart in his chest.”

“Gold took it from the girl. Not me,” Whale cried in his defense.

Ruby snarled, her spittle raining onto Dorothy and the bed behind her.

“You’re not helping,” David said. He looked back at his wife. “And neither are you.”

“You’re telling me to go?”

“I’m telling you that I think you and Ruby being here right now isn’t the best idea, and you’d know that if—“

She snapped back, “What?”

Tense silence hung between the two of them. The fairytale couple superior to all others. The love story to trump all love stories. Their love was epic. In another land it had been curative.

Storybrooke had soured it. The purity of what they’d shared had dissolved leaving these two people who snapped and snarled like wolves.

Henry spoke up for the first time, seeking to ease the tension between his grandparents. “Grams, I get it.” She dragged her eyes away from her husband to focus on him. “I do. This son of a bitch should be strung up and left to rot as far as I’m concerned, but we’re the good guys.” He took a careful step forward, “Remember? Threatening him with death by werewolf isn’t what the good guys do.”
“How far has being a good guy ever gotten you Henry?”

“Hey,” Dorothy in offense.

“Mary Margaret,” David said at the same time.

Henry wasn’t offended. Maybe he should have been. His grandfather and his wife were both appalled by the question. But Henry knew all sorts of truths he was sure even his grandmother didn’t know and so he just returned her stare. A righteous stare.

Her chest didn’t heave as though she were breathless, and even her question hadn’t been framed as an argumentative cry. She was asking calmly and expecting a cool retort in kind.

“You’re done,” David growled. He was angry. As angry as Henry had ever seen him at his wife.

“I think just about everyone in this cage is,” Dorothy said. Henry’s wife was even tempered, cooler under fire than most career soldiers, and her words brooked no argument.

She and David quickly escorted Mary Margaret and Ruby from the cage.

The door slammed shut and silence, but for the distant trickle of water onto stone, hung heavy in the cage.

It was just Henry then. All alone with Storybrooke’s most human looking monster. Who parroted Mary Margaret.

“What has goodness gotten you Henry?”

####

She’d invaded minds and plundered their secrets and she’d been invited into minds and handed their secrets.

This was the absence of secrets. There was no subterfuge. Emma had left herself open and when the link between them was freed of all barriers they just…were.

Two halves of a whole. Two parts of a consciousness. There were no secrets because they were one.

Stop.

It was love.

And fear.

The two so intertwined as to be one nauseous whole that was not herself. She was love and anger and this was love and fear and

Stop.

Jesus. Can’t the lady catch a hint? If she wanted her walking around in her mind like a goddamned public library she would have invited her. Hello! Regina-free—

Zone.
Oh God. The line between them blurred more and more. The thin veil of self disappearing as Emma Swan slipped into her head as gracefully as Cinderella’s foot into that glass slipper and

Jesus H. Christ.

The magic wanted out but the magic would kill and she could still see the flesh burned off in the fire and the eyeballs bursting and the scent that people always compared to pork but was nothing like pork. Nothing smelled like burning flesh. And nothing smelled like Regina. Fucking Regina Mills smelling like stupid apples and smelling like a mom and a lover and no. No. She was not going to think about how Regina smelled and how she felt and about that kiss ten years ago. Not when she had to hold onto the magic and worry about Henry. Kid was growing further and further away. He was like his mom all taciturn and acting like he didn’t care about stuff when he did. And putting on a mask. Moms and their son all so comfortable in their stupid flipping masks.

And Regina licked her lips. God damn it. Didn’t the woman understand that those lips were perfect and needed to be kissed and

“We have to stop.”

Regina had said the words. Squeaking them out as her hand rose to press against Emma’s chest.

“You started this.”

Emma’s eyes were dark. Hunger pulled Regina closer and

No. No. She brought the barriers down again. Slamming them into place. Her breath was coming in quick gasps that caused her chest to heave and Emma’s hand had somehow found its way to her bicep where her thumb rubbed soothing circles.

“I should’ve have done that.”

“Cut out the middle man,” Emma asked with a smirk.

She swallowed, “I just wanted to know—“

Emma sat up on her knees, her hand drifted up Regina’s arm to join the other and cup Regina’s face, tilting it up so that Emma stooped over her, her blond hair a curtain that shadowed them both.

“Emma—“

“You saw in my head. You know what I want to do right now.”

“Yes.” Any other words failed her.

“And now I know what you want.” There was the faintest tremor in her voice. The barest glimmer of fear glinting in her eyes. Fear that had painted the insides of Regina only moments before.

Emma Swan. Fearless and yet terrified of love. Of herself. How did she make it through each day? How did she breathe through all that fear? How did she find it in herself to stoop over Regina and hold her face in her hands and plead for a kiss?

Regina’s eyes dropped to Emma’s lips. Thin lips pressed together in the scantest of frowns. One wrought from worry. From that fear that wrapped around her like chain mail.

Regina sighed, “Then what’s stopping you—“
The question was lost because then there was only the kiss.

Emma’s lips were soft, but possessing an intoxicating certainty. They moved against Regina’s, guiding her like the lead in a dance. So often she’d heard dancing alluded to like sex and she’d never understood it. She’d watched the great dancers of her new land in film after film and been left only more confused than when she’d started.

But Emma. Emma made kissing effortless. There was no concern for where hands or knees would go and no lingering thoughts clouding Regina’s head. There was only the kiss. A finite moment of exquisite eternity that culminated within it too many dreams she’d never dared shared.

Her lips failed her. Her whole body sagged with the simple finality of that kiss. Some chapter in Henry’s book ended with the press of Emma’s lips to hers and just being a part of the moment was too much.

Emma held her up though. She pulled back—just enough. She didn’t try to look in Regina’s eyes. Instead her eyes were on Regina’s mouth. She leaned in again, but only to graze Regina’s nose with her own. A silly little nuzzle that was so very Emma. Sweet, and innocent and childish but comforting.

“You okay,” she asked.

“I’m…”

Emma’s thumbs softly stroked her cheeks. “Shaking.”

Regina reached up to grab Emma’s wrist and saw that her words were true. Her fingers trembled.

“I’m not very good at this,” she confessed.

And Emma had to lean back to appraise her with a grin. “Seemed pretty okay.”

Regina squeezed her wrist, “Don’t.”

The smile faltered. The serious savior’s mask falling into place. “You’re scared.”

“So are you.” She’d felt the fear. It was all Emma was.

“It’s not going to stop me from kissing you again.” She leaned forward—

“How—“

The question was trapped by another kiss.

###

Of all the lessons learned in the stable that day the one best remembered was that all good things end.

Despair was forever but joy was fleeting and so Regina broke the kiss first. It had to end and she wanted it to be on her terms. She pushed Emma away and shot out of the booth, backing away from the still kneeling Emma as fast as she could while still appearing graceful.

“Regina.” Emma said her name as though it was familiar. As though they were familiar. Like her exasperation wasn’t with her former mortal enemy but with a—a wife.
Regina had to cover her mouth.

Emma started to get out of the booth but Regina took another step backwards and the movement was enough to stop Emma.

“Are you okay,” she asked.

Did Regina look okay? Her insides were unravelling. Her very world plucked apart at the seams.

All she wanted to do was kiss Emma again. Kiss her until the voice in her head shut up and the world disappeared and it was just rough hands and bare skin and gasps in the dark.

She took a halting step back towards the booth.

Emma swallowed.

“Henry would hate you,” Regina said. “He’d hate both of us.”

“He’s married. He can get over it.”

“Snow—“

“Doesn’t dictate my love life.”

Love.

“You’re supposed to hate me.”

“Not since 2012.” A crooked grin.

“Emma.” Be serious.

The grin wavered. “I spent years thinking this was a pipe dream. I’m not going to let my parents or our son tell me to let go now that I have it.”

Emma was deadly serious in that moment. Not fragile and scared or a swaggering lover. Just honest and earnest.

“Damn it,” Regina breathed as she crossed the small space between them grabbed Emma’s face and pulled her up into another kiss.

Emma’s hand snaked around her waist and pulled her so close light couldn’t pass between their bodies. Distantly she heard catcalls and the sound of glasses pounding on tables.

“Take it outside,” the bartender shouted.

“Oh I don’t know. We could all just sit and watch.”

That voice.

The barest glimmer of a lilt. The attempt at humor that just sounded infuriatingly smug. A pure malevolence engendered at the sound. Regina spun around, pressing her back protectively into Emma and forming a ball of searingly hot fire in her hand.

Rumpelstiltskin.

He was sitting at another booth. She had no idea how long he’d been there. He might have been
there from the moment they’d arrived or he might have only just appeared. There was a single drink on the table in front of him. A half drunk bourbon or whiskey. No ice. He held the glass up, rolled the liquid around before bringing it to his lips and tipping it back.

“I was rather enjoying the show your Majesty. Haven’t seen you that worked up in years.”

“What do you want,” Emma asked over Regina’s shoulder.

He shrugged. Set his glass down. A puff of dark smoke and he was standing, his cane wrapped up in his grip and resting before him like a sword. He looked nearly like the man that had attacked the Charming’s underground refuge. Only his skin was a more human shade, light didn’t shimmer on it, and the power that his most minimal of gestures exuded was raw, dark and as evil as the curse itself.

“I was sent to retrieve Cora’s darling little girl.” His eyes focused on Regina alone and the human element in them wavered, reminding her of the monster who had long ago taught her to tear the heart from a unicorn’s chest. “She’d like a word with you.”

“You’re her lapdog now?” The question cut deeply and Regina smiled. “Beaten and bent is a good look on you Rumpel. Brings out your eyes.”

He scowled, “She said she wanted to see you. There was nothing about your tongue being a necessity for the visit.”

The fire in her hand flared. “You can try and take it, but I might singe a few of those lovely locks of yours in the process.”

He snapped his fingers and every patron in the bar snapped to attention. Standing even if it meant shoving a table aside to do so. Their eyes rolled back up into their heads so that only white appeared and their backs were ramrod straight.

“I’ve got an army wherever I go dearie. So go ahead. Wage your little war.”

Emma’s hand on her wrist, just a few inches from the ball of fire in her palm, was the only thing that kept Regina from tearing the entire bar apart.

“We can’t,” Emma said. The corner of Rumpelstiltskin’s mouth ticked up in amusement. Emma didn’t even acknowledge him. She was speaking to Regina, urging her to turn and look it her with the mere sound of her voice. “These aren’t like Whale’s monsters. They’re still alive.”

“As long as his fingers are in their brains they’re not.”

“I’m hurt,” he said dramatically, a mere shade of the overly expressive imp he’d once been, “I wouldn’t kill them all out right.”

One of the people groaned and collapsed.

Rumpelstiltskin grinned. “Just one or two.”

Another fell.

“Stop,” Emma said, panic lacing her voice.

“Then tell your new girlfriend to come along nicely.” To Regina he added, “She can even come along if you’re so worried.”

The blaze in Regina’s hand wavered. “Excuse me?”
“Your mother doesn’t want to kill you. She just wants a chat. I’m sure she wouldn’t be opposed to company. Particularly now that you two are so…close.”

“And you’ll let these others live,” Emma asked.

He considered her request before nodding, “Yes. I suppose I can leave them alive. If you can guarantee her,” he pointed the tip of his cane at Regina. “A queen for her peasants.”

“I’m not their queen.”

He continued to smile.

Emma squeezed her arm, “Regina?”

Did she have a choice?

She curled her flaming hand into a fist, extinguishing the flames.

One by one Rumpelstiltskin’s captives eyes returned to normal and their posture turned less rigid. Then they passed out. “Alive and well. Now shall we?”

####

The rain still beat a steady rhythm on the streets, but the thunder had grown less ominous, and the flashes of lightening were only flashes of light behind the clouds.

Rumpel was completely dry in it—as if the rain was frightened to fall on him. Regina and Emma followed him, walking side by side and getting completely soaked. Their hands would swing with each step and with every other step their fingers would graze against one another. Each time it was only for a second, but it was enough.

He brought them to a rope ladder than hung in a halo of golden light in the middle of the street. Centaurs, half dressed like police officer, but for the metal armor on their horse halves, blocked traffic and used their hooves to beat back any curious onlookers.

They stepped past the line of half horse men and came to stand in the halo of light. All three of them stared up into the night sky in time to see the lightening illuminate a blimp as red as the hearts in her vault.

“She always did appreciate a theme,” Regina observed.

“Everything’s red velvet on the inside,” Rumpel muttered. “And more hearts than Granny’s on Valentine’s Day.”

“You mean before Granny was murdered and her diner burned to the ground,” Emma said.

Rumpelstiltskin hooked his cane onto the ladder and twisted around, letting the cane’s handle support his entire weight. “You’re invited up Miss Swan, but you’d be wise to leave that significant chip on your shoulder down here.”

Emma opened her mouth to fire back something undoubtedly scathing (for Emma) but Regina spoke first, “We’ll both be on our best behavior won’t we dear. Least we can do for a big family reunion.”

He raised his eyebrow and nodded, then suddenly the slack in the ladder disappeared and it shot
upwards. She and Emma both quickly grabbed a rung and let themselves be carried up at speeds far too fast to be pleasant.

“Worse than a roller coaster,” Emma shouted.

The top of the ladder ended in the belly of the blimp, and soldiers in blood red uniforms grabbed Regina and Emma by the arms and pulled them off roughly. Emma was green in the face but still managed to shove them back with a puff of magic.

“Watch the hands pals,” she growled at the closest.

Regina nodded regally at the ones holding her and they dropped her arms, stepping back with a bow.

Emma rolled her eyes.

Regina shrugged caught the look and shrugged.

Rumpel led them out of what had apparently been some sort of loading area. They went from the working portion of the ship, with its utilitarian metal walls and grated walkways to the portion that Cora used, with plush carpets and intricately carved wood panelling.

And just as Rumpel had said, hearts were everywhere. Carved into the wood, woven into the carpets, even the soldiers they passed wore rank insignias styled like hearts.

“It’s an actual whole theme huh,” Emma muttered.

“She does seem to have gone a little…overboard,” Regina agreed.

“At least she wasn’t the Queen of Dicks or something.”

Regina snickered. She’d thought something similar when she’d first seen the kingdom her mother had carved into Wonderland.

“Queen of Feet wouldn’t have been so great either,” Emma continued. “Or Queen of Severed Heads.”

“I suspect the first one would be the worst though.”

“It look like a seventh grade boy’s sketchbook.”

“Henry didn’t go through that did he?”

Emma shuddered, “God I hope not. As far as I’m concerned the kid’s never even seen one.”

“He’s married…and male.”

“He pees sitting down, it’s sexless, and they wear full chastity belts to bed.”

Rumpel shook his head, “Even I know that’s not true Ms. Swan.”

She flipped Rumpel off.

He hooked his cane over his arm and pushed open a set of thick wooden doors carved in, naturally, the shape of a heart.

The room beyond seemed to take up half of the blimp’s quarters. It was taller than the loading dock
they’d arrived in and the paneling and carpet even more ornate than those in the hallways. One whole wall was nothing but panes of glass that separated the room from a breathtaking view of the city beyond. A city covered in a haze of rain the glowed with the thousands of garish lights below. Their multicolored glow illuminated the room.

Despite its size and the grand statement made by that enormous window the room was sparsely appointed. A table and chairs near the wall for meetings, a side table to hold drinks and food, and in the center of the room, looking out over the city. A throne. The heart motif was carried through its design, but it wasn’t quite as garish as the motif elsewhere. There were the swooping lines at the top of the chair, and the choice of bloodwood as a medium, but otherwise it was quite the simple throne.

“I was expecting something a little more gilded for the throne of Storybrooke’s Queen,” Emma said, her eyes also on the chair.

It was facing away from them, but it was clear her mother was seated in the chair. She had a flare for the dramatics, and what was more dramatic than surveying her kingdom and facing away from the daughter she’d betrayed.

“I’m no queen my dear.”

She held out a glass, her hand the first bit of her Regina had seen in two and a half years.

Something scurried in the shadows, and Belle appeared, her skin pale as milk, her lips painted red as blood, and her body dressed in a skintight black leather dress. With no heart to pump the blood through her veins her cheeks had lost their rosy blush and any life that had been in her had been preserved like a corpse in formaldehyde.

She refilled Cora’s glass and returned to the shadows without a word, her eyes dark and blank.

Emma crossed her arms. She didn’t seem remotely surprised by Belle’s appearance, and her eyes stayed focused on Cora. “So what should we call you? Despot? Tyrant?”

Her mother laughed, “As though I would care what a simple little creature like you called me.” She swirled her wine in her glass, letting the dark wine breathe.

“And me mother, do you care what I call you?”

The glass paused.

“My darling girl…”

Regina shook her head, “Don’t.”

The glass vanished from Cora’s hand in a puff of magic and then she stood. Slowly rising from her throne and coming around to face them. She wore a perfectly tailored black suit and her hair hung around her shoulders, appearing almost girlish. Her finger traced the slope of her throne and she stepped no closer. As if the throne anchored her to that point.

“I missed you.” The words sounded sincere.

Regina swallowed, surprised by her own weakness. Her mother was one of two architects of Regina’s life and she hated her for it, but seeing her standing there with a sweet smile and a tear in the corner of her eye Regina actually felt…compassion.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have shivved her and left her for dead then,” Emma said.
Cora’s eyes darkened with hatred, but she refused to look at Emma. “I’d hoped to speak to you alone.”

Regina shook her head, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Nevertheless, Rumpel dear, would you please leave us.”

He clicked his heels together and nodded, “Of course.”

“See the girl out first.”

Rumpel grinned, “My pleasure.”

Regina felt Emma’s magic swell in preparation for a fight, much as her own did. Only Rumpel did nothing flashy and he moved quickly. He clicked the end of his cane on the carpet and the wall of windows vanished then he clicked it again and Emma rose off the carpet, her eyes widening in alarm. With a slash of his cane she was launched from the blimp and out into the darkness.

“Mother!”

In an instant the window was replaced and Rumpel and Belle were both gone. There hadn’t even been a gust of wind to mark the entire action.

“Oh she’s fine,” Cora said. “I wouldn’t do anything to hurt the girl.”

“Your lackey threw her out of a moving ship!”

“She’s Emma Swan. There are cockroaches more likely to die than her. And it’s not like Rumpel would kill her.”

“Oh why,” Regina asked angrily, “don’t want the town to see you all murder its savior.”

“The town would welcome that woman’s death. Even those poor souls in the shanty towns aren’t fond of her.”

“Then why keep her alive. For me and Henry?”

She laughed, “Oh no my darling,” she spoke patiently, as if speaking to a simpleminded child, “the curse never effectively ended. Killing Emma Swan would destroy everything.”

###

“What has goodness gotten you Henry?”

With the threat of Ruby gone the mad scientist had immediately turned relaxed. He was leaning forward, his elbow perched on his knees and his chin resting on his fist. The rakish Dr. Whale, who used to make passes at Henry’s mom when she’d bring him in for check ups as a kid.

“I don’t think my wife would have married me if I was evil.”

“No,” Whale’s eyes flickered to the exit. “Probably not. But gorgeous wife aside, you live in a cave with murderers, monsters, and a one-eyed waste of space.”

“I could ask you the same question Doc. Because from where I’m standing being evil hasn’t gotten
That wiped the smile of Whale’s face. He leaned back, “You think I’m evil?” The question didn’t sound rhetorical. Rather he seemed genuinely curious.

“A good man doesn’t do what you did.”

“And what’s that? Because I’ll admit, not all my actions have been kind. But I gave life to those who had none. Poor Belle has a chance because of me.”

“Not as long as her heart’s in your chest—“

“A chance.” He said passionately, the shackles on his wrists rattling, “Less that most I will agree, but Cora wanted her completely gone.”

“How is serving as her slave with no memory of her life and her heart beating in your chest any better?”

“Same could be said of what your mother did to her for more than thirty years. Keeping her trapped and alive rather than murdering her outright. You see us villains Henry, but we’re simply humans forced to operate in shades of gray.”

Henry snorted. The irony of a man from a black and white world saying that not being lost on him, but by the same turn he felt compelled to note, “My mother isn’t evil.”

Whale raised an eyebrow. “She’s the Evil Queen and I seem to recall a little boy once passionately telling everyone that.”

“I was a kid then. A lot’s changed.”

“What precisely? Your mother? Or just your own moral code?”

He asked the question like Henry’s admitting he’d changed would be some victory for Whale. Like the idea that people couldn’t change. That they were immutable. A whole swath of constants.

If anything Henry had learned change was vital. As constant as he tried to keep his own moral code he knew that flexibility was critical. He’d watched his family squashed beneath Cora’s heel because they were so inflexible, because they were so good in a world commanded by evil.

And the times they did bend weren’t the opportune ones. Mary Margaret and Ruby were happy to let their tempers lead them astray, and in the heat of battle Emma had no problem ripping the head off a man’s shoulders. But none of them could bend for the necessity of those around them.

Not like Regina. She made the dark choices. She opted for the shadows her extended family fled from. And she’d taught Henry not to change his whole moral code but to…adjust.

“Both,” he said.

Whale’s eyebrows rose in surprise.

“I don’t like the choices my mother has made. The curse, the people she’s killed in the past? Those were the wrong choices.”

“They make her evil.”

“Maybe then, but the thing is, not everything she does has been evil.” He shrugged, “Selfish maybe.”
The taste of apple was sweet, the buttery crust melted on the tongue. Yet the dessert was forever repugnant. “My mom has been consistently selfish, but not evil. Not like you.”

Whale peered at Henry. Like he was an experiment rather than a man. “What gymnastics of the mind must you perform to truly believe that?”

“If she’s evil than my mother killing more than forty people because she lost control is evil. Ruby hunting Cora’s guards on a full moon is evil. And very life I’ve taken to overthrow Cora and put someone I like in power is evil too.”

“Necessity breeds evil,” Whale said.

Henry sighed. Here it was. Another adult listening and not comprehending. It had happened so often he wondered why he even bothered opening his mouth.

“You’re not listening Doctor Whale. Necessity doesn’t breed evil. It breeds flexibility. Ruby and my mother aren’t evil, and Regina hasn’t been evil for years, and even when she was…she had her reasons. Good reasons. Not like you. You who use people like chattel to further your own curiosity. You have no goal but the arbitrary,” he took a step towards Whale, “That’s evil.”

“And you Henry? Where is the self-styled revolutionary of Storybrooke on your shaky scale?”

Henry didn’t flinch. Instead he jutted out his chin. “Every life I’ve taken has been for the good of the world you and Cora have corrupted.”

“You look so much like your biological mother, but when you talk like that I see how you’re Regina’s too. That fervency for what you feel is just must be a family trait.”

The corner of Henry’s mouth quirked up in a half smile. “My mom made sure to equip me for the real world Whale. Pragmatism and a healthy ego will get you far in life.”

He reached furtively for the wand in his bag, letting his finger trace the the cool glass on the handle. Obsidian.

She used to say he was a “winner.” A special boy bound for greatness. It had been one of the few things his mother used to say that he’d never questioned.

“But she taught me something else too.”

He pulled his wand out and Whale’s eyes tracked its movements. Watched the spark of magic erupt from its tip and fall slowly to the floor.

“You see, when she was my mom she was the mayor and she was a better politician than anyone in town. And not just because of the curse. And this part’s important Doctor Whale. This other lesson she taught me? Way more important than anything else.”

More sparks skittered out, precursor to a path of light that arced through the air and struck Whale directly between the eyes.

“If you don’t get caught it’s not really a crime.”

Whale gasped and his entire body went rigid. “What…what are you doing?”

Henry grinned, “Being my mother’s son.”
The beam of light suddenly turned taut. A straight line between Whale’s mind and the wand, and through it Henry could see every thought Whale had ever had, like photographs on a phone. He shifted through them with a flick of his wrist.

And if he’d allowed Whale to scream the man’s cries would have been excruciating.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

There was a long delay between this chapter and the last, and while some of that had to do with writer’s block a LOT of it had to do with the release of an expansion pack for Civilizations V. Sorry.

Also NOTICE. FEMSLASHCON is this weekend! I’ll be appearing at the Once Upon a Time panel with lysachan, chilly_flame, and fictorium from 1500-1700 Central Standard US. So hop in and say hello and ask us lots of questions and revel in the discussion of femslashy OUAT meta!

You can learn more about the whole event at femslashday.com.

When Emma Swan showed up on her doorstep and Henry proudly proclaimed her to be his “real” mom Regina’s overwhelming desire to murder her had been tempered only by her need to keep her alive. She’d been forced to be more conniving in her attempts to rid the town of its savior in order to protect the curse.

Ultimately she’d failed.

She hadn’t considered the curse, or Emma’s relationship to it, much since returning to the Enchanted Forest. Somewhere between their escape from the centaurs and their time as prisoners in Bluebeard’s palace her desire to slip a knife between Emma’s ribs had waned.

No.

No wane wasn’t the right word.

It had waned. But then they’d kissed. They’d kissed because of secrets and harbored feelings and a need for comfort and Regina had to admit that wane wasn’t a good word to describe her movement on the spectrum of love and hate. Wane implied a potential to return to some previously established point. Wane suggested that one day she could desire Emma’s death again.

And the truth was Emma’s death would ruin Regina.

She no longer wanted Emma alive simply to maintain the curse. She needed her alive because the world would be a worse place without her.

So she and her mother were of one mind—for once.

Emma confessing her love for Henry may have weakened the curse to the point of people remembering, but the curse itself was still intact, keeping Storybrooke alive and all its inhabitants in place.

Unlike the trigger Regina had hidden deep beneath the town, Emma’s death would end the curse peacefully. Everyone would be as they were. They would be whisked back to their homelands and Storybrooke would return to nature.
And Cora’s new metropolis would be destroyed. She would once more be ruler of nothing more than the mad.

“You’re preserving her.”

Cora shrugged, pleased with herself. “It can be trying sometimes. The woman just loves throwing herself into mortal peril for the good of others.”

“A family trait,” Regina said automatically. The tyrannical compassion of Leopold had been passed on to a daughter raised by him to lack empathy too. Somehow she had passed on her compassion to Emma, but a life time in the foster care system had also given her an almost destructive sense of empathy. She understood everyone.

Even Regina.

She stepped closer to Cora, tilting her head in curiosity. “How do you keep her alive?”

Cora tugged smoothly at her skirt. “I have my ways.”

“Emma still has her heart.” She remembered it thrumming against her fingertips.

“Who knows how the curse would react to her losing it.”

“So how do you do it?”

Her mother not so unsubtly changed the subject, “How did you find that dank little home they built? I’ve never been down there myself, but I hear it’s very…” she smiled appeasingly. Reminding Regina of the princes and princesses who’d occupied Storybrooke’s country club, “quaint.”

“It reeks of poverty. Would take you back to your days as a miller’s daughter.” The little self-satisfied smile on her mother’s face froze. “Especially compared to this baroque flying palace.”

“Do you like the design?” Cora actually sounded curious, even though her entire face was still frozen with displeasure.

Regina crossed her arms. “No.”

“You’re trying to insult me?”

“Yes.”

“It’s juvenile.”

One corner of Regina’s mouth curled up, forming a smirk that she gladly wore like armor.

Her mother hissed in frustration. “When will you learn that you only spite yourself with your childish games?”

Regina looked away, as if bored, and out of the corner of her eye she saw her mother’s growing anger. It normally terrified her. Her mother’s wrath had always been accompanied with suffocating magic.

But Regina had buried her past and embarked on a new future all in the same night and she was feeling…invincible.

“If you brought me up to this blimp to lecture me you’re wasting your time mother?”
“It’s a zeppelin dear, and I brought you here to protect you.”

“From what?”

“From the wrong headed idea you’re entertaining even now.”

“I don’t—“

“You kissed that girl—that woman—in the bar tonight.”

“Rumpel told you.”

“What possessed you to think that a relationship with her was anything but foolish?”

“She cares about me Mother. And honestly who I spend my time with isn’t any of your—“

“You are a means to an end for her Regina. For all of them. You’re a…a shield that they would gladly wear to protect themselves.”


“Henry?” Cora laughed, “Henry is the worst of them.”

“You’re trying—“

She all but shouted her claim. Raising her voice to be heard over Regina’s protestations. “That boy is manipulative.”

“Says the woman that orchestrated half my life.”

“I apologized.”

“You did. You apologized and then stabbed me. You left me for dead Mother. You betrayed me.”

Her mother cast her hand out towards the wall of windows, “And I built you a kingdom to make up for it. I am sorry for what I did to you Regina.” She grabbed Regina’s forearm, squeezing it gently, “And I am warning you. That boy will only build you a grave.”

She yanked her arm away, “That boy loves me.”

“I love you.”

“Then surrender.”

####

Whale collapsed back onto the bed as if he were dead. He wasn’t.

Dead that it.

Henry’s trick with the wand had rendered him unconscious, but given time and and a lack of magic coursing through his brain the mad scientist would return to the land of the living with a headache and a taste in his mouth like burnt bananas.
But he definitely looked dead. He was pasty and pale and the sweat covering his face looked less like sweat and more like grease—like a teenager who hadn’t washed his face in days. His lips were blue but for the scarlet bloom of blood leaking out of the corner of his mouth. He’d probably bitten his tongue. Henry’s victims had a habit of doing that while he rifled through their brains. Or they’d clinch their hands into fists so tight they’d rip the skin off their palms. It was some unconscious effort to hurt themselves enough that they broke away from him.

But they couldn’t actually break away. When Henry was using a fully charged wand he could rip through a person’s mind like a kid tearing into the wrapping paper around a new present—

“What the hell did you do?”

It was his wife, standing in the entrance of the cage and looking at Henry in abject horror. He mutely pocketed the wand and stared back at her. There were no words. They both knew what he had done. The evidence of it was there on Whale’s slack face.

Finally Henry shrugged.

Dorothy braced herself against the frame of the cage’s door. She refused to meet Henry’s eyes, instead staring at the empty space between him and Whale. “I thought you said you were done with this.”

She’d found him with the body of a witch once. Flecks of pink spittle around the dead woman’s mouth, her eyes rolled back in her head, what was left of her brain leaking from her ears. He’d promised her. Never again. He’d sworn it.

“We needed information.”

She tilted her head as though Henry’s words hurt. Still she refused to look at him. “You kicked Mary Margaret out of here for going too far and then you—“

“I do what’s necessary. What the rest of you can’t.” It had always been that way. Henry was their little band’s dark knight. A savior in the shadows. It was only Dorothy’s light that brought him back each time. That pulled him from a precipice above a pit of evil from which there was no return.

“And you said you’d stop.”

“That was before—“

“Before what?” Her eyes snapped to focus on him and fear trickled down his back.

“Before Regina came back.”

“You promised me Henry. Your wife.” She ran her hand over the top of her head. It caught in the knot of braids at the back of her head. Frustration coated her every word, “Every time you do this you grow more like—“

He was quick to interrupt. “My mother?”

“Like Cora,” she said, “And Gold. And yeah. Maybe Regina.”

“Is it so bad? Being like my mom?”

“Look at the drooling idiot with a brain you just ransacked and maybe answer your own damn question.”
“Dorothy…”

The problem with being married to a teleporter who could move virtually anywhere in Storybrooke with a thought was that when she was mad and felt it was time to end the conversation she was just gone. One minute he was looking at his irate wife and the next he was looking at the space she’d only just occupied.

“Real mature,” he shouted to the empty space.

####

To make the request was easy. They were just words. Malleable utterances.

“Then surrender.”

She made the request as though she were asking Henry to pick up his shoes.

Cora was still. Perhaps the request was unexpected for her.

But then— “To who?” One moment her mother had been fighting and the next she exuded only chilly resignation.

It was an act. Regina knew that much. Her mother was playing at defeat. At humility. So she tested her. “Emma.”

Without missing a beat she said, “I’ll surrender to you.” Her mother’s words were uttered as easily as Regina’s had been. “The city is yours,” she continued. “Its people. Its laws. Its…everything is yours.”

“And you Mother?”

She held her hands up as if wrapped in chains. “I am yours.” When Regina could say nothing more—her shock robbing her of her voice—her mother applied more words. Like layers of salve on a wound. “I told you I built this all for you out of love. If my surrender proves it then so be it.”

“And if I were to force you naked through the streets?”

“I forced you into a king’s bed. It is the least I can endure.”

The mention of Leopold cracked something inside of Regina. She felt the burn of tears in her throat. They blurred her vision. She swallowed in an effort to keep command of her emotions.

“This city is my apology.”

Her mother was up to something. That was plain. She wouldn’t simply build all of this and give it up out of love. Love was weakness. An anathema to Cora Mills.

“I heard what you said when you thought I died. This is me proving my love.”

“And what you did to me in the Enchanted Forest.”

“You wanted the world to love you, and for Snow White to be hated. She’s a terrorist now, the people view her daughter with suspicion, and you are their queen.”
It was true…she’d seen that much. But… “you did this for me?”

“I do everything for you.”

####

When Henry made his way upstairs he found one mother sitting at the table, soaking wet, speckled with white paint and feathers, and plowing through a bowl of cereal while his grandparents and Ruby all watched.

From the kitchen.

“What the heck happened to you,” he asked.

Emma looked up, “Gold launched my ass out of a blimp.”

“Zeppelin,” Grams corrected.

“Whatever,” Emma said, “I had to teleport midfall but not before I fell into a flock of birds and have you ever fallen into a flock of birds?”

Henry shook his head. He hadn’t.

“It’s unpleasant.”

“So what you’re covered in is…”

“Why we’re all standing over here,” Gramps said.

Ruby wrinkled her nose. “She smells awful.”

Emma waved her spoon, “Only because you have a super nose.”

Henry gave his mother a wide berth to reach the kitchen, but the scent of metallic…unpleasantness still reached him.

“We can all smell it,” Gramps said. “You think maybe a shower might be a good idea?”

She flicked a feather off her shoulder and in her dad’s direction.

Henry chose to ask the question he had a sinking suspicion no one had asked yet. “Why were you in Cora’s zeppelin?”

“She made the air quotes without dropping her spoon. “Then she decided she wanted to talk to Regina alone.”

“You were on Cora’s zeppelin,” Ruby asked. “Did you see Belle?”

It had been years since any of them had seen her. She’d left the home she’d shared with Ruby to find Gold. “To rescue him,” she’d claimed she’d told Ruby and Grams.

But she’d never come back.

Ruby had valiantly attempted to rescue her and it was why her body was held together with staples and one eye glowed red. After a while they’d all just…given up.
Then Emma nodded. “I did. She’s…I mean I guess she’s alive. Her body at least.”

Flashes of Whale’s memories crept up on Henry’s own and felt compelled to say a truth none of them had none. “But her heart’s not there.”

They all looked at him in surprise.

“How do you know,” Ruby asked.

“Because Whale told me.”

“Henry,” his grandfather crossed his arms, “where’s her heart.”

“Where do you think,” Emma said. “It’s in the bastard’s chest.”

Ruby started to ask, “How—“

“She’s right,” Henry said.

“Great,” Grams interjected. “Wonderful. Belle’s alive and Whale has her heart. But is everyone else in the room forgetting the fact that Regina is now with Cora? They’re teaming up—“

“They’re not teaming up Mom.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I know Regina—“

“You know what she wants you to know—“

“I know her Mom. Not the queen and not the lady you’ve got serious mother/sister issues with. But the woman. Regina. I know her and I trust her and…” She took in their stony stares, “And this would all be much more emphatic if I wasn’t covered in feathers and bird shit huh.”

“At least fifty percent more,” Gramps said and he illustrated the gap with his hands. “Maybe seventy-five.”

“You two are joking.” Grams threw her hands up in frustration. “She could be giving Cora all our secrets but it’s okay because hey! Emma ‘knows’ her.”

Gramps frowned, “What secrets?”

“If I knew I’d be a lot less worried!”

Henry definitely caught the look Emma and David both shared. Clearly neither wanted to be the one to point out the absurdity of Mary Margaret’s concern. Ruby wasn’t going to be any help either. She was staring off into space—no doubt thinking about her ex-boyfriend and the heart of her best friend currently lodged in his chest. Henry started to man up and do it himself but his mom caught his eye and shook her head. A feather wafted out of her hair and floated onto the surface of her cereal.

He forged ahead with another tact. “This could actually be good for us,” he said.

Grams looked at him sourly, “How?”

“It gives us an in.”
“If we can trust her,” Gramps said.

“And a distraction if we can’t,” Henry finished.

“A distraction?”

“Whale told me how they’re keeping the barrier up and I’ve got an idea for bringing it down.”

Emma dropped her spoon into her bowl, “But let’s be clear. Part of your plan is manipulating Regina.”

“She’d be the first to tell you to use the tools you have available.”

“In this case, her.”

He shrugged. Yeah. In this case Regina was a tool Henry had at his disposal. He wasn’t going to pass up the chance to use her.

“She’s the best tool in my toolbox Mom.”

“So what’s the plan,” Gramps asked.

“We get access to Cora’s palace, we find the trigger she’s using to power the barrier, and we destroy it.”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? I was expecting, like some Mission: Impossible junk. A little subterfuge.”

Gramps added, “Emma and I disguising ourselves and sneaking into Cora’s big ball as Count and Countess Von Spiel.”

“And we’d use laser pens.”

“And our clothes would turn into rafts in a pinch.”

“And our bubblegum would actually be explosives.”

“And we’d have a car that shoots shark shaped missiles.”

Emma rounded on her dad, “Shark shaped missiles?!”

“Or sharks with missiles attached to them. I’m not picky.”

She sighed, “Clearly, the sharks have lasers attached to them Dad. Jesus. That’s James Bond rule one.”

“I think we’re getting off track here,” Henry tried to interrupt.

They both ignored him.

“But why lasers? Underwater all they do is make tiny beams of steam. Missiles at least explode things.”

“The lasers are for precision.”

“Guys,” Henry tried again.
“They’re strapped to **sharks**. Lasers strapped to monkeys or bees maybe. But not sharks.”

“If the bees had lasers on them then the swarm would just roast itself.”

“But the monkeys—“

“Well, they are already tool users. That’s just a natural extension—“

Mary Margaret raised her hand, as if petitioning to speak in front of a class, “I’d just like to point out that while you two engaged in your sharks with lasers versus missiles debate **again** Ruby has disappeared.”

“Disa—Shit!”

Emma ported out of the room so fast half the smoke conjured by the spell went with her. The rest of them, being mere mortals, raced down the stairs to the cage and arrived just in time to see Ruby shift from her enormous grotesque wolf form to her fashionably dressed human one.

Blood caked her chin and nose and she used one hand to wipe at the mess on her face. Which only worked to make it all messier. Then she spat on the ground and a chunk of…well…**person** hit the cage floor with a wet splat. The floor, being cage itself, acted like a strainer, letting black and red fluids drip onto the cave floor below.

Emma stood frozen at the cage’s entrance.

She, and all of them watched as Ruby stooped to scoop something out of the viscera that had once been Doctor Whale. She stood back up and held aloft a glowing red heart, streaks of opaque red ichor falling off its surface.

“Do we have a box or something we can put this in?”

####

Regina surveyed the world below. The glow of the city cast a green glow on her skin. She hated the color. Thought it made her look peakish. If she was going to maintain the new Storybrooke she’d have to see to it that the glow the city cast was changed to a more flattering color. A soft pink hue, or even blue would be nice.

Not red though. It looked too demonic and brought to mind her vault. Something else she’d need to see to. She hoped the wards around it had held otherwise **anyone** might have snuck in and claimed her hearts and magical wares.

She needed the hearts. She could use one to restore Belle. Put a random heart in Whale and Belle’s back in her own body. And if the bodies of any of the other hearts survived she could return them. Gifts. A way of beginning her new reign magnanimously.

That was the problem. Last time she’d clutched too tightly and she’d followed a king that was beloved by his misguided people. This time she would be empress or queen. Maybe she’d stick with mayor. And she’d be following **Cora**.

They would rejoice in the streets and she would see to it that they were happy. That the slums were dismantled and their residents freed. She’d clear out Emma’s system of caves. Build proper houses for them. And—
“Surveying your new kingdom your Majesty?”

There was no deference in Rumpel’s tone. Actually, he sounded amused.

She wouldn’t let it affect her. “As a matter of fact I am. Not often one is given the keys to a city.”

“Perhaps,” he came closer, the tip of his cane thumping softly on the rug, “But by my count this is the third time you’ve been elevated.”

“And if I have my way it will be the last.”

“Plan to do things differently?”

“I’ve learned.”

Rumpel joined her at the window and took in the vista before them. “That would ring a little truer if you hadn’t just fallen for your mother’s lies.”

“Falling implies I believe or trust her.”

“Don’t you?”

She brought her hand to her chest dramatically, “Oh absolutely. The first thing I did was put all my faith in the woman who has failed me at every major moment in my life!”

“Be as facetious as you like dearie, but I’m just trying to help.”

“Like you helped Belle?” She turned to face him directly, “Tell me, how little urging did it take for you to rip the heart from her chest?”

The lights of the city cast Rumpel’s face in black shadows and rich green light. The muscles around his eyes twitched and for a moment it was as if he was on a stage, the light meant to externalize the monster hidden behind that human visage. The shadows seemed blackest in his eyes. Eyes so dark as to be depthless. He blinked and they were nearly feral with his wrath.

“Watch yourself,” he said in a low growl, a hint of an accent coloring his threat.

The lamps of another zeppelin flooded the room with pale light and revealed the man again. The one who’d hobbled himself for love and was more mortal that he’d have anyone know.

“Threaten me as often as you like, but my mother has your dagger, and I have her love.” She knew she sounded smug. Sometimes it was okay to sound smug—to be smug.

His teeth flashed in a menacing smile, “Think of me as a wolf. Just because you’ve put a leash on one, doesn’t mean you control it.”

“That bitch of Snow’s is more a threat than you.” She reached out for Rumpel’s tie, and hooked her finger into the knot of it, jerking him close. “You’re a lap dog.”

“As long as your mother has my knife.”

“You think the knife is the only thing keeping you in check? I have Whale, which means I have Belle’s heart. And why the benevolent part of me would see it put back in her chest, the smart part of me thinks dangling it over your head is the better plan.”

“You kept her alive for thirty years. I don’t see you killing her now to prove a point.”
“Try me.”

It was a dangerous game, challenging a god. And Rumpel was a god. He was the Dark One. His myth lurked under children’s beds and in their closets and especially in the shadows outside their homes. He was the Enchanted Forest’s personification of all the dark power of the world.

And she was the witch that had stolen from Hermes and dealt lies to the Monkey King.

She let go of his tie. Her hands ran across the tailored shoulders of his cut, brushing off invisible specks of dust.

“Now,” she said brightly, all menace gone from her voice, “To celebrate my ordination as this city’s new ruler I’ve decided to appropriate my mother’s impending ball. And I’d like for you to extend a few personal invitations for me.”

He scowled, but came to heel all the same.

####

“Excuse me?”

Ruby was covered in blood and over the sink where Mary Margaret was trying to help her scrub some of the gore off. Emma was standing at the table showing Dorothy the contents of the box and filling her in on what she’d missed. David was clutching half a dozen trash bags and wearing his wife’s bright pink rubber gloves and on his way to clean the cage. And Henry was standing in the doorway, barring Gold entrance, and trying to comprehend what he was saying.

“You are cordially invited to the Storybrooke Masquerade Ball,” he said rotely.

“You’re serious?”

Emma stepped between Gold and the box, “Usually you guys try to kill us if we show up.”

“That was before Cora handed the keys of the city over to Regina. Now she’s using the ball to announce her position as the head of Storybrooke,” He sighed. “And she sent me to invite...you.”

Emma came up behind Henry. “Regina’s mayor again?”

“That would require an election,” Dorothy said.

“Exactly,” Gold agreed, “I don’t think she’s selected a more appropriate title yet. But the end result is the same. Regina Mills is in charge of Storybrooke again.”

“And she wants us there...to celebrate?”

“Yes Ms. Swan. Your newly professed love would like you and your son at her side when she announces to the entire city that she’s in charge. I’d be impressed by her political acumen—what with showing a united front, but I suspect she really wants you there for,” his nose wrinkled in disgust, “personal reasons.”

“Professed love,” David said incredulously.

The tips of Emma’s ears turned pink. “Not important now Dad. How do we know this isn’t a trap?”
“I suppose you’ll just have to trust Regina.”

Mary Margaret snorted.

“Regina’s not who I’m worried about.”

“Mom.” Trap or not Regina and Cora’s ball would give them access to the palace. And the trigger. She chewed on her cheek, like she was deliberating. “Fine. Tell her majesty we’ll be there.”

“Nary a fuss. I expected a little resistance.”

“Yeah, but see Dorothy bought Henry a tux.” His mother’s ability to bullshit always kind of amazed Henry. “This gives him an excuse to wear it.”

Gold’s eyes narrowed. “A tux.”

“Impeccably tailored,” Henry added.

“Tell her we’ll be there,” David said. “Emma and Henry and Dorothy and I.”

He bowed, “Of course. I’ll leave you all to your,” he looked at David’s gloves, “spring cleaning.” Dark smoke, somewhere between red and magenta, swirled around Gold’s feet as he began to transport. Then it abruptly stopped as his eyes fell on Ruby. He grinned evilly, “Ruby dear, you’ve still got some Whale on your chin.”

Dorothy was the first one to break the silence after he was gone. “So, I guess we don’t have to worry about hiding the body now?”

Ruby picked at her teeth with her thumbnail. “You think we have anything else to worry about.”

“He saw the heart,” Emma said. “So he’s probably just as happy about it as you are.”

“I’m not——”

Emma’s pegged the werewolf with a look.

“So you all are going to a ball in a few days,” Ruby asked.

“To celebrate my mom’s…coronation or whatever.”

“This is the perfect in to get to the trigger,” David reminded them all. “We can sneak off in the middle of the ball and snatch it before anyone notices.”

“But do we even need to,” Emma asked. “I mean, the whole point of bring the barrier down was stopping Cora. Now we’ve got Regina in charge and——”

“The barrier perpetuates a system of oppression,” Dorothy said. “It’s coming down.”

Henry nodded. His wife was right.

“So we get Regina to bring it down. She’s on our side, remember?”

His poor mom. She used to trust no one, and now she was willing to put the fate of all of Storybrooke in Regina’s hands. It was like she’d forgotten everything Regina had done to them.

“Regina’s on her own side Mom. No one can guarantee she’ll agree with us.”
“So in addition to using her we’re now going to hide our plans from her?”

Mary Margaret dropped the bloody rag she’d been clutching into the sink. “If Regina were in our position she’d do the exact same thing.”

“Okay, but Mom the point is Regina is on our side.”

“Why? Because you suddenly have feelings for her?”

Emma reeled, “Because she’s part of this fucked up family! You and Dad make this big deal about family sticking together and then you tell me to stab her in the back?”

“We’re not stabbing her in the back,” Henry said. “We’re avoiding painful truths to do what needs to be done.”

She looked…betrayed. And sad.

Finally she shook her head. “I thought I raised you better,” she said.

“You weren’t the only one that raised me,” Henry countered.

And that truth seemed to devastate Emma. “That’s right kid. It wasn’t just me. It was the mom you seem ready to throw under a bus too.”

“You can help us or you can stay home Mom, but we’re doing this, and we’re doing it my way.”

“If you go,” Grams said, “I can make you a lovely dress.”

“If I go, it’s to tell Regina I’m sorry her son’s such an asshole.”

Henry grinned. He knew he had to look petulant. And mean. But he had to say it too. “Really? If this plan didn’t involve her she’d be proud as hell.”
Guys, you don’t know it, but the end of this story is just around the corner (okay in like six or seven chapters). I’m REALLY excited for part 3, “Dangerous is the Vexed God,” but I’m almost more excited for the second half of this here present fic. So hold onto your butts y’all.

Her hands snaked around his neck, took hold of his tie, and gave it a quick tug.

“It was crooked,” she whispered in his ear before resting her chin lightly on his shoulder and appraising them both of them in the mirror. “We look good.”

In his tailored tuxedo standing next to his wife in a black and white sequined evening gown Henry had to admit they looked really good. Arnold and Jamie Lee at the end of True Lies good. He puffed up his chest and Dorothy rolled her eyes.

“You’re picturing us in True Lies again aren’t you.”

“We look like spies.”

“No. You look like a man that can dress himself. But I look like Lena Horne’s hotter, younger sister.” She cocked her hip out to the side for emphasis. “Not spies. Classy people.”

He ran his hands over the smooth planes of the front of his jacket. “Sexy, classy people.”

“You’re as bad as your mom.”

Emma had sashayed by earlier, half dressed, and declared that whatever happened it would be okay because she looked fantastic. No one actually believed that Emma looking fantastic would save them from certain death, but she had looked great and if they were going out at least they’d all go out in absolute style.

Dorothy dropped her hands down to Henry’s waist and then clasped them in front of him. “You okay,” she asked, picking up on his shift in mood.

He looked her in the eye via the mirror, “I’m fine.”

She stared back. “You don’t have to be fine with me.”

“Truth?”

She nodded.

“This whole plan makes me nervous.”

“If Regina wants the barrier down this saves her the trouble.”

“And if she wants it up she’ll be furious at the betrayal. Hell she’ll probably be mad anyways. She
used to get pissed if I’d bring an apple from her tree to school for a teacher."

“You’re making your mom sound a little erratic.”

He knew the look he shot his wife could only be characterized as pissy. He shot it anyways. “She’s not erratic. It’s just…the number one person in my mom’s life is **always** my mom.”

“What about when she went to save Emma.”

“I held her ass over the fire and threatened never to speak to her again. Saving Emma was her only choice.”

“She could have changed. She was gone for two years. She made friends. Hell there’s a movie playing right now where she’s the hero.”

She could have changed. He wanted his mom to change. But he’d watched his mother shred a man’s mind with a coin because she felt like it, and he’d seen her gleefully chase Whale down when the plan was to keep her away from him. Regina may have become more heroic, but she was still the woman who poisoned a turnover to keep Henry to herself.

“I hope she did,” he said, “but it’s better for us to operate on the assumption that she hasn’t.”

Operating on the assumption that his mother hadn’t changed and would try to stop them if she thought it necessary meant that their plan was much more…aggressive then he would have liked. Emma would be running interference with Regina, and hopefully Cora. Which left them to deal with guards, Gold, and Cora’s two witch cronies.

“We can deal with Gold or the witches,” David had said, “but both will be a problem.”

It was Dorothy who had come up with the final, and most crucial piece of the plan. He glanced down at his wife’s ruby red slippers. They no longer reflected light. Emma had done something to “supercharge” them and they now exuded an unearthly red glow.

For one trip only Dorothy would, hopefully, be able to travel through the barrier. It involved a lot of magic theory way over Henry’s head and while Dorothy had provided countless graphs, charts and equations that illustrated the concept (something to do with the crack Regina had formed in the barrier when she’d come through) Henry had been able to do little more then ask, “Is it dangerous?”

Dorothy had nodded, “Deadly if I do it wrong, but if I do it right the Wicked Witches are off our backs for good.”

Back in the present he grimaced bitterly, “So I’ve now completely forgotten about being worried about my mom and gone to be worried about the other part of the plan.”

Dorothy clicked her heels together, “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll send a message through to let me know you guys secured them in Oz?”

“Or I’ll just come back through and let you know in person.”

“That’ll work.” Not really. He’d be terrified until she was back there in his arms.

She tapped the end of his nose, “You’re getting a sappy look at your face Mr. Mills. I don’t cotton to sappy looks.” She caught his nose between the knuckles of her fingers and squeezed, “Especially when combined with morose.”
“I just wish we had someone else risking their lives to get the witches out of the way. Like August. He’s disposable.”

“August is made of wood and he has giant ass feet. They’d stretch the hell out of my shoes.”

“Well how about—” She cut him off with a kiss.

“How about you stop worrying and go back to looking pretty in the mirror. We’re gonna be fine Henry.” She spun him around the face the mirror again and hugged him close. “We always are.”

###

A masquerade ball. One where everyone dressed in their finest clothes and donned bejeweled masks and waltzed across a polished parquet floor while a sixteen-piece band played music from worlds that hadn’t even been discovered yet.

She hadn’t been to so ornate a ball since she’d been married to a king.

Waiters weaved through the guests in vibrant burgundy uniforms and held aloft their trays on hands covered in blisteringly white gloves. The guests all moved with a certain kind of weight. The glittering qualities of their clothes were not from sequins but jewels and precious metals. Some wore sleek gowns, others voluminous ones, and others wore uniforms festooned in medals from wars fought in other lands.

Regina detested the voluminous gowns and had avoided them since her wedding, and the wars she’d waged had been waged as a queen, not a soldier. So she wore a slinky dress a shade of blue just past midnight. It was sleeveless and her mother had tsked in disapproval at the sight of her bare arms.

“They must fear and respect you,” she’d admonished.

Regina had been putting on tear drop topaz earrings at the time. The light had reflected off them, bouncing on the mirror. “My bare arms have nothing to do with respect.” The light suddenly moved off the mirror, turning into a ball of orange flame that hovered dangerously near her mother. “That’s why I have magic.”

The show of force had appeased Cora a fraction. Regina now stood on a balcony overlooking the dance floor and watched her mother mingle with the guests. She let her eyes wander over the crowd. Her own guests, the ones she’d purposely invited, had yet to make an appearance as far as she could see.

Where Henry and Emma ashamed? Were they avoiding the ball as a meek form of protest? Perhaps sending Rumpel as errand boy had been too much. She should have gone herself, explained the changes in power to them in person.

If they understood that she was in command at that it would all be different that maybe—

“Regina dear, I’d like you to meet some of your guests.”

Cora had appeared behind her as if by magic. No, it had to be magic. Regina surely would have heard that much taffeta sneaking up behind her. Cora stood between a man and a woman. Their skin was dark as the night sky, their hair as pale as a full moon and their eyes flashed like silver. Their clothing seemed to shift constantly, from the formal wear appropriate for a ball to something intangible that sparkled like stars. The only portion of their costumes that did not shift and dazzle
were the white masks they wore in respect to the ball’s theme.

“This is the—“

Regina curtseyed so deep her knees brushed the floor, “Queen and King of the Unseelie Court.” She rose again, her eye’s meeting the woman’s, “Titania, and her consort, Oberon.”

“You know of us,” Titania’s surprised voice danced pleasantly in Regina’s ears.

“Only a fool would not know of the fairy queens.”

“I am just one.”

“The finest,” Oberon rumbled, his voice like waves crashing against the rocks.

“She’s come to us with a proposition,” Cora said.

The fairy queen’s smile was nearly a grimace, pulling at her perfect face unpleasantly. “Us is so inaccurate a pronoun.” She motioned towards Regina, “I wish to speak to her.”

“About Storybrooke?”

“About—“ She was suddenly vexed.

Cora’s eager face fell.

Rumpel’s ever present smirk turned into a dark grin.

“Sorry, I need to borrow her for a second.” A warm hand slid into Regina’s and tugged her away from the fairy queen.

It was Emma, dragging Regina out onto the dance floor and pulling her close, grinning impishly.

“Care to dance?”

It was as if all those years of being raised in privilege by a prince and his sorceress wife took over. Regina took the proffered hand and let herself be led automatically. But she still managed to say in a surly tone, “You’re an idiot.”

“But I look fantastic.”

Emma had pulled her hair back into a ponytail, and instead of her thick rimmed glasses (which Regina could see peaking out of her breast pocket) she wore a sleek black mask lined in black opals that made her green eyes practically glow. But it was the tailored suit and skinny tie that were the problem. No woman should have had any right to look so good in such attire. Emma took what could have been almost aggressively masculine clothes and made them…unique.

“Isn’t your outfit a little casual?”

Emma shrugged, spun Regina away and then pulled her close again. “I’m a woman at a masquerade ball. Attire is flexible. Besides I’m more dressed than your fairy queen friend.” She moved them between a couple that was eight feet tall and made of stone and one that appeared to have had all the color sapped from their skin and clothes. “Bare nipples are a bit much for a ball don’t you think?”

“She’s the Queen of the Unseelie Court.”

“And her husband’s nipples are distracting.”
They were very erect.

“She’s practically a god Emma. She and her husband can dress however they like. And how do you even know who they are?”

“When Cora kidnapped Henry a while back they spent just about all their time with the woman.” Emma glowered, “Except when Titania’s bare ass showed up on my doorstep to ‘broker’ peace.”

“Titania reached out to you?”

“More like hit on me. And David. And Ruby.”

Regina had no idea the fairy queen was so lecherous. “How did that work out?”

“Told her a deposed princess made of True Love trumps fairy queen and kicked her to the curb—er—cave entrance.”

Regina rolled her eyes. “Nice to see you finally embracing your heritage.”

“Can’t say the same for you,” Emma all but rumbled.

She tugged her close again, this time close enough that Regina’s breasts brushed against Emma’s. It was a more tantalizing feeling than was becoming at the present venue. The shock of arousal raised all the hairs on Regina’s bare arms and the current of magic that seemed to pass between them with every touch sent faintly glowing sparks of magic racing beneath her skin.

She glanced down at Emma’s lips. Swallowed. She needed to think about other things. Things like—her voice cracked “You don’t like that I’m in charge?”

“I don’t like that you’re working with Cora.”

How could Emma not be undone by the heady sensations passing between them?

“Why do you think I invited you? I need someone to make sure I don’t get too…enamored.”

A true, if at the moment ridiculous, statement. One that surprised Emma, her eyes widening behind her mask. “Pardon me, I’m taking a moment to be stunned that you trust someone.”

“Says the wandering bounty hunter who didn’t have a relationship lasting longer than three months before moving to Storybrooke.”

“I always forget that you researched me when I first showed up. Creepy by the way.”

“Oh you did the same.”

“I didn’t have to. Henry was a font of info back then, Ms. Nutella and apples at three a.m. almost every morning.”

God. Nutella. And apples from her tree. And the way the tart, crisp quality of the apple would be balanced by the sweet and fatty mouthfeel of the Nutella and—“

Emma tugged her close again. Her breath warm in her ear, “Are you fantasizing about Nutella?”

“It’s been two years,” she sniffs.

“Cora banned it.”
“You’re lying.”

“No name brands in Cora’s kingdom.”

“She must die,” she said flatly.

“You want your mother dead and you’re up for trusting me. Did that mind meld or whatever happen the other day at the bar scramble your Evil Queen brains?”

“No.” Maybe a little. “It has nothing to do with that, or you for that matter. It was all that traveling with Aurora and Mulan. They’re almost as noble and cloyingly trusting as your mother.”

Emma grimaced, “Maybe used to. In case you haven’t noticed my mom is kind of a bitch now.”

“All that royal privilege has been scrubbed out of her. It’s to be expected.” She peered over Emma’s shoulder, scanning the crowd. “Where is the wholesome one anyways? She used to love a good ball.”

Besides caring for woodland creatures and hypocrisy huge balls were Snow’s greatest love.

“Stayed home. Mary Margaret doesn’t go out much.”

“And your father?”

Emma spun them so they could both face the rather large buffet that featured half a dozen suckling piglets, roasted lamb and enough foie gras to put every person in the room on PETA’s most wanted list for a century. David, his thick hair brushed back, his beard groomed and his disgusting eye patch replaced with a black satin one with a jewel garishly plopped in the middle of it, was hovering over the table, filling a plate half a foot high with delicacies.

In fact the only person with a plate even approaching the height of his was Dorothy. Who was holding a pig down with a giant fork while David tried to wrench its leg off.

“They both said something about how if I’d grown up in real poverty I wouldn’t be skipping the buffet,” Emma said. “We’ve been here fifteen minutes and that’s their second pass.”

Regina’s stomach protested violently. But then, “You’ve been here fifteen minutes?”

Emma nodded, “Getting the lay of the land. Maybe finally stalking you a bit.” Her hand had been resting very politely on Regina’s hip since they’d begun dancing, but it now slipped up to splay across the bare skin of her exposed back. “This dress is kind of insane.”

“When did you get so gay?”

“I wear tank tops and leather jackets Regina. The real question should be when did you finally notice?”

“Is this the part of the conversation where I crudely ask if you’d like to make out?”

“You could,” she said—though she clearly didn’t think that should be the plan. She pressed up against Regina, her thigh sliding between her legs before pushing her away with a thrust of her leg and forcing her back into a dance. “Or this could be the part where I show you how hot dancing can be.”
His moms’ were the main topic of conversation for everyone not dancing around them. A low murmur of gossip seemed to hum around the room. Henry spied them through the crowd. They were dancing. Graceful. Sexy if they’d been anyone but his moms.

Content.

Both women appeared more content and at ease then he’d ever remembered either of them looking, and they did it all while waltzing. He didn’t think Emma had even known the Macarena.

Most of Henry was happy to see his mothers share a moment. To see them both happy. While it wasn’t the method he would have used, the end result of their shared joy was the same. Henry wanted that to be enough.

But it was still Regina Emma was dancing with. The Evil Queen. Two years and countless adventures might have changed her, but he didn’t know to what extent.

And she was still dancing with a woman who’s spent the better part of tens years in a magic cage. One severe emotional trauma and Emma could set the whole ballroom aflame with magic. She and Regina were time bombs. Fragile monstrosities that could not be controlled.

He liked to think it was fine when they’d both been devoted solely to him, but now they seemed to have one another. Which meant more variables. More ways for either to lose grasp of her temper and destroy everything.

He could hear Dorothy in his head telling him his whole train of thought had nothing to do with keeping his moms safe and unexploded and everything to do with infantile jealousy but—

No. No, he was in this ballroom, attending this party, because he had a job to do. All the mess emotional mother issues would have to wait.

A more immediate threat was before him, speaking in low voices with the Queen of the Unseelie Court, her consort, and Gold. Gold was the first to notice Henry, his smile impish and evil.

He and Cora were dressed to match. His coal black suit accented in the same blood red fabric that gave color to Cora’s black lace ball gown. They even wore matching masks. Red with black beading.

Henry self consciously adjusted his own mask and slipped through the crowd, making his way towards his grandmother and her devoted thrall.

“Helluva party,” he said when he was within speaking distance.

“I’m just glad you could attend,” Cora replied without missing a beat. Her voice was bright with false kindness. Henry recognized it. Regina had used the same voice often with Mary Margaret before the curse. And Granny. And Archie. And just about everyone in Storybrooke.

Dorothy claimed Henry used the exact same voice when dealing with Hansel and Gretel. Which—whatever. Those two were assholes.

Cora motioned to the royalty beside her, “Henry you remember the Queen and Consort of the Unseelie Court?”

How could Henry forget? Titania had always had an unnerving fascination with Henry and when
Cora had held him captive for a year and a half Titania or Oberon had appeared often to just...chat.

“He’s grown,” Titania observed.

“Practically a man,” Oberon said to his wife.


“Henry,” Cora said through gritted teeth, “behave.”

He ignored her, “So you two in town because the other fairies finally kicked your butts out, or because you’re a fan of our weather?”

It had been raining for days.

Titania’s silver eyes seemed to stare right through Henry, and while Cora fretted over his lack of manners Gold watched his interaction with Titania with unadulterated glee.

“Your mothers dance well together” Titania said. He still hadn’t gotten a rise out of her. In fact, he’d never gotten a rise out of her. Ever. Even when he was a surly and reckless teenager. He wondered how his voice sounded to Titania and Oberon. Was it like the buzzing of a fly? Did they only acknowledge what Cora and Gold said because they were sorcerers?

“They seem to get along rather well,” Gold teased maliciously. “How’s it feel to no longer be the center of their universes?”

Henry shook his head, “Jesus you people from the Enchanted Forest move fast. One dance and they’re suddenly soul mates?”

“A dance this evening. The other evening it was quite a bit more.” Henry had to fight the urge to punch that knowing grin of Gold’s narrow face.

Cora squirmed, “Gossip is so distasteful dear.”

“Sorry love.”

Gross.

“Though he has a point Henry. You were forever the apple of your mothers’ eye. Now they’re so wrapped up in each other that I have to wonder, have they even looked at you?”

They were ganging up on Henry. Trying to get him bitter over a relationship that might not even be a thing. They wanted his moms apart and they were trying to get him to do the breaking up for them.

He sputtered. Snappy comebacks failing him big time.

His hand curled into a fist, the Charming method of dealing with the problem at the forefront of his mind.

“Enough useless posturing,” Titania said in boredom. “It has been so long since I last spoke with Ms. Swan, and I still have not had words with daughter. Cora, you will arrange the introduction.”

She seemed to float across the floor towards the couple, and nearly everyone in her way wordlessly moved, many bowing or nodding. Oberon followed after her, with Cora trailing a distant third.

Gold came to stand beside Henry.
“Used to you were the one she was fascinated with.”

“Used to you had free will. Stuff changes.”

“A lot of things will change soon I expect. Your mother in charge, Emma and Cora warring to bend her ear. It’ll be up to us to keep the peace.”

“You don’t want peace. You want your dagger back.”

“I want out of Storybrooke, my life intact.”

“Why? So you can look for your son? You know he’s probably dead by now.”

Gold stepped close, “This is me offering you a deal boy.” A bit of an Scottish brogue seeped into his voice. “If you know what’s smart for you you’ll shut your mouth and you’ll help me.”

“Or, I’ll get the dagger and force you to kneel and watch as I slit your throat.”

Gold recoiled. “I thought your grandmother was the dark one in the family.” But the threat had worked, putting Gold on edge and causing his brow to knit with worry.

“You’ve spent more than sixty years playing both sides of my family like chess. You damn well know that anything I do to you is deserved.”

Gold shook his head and then clasped Henry’s shoulder in a deeply unsettling and paternalistic fashion. He leaned close, taking his weight off his cane and putting it on Henry. “One day, when the life is fading from your eyes and the breath slipping from your lungs you’ll remember this moment. And you’ll remember it as the beginning of your death. And that’s not a threat Henry.” He squeezed Henry’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes unflinchingly, “That, my boy, is a promise.”

####

Henry found Dorothy and David leaning against the wall in the hallway outside the ballroom. Dorothy had removed her mask and lengthened the split in her dress for better mobility and David had unbuttoned his suit jacket and was toying with a thin bladed short sword.

“Why does he have a sword?”

Dorothy shook her head.

“Where the heck did you get a sword?”

His grandfather shrugged, slashing the blade expertly through the air. “Found it.” He jerked his thumb in the direction of the door behind him. “One of the guards we’re storing in this closet had it on him.”

“I think he’s in love with it,” Dorothy said.

“It’s short enough I can strap it to my thigh to hide it, but long enough to do some real stabbing,” he thrust it before him in illustration.

Dorothy looked over Henry’s shoulder, “Any problem getting away?”

“Nope. Just some idle chit chat with Gold while we watched the fairy queen talk with my moms.
Though,” he rubbed at the back of his head, “I may have threatened to kill.”

“Everyone does that at some point,” David said, still swishing his sword around, “It’s a right of passage in our family.”

“I was pretty aggressive.”

“You’re doing that thing your grandmother used to do where you transfer all your worry to something stupid because you’re about to do something dangerous. We’re gonna be fine kid.” He made his assurance as he deftly slid the sword into his belt.

“How is gold killing us stupid.”

“For starters he’s still in the ball while we’ve slipped out and are,” he motioned to the empty hall around them, “alone.”

“If we keep standing around here talking we won’t be for long,” Dorothy said. “So let’s maybe go steal us a trigger?”


###

Regina tried to be surreptitious as she searched the room for her son. She’d spied him only once, while he spoke with Gold. His appearance, in a dashing suit with coordinating mask, had had her heart welling with pride. The world could condemn her for a great many things she’d done in her past, but Henry had been one thing she’d done right.

Emma’s hand, possessive on her waist, squeezed tightly to keep her focused. They were having an audience with Titania in the middle of the dance floor. Couples moved gracefully around them, forming a kind of sentient wall. Cora watched the conversation with bald eagerness. There was a degree of sycophancy to her behavior that was unnerving. As unnerving as Rumpel, who stood as far as he could from them without breeching the wall around them. They were deferring to Titania. A woman and man who had both learned sorcery and sold their souls just so they might never beg.

“You didn’t come all the way to Storybrooke just to meet me,” Regina said.

“No,” Titania agreed, “I did not.”

Emma asked, “So why are you here, because it sure as hell isn’t for the weather.”

“Or the sights,” Regina added. “Maybe the food?”

“Or theater,” Emma said. “The Three Little Pigs formed an acting troupe of former barnyard animals that do the best version of Chekov’s Cherry Orchard.”

Regina didn’t miss a beat, despite being surprised Emma even knew who Chekov was. “Personally I prefer their J.B.”

“Well, you would. I’m partial to their Long Day’s Journey Into Night. Josephine Rabbit is magnificent.” Now Emma was just lying. No one, especially not a high school drop out ex-con and ex-bounty hunter, liked Long Day’s Journey Into Night. And Josephine Rabbit had been in that play since 1983 and had yet to make it to Act Four sober.

“Two fools,” Oberon rumbled. “Is that all this town breeds?”
“Mayor Mills here used to brew a mean cider too.”

“My secret was the apples. Imported from the Enchanted Forest.”

“Perfectly tart.”

“And a little sweet.”

“Enough,” Cora cried. “You’ll have to forgive my daughter and her friend. They must be… inebriated.”

“No Mother. Just curious. I know why most of the people in this room are here, but a Queen of a fairy court? Taking in interest in me, Emma and are son? Why are you here?”

“The theater,” Titania purred.

Her husband laughed, his voice booming so loud that a couple made entirely of glass cracked.

####

The floor shook and all three froze.

“The hell was that,” David asked.

“Someone’s mad,” Dorothy said. “Or someone’s happy. Either way I guess your mom is doing good with the distraction thing.”

“Guess so.”

Henry jogged ahead of his wife and grandfather. Inside Whale’s head he’d walked these corridors a dozen times. They were nearly to where Cora kept the trigger that powered the shield.

“Anyone else noticed how all we had to do was walk here,” Dorothy asked.

David drew his sword, “Yeah, it’s a little weird that the only guards we’ve run into are those first two.”

Henry agreed, which was why none of them were surprised when they came to the room holding the trigger and found two very wicked witches waiting for them on the dais where the trigger should have been.

“I was wondering when you’d show up,” the green one said.

“We’ve missed hours of the party waiting for you,” the pale one pouted.

Lilith, in all her verdant splendor, gracefully approached. “Now if you three would kindly turn yourselves in we can get back to the party.”

Leila nodded and stepped down from the dais to join her sister, “It would be very helpful.”

“Where’s the trigger,” Henry asked.

“Far away from here,” Leila said gleefully.
“It wouldn’t be a very good trap if we gave you a chance to succeed,” her sister cackled.

Dorothy’s heel clacked noisily on the marble floor. “Two of them and three of us. Do I do the nuclear option?”

David slashed his sword through the air, “But I haven’t even gotten to try out my new sword yet.”

The green one, Lilith, snapped her fingers and a dozen swords appeared above her head, their sharp tips directed at David. “Good. I was wanting to try out a few of mine too.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter took so many ages. We're hitting the point of no return with this fic and that's a scary place to be if you're a commitment-phobe writer okay?

Rumpel had never been prone to wearing jewelry. The gold shimmer of his skin had, in the Enchanted Forest, been enough for him. In Storybrooke he’d allowed himself a few accoutrements. A tie pin or a chunky ring or two. But none as distracting as the ruby stone he wore on his finger.

Even though Regina’s “audience” was with Titania, and he was standing away from them and watching quietly her eyes kept being drawn to the ring and the flashing red stone that dominated the piece. It seemed to glow in warning, and it felt like Regina was the only one who could see it.

Until Rumpel caught her eye and followed her gaze. Then he scowled and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Beside her Emma’s face became absolute stone.

“What on earth is going on,” Titania asked testily.

Regina had no idea, but her stomach was in her throat when she saw her mother’s serene smile. “Dealing with a pest problem.”

Somewhere, Regina suspected, a trap had been laid.

And she had herself been played.

####

Henry leapt back, pulling his center away from the knife wielding flying monkey.

Because there was always a damn knife wielding flying monkey.

That had been part of the trap. They’d come out of the woodwork like roaches. Only screeching and flapping and wielding knives. Henry punched one, punted another like a soccer ball and used a third to catch a knife lobbed at his head. The monkey turned to mist as it died.

That was the one good thing about them. They were all weird magic clones that left behind no mess when their attempts at lives were cut short.

Up on the dais where the trigger should have been David was fighting six swords at once. Not six sword wielders, but six floating swords. And a witch. Lilith would lob a fireball and then a sword and then swoop in herself and David, despite have no depth perception whatsoever, was nimbly engaging her.

Sometimes Henry forgot his gramps was a hero of frickin’ legend. Then David battered away three
swords, twirled around a fireball and slid his blade straight through Lilith’s heart.

She cackled.

The blow would only slow her down. She and her sister had partaken of Cora’s fabled Peach of Immortality. They wouldn’t live forever, but as long as the magic fruit was in their system they wouldn’t die either. Before the Blue Fairy had been captured she’d done the math and claimed they’d live at least two hundred and twenty-seven years.

Henry really hated that god damned peach.

A monkey soared past him, waving a too large halberd wildly in an effort to remove Henry’s head from his body. He reached up, wrenching the weapon away--sending the primate flying into a wall. Its skull crunched against the stone before it turned to mist.

He shouted his grandfather’s name and then hurled that halberd at him. In a move that had Henry a little envious and in a whole lot of awe, his grandfather shoved Lilith back using the hilt of his sword, leapt up, snatched the halberd from the air, took out two more flying swords and then slashed the tip of the halberd’s blade through Lilith’s neck.

Blood, obscenely red, welled from the wound and she frantically reached for it--her cackles turning to gurgles as blood flooded her throat. She could keep going with a sword in her heart, but two fatal blows would keep her down for a couple of minutes.

Both men turned to help Dorothy deal with Leila.

“This would be a lot easier if I had another house to drop on her,” she snarked as she dodged a gout of fire. The fire instead struck a monkey, who behaved as any creature with nerves would, and screeched and then flew in panicked circles.

Which fanned the flame.

The other monkeys rushed to its aid.

And burst into flames.

Lilith gurgled in rage and Leila watched in mute shock as their little army of winged simians turned to mist one by one.

“See,” David said, watching the macabre scene overhead, “You didn’t even need the nuclear option.”

“You’d think that many burning monkeys would have a smell,” Dorothy said.

“Who...said...needed...the...monkeys?” Lilith gasped. Then she jerked her arm. One of the her swords darted across the room, its tip aimed at Dorothy’s heart. Their magic had rarely been a problem for Dorothy in the past. She was a teleporter. She thought and she was gone.

Except in Cora’s palace. Her shoes didn’t work in the palace, and though Emma had rigged them, they had exactly one trip in them, to Oz. So she tried to dodge the sword, spinning and falling out of the way.

A splash of red against the marble under foot as the sword bore into her bicep. She went to her knees in pain.
Lilith grinned, her teeth red with her own blood.

###

“Mother?” She didn’t mean for her voice to crack. The sound lancing through her ears.

Her mother winced in response. Not because Regina was upset, but because she was showing emotion in the presence of guests.

“Not now dear,” she said, her eyes on Titania.

“No, very much so now. What the hell is going on?”

“Perhaps we should leave,” Titania offered. “Come back when you’re more prepared to talk.”

“She’s just upset,” Cora said in a terrible attempt to placate.

That was enough for Regina. With a thought every door in the ballroom opened with a loud clash. “The party is over. Everyone leave,” she said, “Now.”

“The party is not over,” Cora countered. She gave everyone she made eye contact with an appeasing smile. “Not yet.”

A different tact then. She'd embarass the woman into submission. “Where is Rumpelstiltskin Mother?” She stepped into her mother's space. "Where is my son—“

There was a crack of lightening, a flash of white, and the worst nasuea in Regina’s life. She stumbled and Emma caught her.

“Sorry,” she said.

Regina looked around. They were standing on a windy balcony somewhere in the palace. Regina didn’t even know where—what with having only received the palace a few days ago.

She pressed her hands to Emma’s shoulders. “Did you just…?”

She had. She absolutely had.

She’d teleported them. Used her unholy variation on the spell to rip straight through the many barriers designed to keep anyone but Cora’s select few out.

“I had to get us out of there.”

Regina ripped off her mask, “You teleported us.”

“Yeah.”

“After I asked you not to. After I told you how dangerous it wa—“

“I had to get us out of there,” she repeated.

“I—“

“Look,” she interrupted, “I know you want to yell. I get it.” She carefully removed her masquerade
mask, slipping it into her pocket and taking out her glasses. The moonlight caught the crack in the lens. “But that can wait,” Emma continued. “Because right now I need you to listen.”

“This is about where Henry is.”

“Yeah.”

The awful sensation did not abate. “And Rumpel.”

Emma nodded, “We did something today, that knowing you, you’re going to be offended by, but that Henry—that we felt needed to be done. And I need to know that whatever happens you’ll forgive him.”

She meant, “Henry.”

She nodded again.

“Emma, what did you do?”

####

He tried to charge Lilith. A need to inflict pain upon her every nerve consumed him. His grandfather caught his arm though, drawing him up short and flinging him away from Lilith.

“Calm down,” David demanded.

Lilith laughed.

Leilia tsked. “Temper temper little Henry.”

He jabbed his finger in her direction, “You’re next.”

She feigned horror and laughed as well, her sonorous voice a compliment to her sister’s crackling one. “The little prince makes threats.”

Her sister sat up, the red line across her green throat healing a soft pink. “It’s adorable.”

“What are you going to do little prince?”

“Yes, what’s the plan?”

David tightened his grip on Henry’s bicep.

Henry was having trouble thinking of an exact plan. He just kept seeing the sword hit his wife. Kept seeing her go down. Kept feeling the need to hurt everyone who had hurt her.

His knuckles popped loudly as he curled his hand into a fist.

“I think he just wants to beat us bloody sister.”

“How terribly violent.”

“Well he takes after his mother.”

“Which one? I hear Regina's just as bad as Emma.”
“You don’t know them,” Henry growled.

“No. We just know the trail of bodies.”

“Will you add to it?”

One smiled.

“Will you follow in your mother’s footsteps?”

The other grinned.

“What will you do, Henry?”

Dorothy coughed.

“For one he’s gonna let me fight my own damn battles,” she announced. “And he’s not gonna embark on some sad ass revenge quest because you hit me in the arm with a flying sword.”

She stood back up, her hand pressed to the wound in her arm, and blood leaking out from beneath her fingers. Even injured and annoyed she was breathtaking.

“So how about you two stop egging him on and tell us what you did with the damn trigger already.”

######

“Whale told us how to bring the barrier down. Henry--we--made a plan to do just that.”

“Without telling me.”

“We didn’t know--”

“I want the barrier down. I have...friends on the other side. People who are counting on me. If you’d just asked--”

Emma snorted, “You've been pretty out of pocket the last few days your majesty,” The honorific stung. Emma stuck her hands in her back pockets and leaned in. "Or is it back to madam mayor? Because I really don’t know.”

Regina recoiled, “You don’t trust me?”

“Yes! Damn it.” Emma sighed. "No of course I--I’ve been in your head Regina. Of course I trust you.”

“So why not just tell me?”

"Because. Look I can't." 

Emma was acting absurdly. Acting like...a teenager. Reticent and not at all the woman that had kissed her. That woman had known what she wanted. This woman...this woman was hiding something.

No. She watched Emma look away. No this woman was protecting something. Someone.

She brought one hand to her stomach, protectively covering the part of her that seemed consumed
only by dread. She had to ask. But just looking at Emma she knew the answer. "Henry asked you to keep it from me."

Emma looked up over the frames of her glasses.

"Henry is the one that doesn't trust me."

"It's complicated."

"No. It isn't. I took this city back to give him a better life. But he doesn't trust me to do it. That's very uncomplicated."

"He's an idiot Regina. He's kind of--I mean we're all idiots when we're twenty one." Or married and learning sorcery from an imp.

"He probably needs your help dealing with Rumpel right now. You should go."

"I need you to not be mad."

"Please. Emma—"

She reached for Regina's arm, "I need you to forgive our son."

Regina pulled away, pegging Emma with her most frigid and regal glare. "What I need is to be left alone. Go help Henry."

Perhaps Emma wanted to say more. There was certainly a conflict written on her face. She did seem to briefly struggle with words that could be said. But she didn’t say more. She didn’t again demand Regina forgive or try to offer comfort. She disappeared with a cracking of lightening.

And left Regina to misery, that if she was honest, was of her own making.

####

Gold materialized in the center of the room in a theatrical puff of dark smoke. There was a kind of manic glee on his face. "Look, a party. I’m devastated I wasn’t invited."

"We didn’t want to interrupt your sniveling at Cora’s feet," Leila said.

"It is so adorable," her sister continued.

"Just remember ladies," Gold said through gritted teeth, "the peach that keeps you alive won’t last as long as the magic that makes me immortal."

One shrugged. "We’ve got time."

The other nodded. "At least two hundred years of it."

"Jesus Christ," Dorothy moaned. "Anyone else showing up with some shitty threats? Dracula? Imhotep? Maybe Baba Yaga?"

Emma appeared in the room in a flash of white light that crackled along the walls and raised all the hair on Henry's arms. "Sorry I’m late," she curled on hand into a fist and her knuckles popped
audibly, “Now who am I punching?”

####
The city spread out before her. The lights caught in the darkness and twinkling like jewels. She’d always read that line. Seen it in books that spoke of worlds beyond Storybrooke.

"Lights like jewels."

She’d never understood it. Storybrooke had been small. Quaint. There had been few places to take in the whole city. Few places to observe it from a distance. And even then. Even standing in those place—like the lookout in the forest she’d drag Henry to as a child—the town had never possessed the lights and the complimentary darkness that made a city sparkle.

Not like Cora's Storybrooke. Details of the city were lost to the contrast between light and dark. Lost to the splendor of those twinkling lights.

Henry didn’t trust her.

Damn it.

Emma trusted Henry more that she trusted her.

Damn. It.

Her mother would never trust her.

Regina closed her eyes.

Here she was with a perfect world. One where her mother loved her. One where Henry had seemed to understand her. One where Emma Swan wasn’t an obstacle, but a kind of salvation.

It was all rotten. She was still the outsider, condemned by a past she could not forget. Another imp that could never be trusted.

Her son had organized an assault on the day of her party. Used her. Lied by omission.

She would have sunk to the ground in depression but she was too angry. Her entire body hummed with anger. Her muscles twitched with it. And it was all at odds with the absolute despair.

"She's told you then."

She froze.

Her mother approached quietly, but with infuriating confidence. "She told you Henry's plan?"

"You knew?"

She smiled, "I have my ways."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I didn't want to force you into making an unappealing choice."

"I could have stopped him. If I'd known I would have talked to him. Convinced him to let me handle
things."

Cora’s look was pitying, “No, my dear daughter, I don’t think you could have.”

###

Fighting Gold was like fighting a god. Not that Henry had ever fought a god. He just assumed that was what it was like.

Gold could be anywhere. He was immortal. He was better at everything than everyone else. And he always seemed to enjoy it. There was a dark satisfaction every time they fought. Like it was Gold's only form of pleasure now that he was under Cora's thumb.

When fighting him Henry caught a glimpse of what it was to be a mouse in deadly combat with a cat.

The witches from Oz didn’t make it any easier. One flung Emma into the wall so hard stones shifted from their mooring and tumbled out of the wall, falling far to the street below. Even with her considerable power on their side, they were facing three immortal sorcerers.

And Dorothy was hurt.

Maybe not fatally, but red ichor seemed to cover her whole damn arm, and her skin was ashen from the blood loss.

"I think we should retreat," David grunted, heaving Dorothy up and slinging her good arm over his shoulder.

Dorothy swallowed. Nodded. But watched the two witches from Oz with longing. "If I could get a second to get a hold of both of them--"

"You'd still have to transport all three of you. It could kill you in your current condition," David said.

And Henry was grateful. Because his grandfather could voice the concerns for Dorothy that Henry didn't want to even fathom.

"Yeah," Emma said, cracking into existence right in front of them. "Retreat is definitely in--"

Leila swung a giant glowing club of energy at Emma, catching her in the side and sending her through the cracked wall and out onto the slick street below.

David held up his sword, standing between Dorothy and Henry and three grinning sorcerers. "Retreat. Now."

###

The palace shook. No need to wonder how or why.

"Call Rumpelstiltskin off."

"He's doing you a favor dear."
She thought she heard screams in the distance. Shouts of pain and alarm. Squealing tires on the street below.

The building trembled again.

"You have the power to stop this Mother. The power to be the gracious one. Please."

"Do you know what they came here to do?"

"To destroy the barrier."

"To destroy the trigger," Cora clarified, "Which could very well destroy the town and all of us with it. And for what? For them to have a little more freedom?" She shook her head, "My life isn't worth their peace of mind."

Glass shattered. Mortar crumbled. The battle below their feet waged on.

"The barrier has to come down."

"Because of Henry?"

Because of Killian and Mulan and Aurora. Because-- "It's the right thing to do."

More shouts below. Regina stepped backwards until her hips brushed the banister. She looked over and in the green glow of street lamps she saw could see a battle being waged. The battle. She didn’t need to see faces or any true definition to know one was Emma and one was David and others were Rumpel and Henry and Dorothy.

They were flagging. A true love superhero with no control, a prince and two noble twenty-somethings could only try to fight a god.

A god and—

"Who’s helping Rumpel?"

"Two wicked witches from Oz. Henry hasn’t told you about them?"

Why would he?

"Make them stop."

"I won’t."

"If you kill Henry—"

Cora laughed. Actually laughed. "You’ll what? Throw another tantrum?"

"You do not get to decide my son’s fate Mother."

"That’s where you’re wrong dear." Cora crossed her arms over her chest, "I get to decide everything."

Regina looked back down again. She could see the edges of her mother’s magic and the barrier around the castle that kept anyone from teleporting. The battle being fought was just beyond it.

She pulled herself up onto the balcony’s balustrade.
Cora rolled her eyes and huffed. “What are you doing? Get down.”

“No.”

“You’re being foolish.”

“No, you are,” she shouted back, her voice ringing in her own ears like that of a petulant child. She clung to the rail and leaned across it—closer to her mother. “I’m not that stupid girl in love with a stable boy or that despondent idiot you last saw in the Enchanted Forest. I have power at my command you can barely fathom Cora Mills. And I think that right now it’s time I teach you and all your cronies a very important message.”

Regina had pulled herself close to the balustrade, but then she pushed away.

As falls went, it was almost pleasant.

####

One mother entered the battle in a flash of light. The other arrived in a swirl of smoke. Emma had arrived brandishing swagger and charm like swords. Regina was silent. Moving quickly. Efficiently. Less that swanning Evil Queen and more the most efficient mayor in Maine three years in a row.

She threw one arm out and sent one witch flying flying into a stop sigh, which promptly came to life and wrapped around the woman. The other charged, a dozen conjured swords over her head. Regina put a car between her and the swords. They plunged through the metal, shredding it to ribbons. Ribbons that with a snap became nasty projectiles she quickly sent careening towards the other witch, skewering her like a pin cushion.

Gold stepped back, stunned by Regina’s sudden and violent entrance and she set her dark gaze on him, wrapping him up in a blurred glow of light and raising him aloft.

And it was only then that it became clear how she was doing these sudden feats of power. Emma had fallen to her knees and was barely supporting herself with shaky arms. The locket she wore constantly around her neck didn’t glow or flicker or shine. But it seemed somehow heavier than ever before and Henry thought he saw a red rash spreading across her skin where the locket’s chain pulled on her neck.

“Mom!”

She glanced over her shoulder, “I’ll deal with you later,” she said. Her tone nearly turning Henry back into a ten year old boy who’d ignored his mother’s demands and run headlong into his birthmother’s arms.

Betrayal.

No.

Betrayed.

She curled the fingers of both her hands, as if holding hearts in them, and the skewered Lilith, the bloodied Leila and the incapacitated Gold all rose before her, twitching on invisible threads.

“Right now I have to teach another lesson.”
She tightened her grasp and loosed it just as quickly as three cries of pain were pried from the mouths of three sorcerers.

“It seems all I’m doing is teach lessons. I feel rather like Snow with her little bird the first day of school.”

Another tremor of pain went through the three. Emma moaned.

“But the world, and the people in it must know that I’m not to be controlled, or manipulated or made to watch my son murdered at another’s whim. And these immortals must know—”

Their three bodied bulged. Their veins seemed to open as red fissures cracked across their skin.

“That they’re only as immortal as I allow.”

Gold. Lilith. Leila. Each seemed to be spread. And dissolved. And dismantled. All at once.

Dorothy, who had clutched Henry for support, pushed away and stood up straight. “Oh my God.”

The tip of David’s sword clanged loudly against the pavement as his arm dropped and he watched the tableau in horror.

Emma begged—pleaded, but her voice was stolen by the locket that seemed to siphon all her power away and give it to Regina instead.

Regina grinned.

And for the first time Henry saw what was behind that evil grin.

A grimace.

Her eyes weren’t alight with delight in her power. But with tears she would never shed for victims she could not allow herself to pity.

“Please,” Henry said again. “You can’t do this Mom.”

“They would kill you.”

“I know. But look at Emma.”

She did, and Emma looked at her. And something passed between them that had Regina turning back to the three sorcerers with a snarl and renewed rage.

“Henry is right dear. You must stop.”

It was Cora that ended things. Appearing in a new gown—as if she’d changed just for the occasion. She seemed to glide down the steps leading up to the palace, the lamps overhead casting a sickly green glow on her new purple dress.

When she came to pass him she paused. His grandmother’s eyes washed over him only briefly then she smiled, a private one, just for Henry.

It was a smile that practically goaded him into answering the question Regina wasn’t asking.

Why should she not kill them?
This was clearly Regina’s moment of triumph. Her declaration of self divorced from Storybrooke or Cora or even Henry. This was her choice, so why should she not follow through?

Henry swallowed. Sweat dripped down his back, tickling the space between his shoulder blades.

Regina caught the little moment between him and Cora, and she looked from one to the other, her hands still held up, her victims still twitching in her magic’s grasp.

“Well,” she seemed to ask the two who knew her best.

Henry looked away and listened to his grandmother delight in the story she told. He’d heard it when she’d first captured him and held him prisoner in her palace. He’d listened with horror and awe as she told a tale of a visitor to Wonderland. A man named Oz, who came to Cora’s kingdom and wooed her with talk of other worlds she might conquer. He disappeared after a time, and there in Wonderland, where time was fluid and biology a mere idea, she became pregnant.

With twins.

Who sought their father out and sought to claim the land named for him in his, and Cora’s, stead.

His aunts.

Who had spent their youths trying to murder his wife.

And now were near torn apart by their older sister’s will.

“He knew,” Cora said finally—making her reveal as calamitous as possible as she gestured at Henry.

And Henry could not bare to see his mother’s face, because he knew her well enough. He knew how hurt she’d be by his failure to tell her. He knew how her hold on them would slacken. Her desire to protect him from them would waver.

He knew his mother.

She was like Mary Margaret in so many respect.

For them.

Family was all.

Dorothy breathed loudly beside him. She knew the story—and had said more than once it didn’t matter. “Family is made,” she would say. “Blood can’t matter when it’s is vile as what those two bleed.”

Regina dropped her hands and the three she’d nearly torn apart fell to the ground. She looked from Henry to Dorothy to her mother and back around to the two sisters she’d never known.

“How—"

"Jesus. Is anyone in Storybrooke not related," Emma exclaimed. "You guys do realize you're living a Greek tragedy about one dues ex machina away from Medea or something right?" She stood up straight with a grunt. "I mean here's the thing Regina, you suddenly having sisters is fantastic and totally a reason to second guess what you’re doing. But your sisters are assholes who tried to kill us."

The twins nodded.
"I mean, you two even knew that Regina would not be okay with us dying right? But you did it anyways." She jabbed her finger in Cora’s direction, “And she's known for years that you have sisters and only tells you when you're about to turn them into Bluebeard mist. Christ lady, how much more manipulative can you be?"

She waved at Gold. "You're making that guy look open and honest in retrospect and he orchestrated our lives,” she waved at herself and Regina, “from before we were even frickin' born."

Emma glanced back at Henry, wearing disappointment like a mask. "And don't even get me started on you kid. When we get back to the cave we're tracking down Archie and we're gonna unpack the whole mess your part in this stupid drama is."

"Emma," Lilith said.

"Shut up," Leila finished.

Then they lobbed a magically conjured axe at her head.

####

Regina only barely caught the axe. In fact she caught it as the blade was cutting the skin. It was a thin red line and had it appeared on any other part of Emma's body it would have been little more horrific than a paper-cut.

But striking at the hairline it immediately welled up with blood that streaked down her face. Regina whirled the axe back around, and it struck the new green sister in the chest with a satisfying thunk. Her other sister wailed dramatically and threw another conjured sword. Dorothy caught that one as she dashed towards the sisters. She twirled it around and buried it to the hilt in the pale one's stomach and pushed her back into her sister, who she took by the shoulder.

Than she looked at Regina. And at Henry. And she flashed a grin. "See y'all on the other side,” she said before disappearing with a pop and taking Regina's new found sisters with her.

It happened so quickly that no one spoke. The sound of the city beyond their little battleground was deafening. Cars and zeppelins and even people.

Then Henry choked back a sob.

And Cora looked away.

And David sheathed his sword. The battle officially over.

"What's just happened," Regina asked.

"Dorothy may have just killed herself to stop those two for good," Emma explained.

Regina looked to her mother, but Cora was already turning away, her interest in the affair apparently gone.

“If Dorothy survived, you’ll have to tell her thanks for me,” Rumpel said. “If she didn’t I’ll be sure to send you a fruit basket Henry.”

Henry didn’t hear the remark. His eyes were still focused on the spot that Dorothy had last occupied.
It was David who stalked menacingly towards Rumpel, daring him to say anything more.

“Rumpelstiltskin, with me please,” Cora called without looking back.

His nasty grin wavered, but he turned and followed his mistress.

Emma called Henry’s name gently and Regina watched her son grow more rigid. She could see Emma in Henry then. And herself. Could soon the wound that Dorothy’s sudden departure crafted.

So it was she that reached out to stop Emma from going to comfort him.

Instead she laced her fingers with Emma’s and kept her close and together they watched Henry run.

“We should go after him,” Emma said.

“He needs time,” David said.

And besides. With the barrier still up Henry couldn’t run far.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

This is what I've been calling the "come to Jesus" chapter in my notes since way back in Destiny is the Rabbit Hole. So feedback, good, bad or indifferent, would be much appreciated. And questions can be directed to ye old Tumblr (maggiemerc.tumblr.com) because I don’t doubt some of you will be confused or mad or something.

Emma tried to follow Henry again, her hand falling out of Regina's and her eyes on their son's fading form. "We need to be with the kid," she said. "Make sure he's okay."

Regina agreed. Someone did need to check on him. But he also needed time, and judging by Emma's poor pallor and the fine coat of sweat covering her skin she needed rest.

She glanced at David, relieved to see he seemed to agree. Wordlessly they each took one of Emma's arms and Regina teleported them back to their dank system of caves.

“What’s wrong with her,” David asked.

“Regina used me like a battery for her little show back there,” Emma said—her voice hoarse. “Would have been nice if you’d asked by the way.”

“Someone doing something for a lauded ‘greater good’ without getting consent first? I wonder where I got that idea?"

Emma grimaced. “I omitted parts of a plan to you. I didn’t use you like the Energizer bunny.”

“You omitted the entire plan. The difference here is that my plan worked whereas your plan nearly got you all killed.”

“I’m missing something,” David said.

“Regina is trying to be passive aggressive and just sounding like a jerk.”

“Oh,” he said, before nodding in understanding.

Regina dropped Emma’s arm like it was on fire and David had to scramble to support them both. “Passive aggressive,” she said incredulously. "You lied to me, invaded my palace, failed to trust me and I’m trying to politely show how hurt I am in a mature and adult fashion and I’m being passive aggressive?"

Emma yanked her other arm out of her dad’s grasp and stepped into Regina’s space. “Yeah your majesty you are.”

A few years with Aurora the infant princess had changed Regina. To the point that she wanted nothing more than to just pinch the living hell out of Emma. Which was perhaps better than the urge she might have had three years ago. That would have involved a punch. A nice right jab right into Emma’s nose that would have had her splurting blood everywhere and Regina needing to wrap her
knuckles in a bandage.

Instead Regina took a tactic from the books of Killian Jones and Princess Aurora and…she kissed David. A good smacking kiss. Loud. Hot. Her tongue in his mouth and her hand yanking at his hair. She moaned into the kiss and tried to ignore the way David’s beard scratched her chin and cheeks.

Then she stepped back, resisted the urge to wipe the spit off her lips, and she crossed her arms. Her lips felt bruised, and probably were judging by the way David’s were plumper and redder than they’d been a few moments before.

She smirked.

“How’s that for passive aggressive?”

“Did you just—“ David asked in a daze.

Emma’s mouth had dropped open and she tried to close it but failed.

She reached over and shut it with a single finger. “Careful dear, you’ll catch flies.”

David smacked his forehead like he’d just realized he’d left the stove on. “I kissed my mother in law.”

“Call me that again and you lose the other eye Charming.”

Emma threw Regina’s hand away. “Did you just kiss my dad?!”

She motioned to Emma, “See that’s what I was going for.” She then waved at Charming, whose single eye was bulging in alarm, “And that’s how you do passive aggressive.”

He paled. “I feel dirty.”

She sucked on her teeth. “As do I. Did dentistry die out with freewill in this town?”

“My dad!”

“A lesson in passive aggressiveness dear. It had to be done.”

Emma rolled her eyes so hard Regina was half sure they were about to pop out of her head. Charming, meanwhile, was shaking his head. “I don’t even want to,” he motioned at the two of them. “I have to—go. Now.” He quickly shielded his eye to avoid looking at both of them and fled the room.

“He didn’t even wipe his mouth,” Regina said.

Emma watched her father flee, but far from angry she now seemed amused.

“I’m trying to stay mad but I think you just made a man out of David Nolan.”

This was probably true, because she highly doubted Snow White was anywhere near as good a kisser. But the kissing had all been in aid of getting a rise out of Emma who was being far too non-plussed about it now that her father was out of earshot.

In annoyance, and not eager to listen to Emma make cracks about her kissing her father, Regina snapped her fingers and her wasted evening gown was replaced with a very neat mayoral suit. Spinning on her new and reasonable heel, she started walking the other way.
Emma noticed at the last moment and caught her arm. “Hey. Where are you—“

“I’m going after Henry, to make sure he’s okay.”

“Alone.”

“Yes Emma, alone. You can stay here and trade kissing stories with your—“

“Stop.” She squeezed Regina’s arm. “Seriously. Okay?”

So Regina swallowed. Took a deep breath. She stopped. “You all lied to me this evening,” she said. “You forced me to choose sides.” She leaned in, “You used me.”

Emma had the grace enough to look chastised. “I know.”

“And you didn’t trust me.”

“I trust you,” Emma said. “Henry…”

“Is your son. If you wanted him to trust me you could have made it happen.”

“He’s our son Regina, and we both know he doesn’t do anything unless he wants to.”

“You’re trying to make this all more palatable, but Henry wasn’t the only one at fault today. You could have told me—”

“Yeah. I could have told you, but maybe you’re missing something here your majesty. You two have me stuck between you like divorced parents. And you’re both begging me to say shit that I can’t say without hurting the other.”

“Telling me would have hardly hurt—“

Emma interrupted her, “I’m trying to be the peacemaker here Regina. I’m trying to stay like Switzerland between my son and the woman I—“

She caught herself. Her eyes widened in alarm. It was that little betrayal of self that drew Regina in—duking her head to better look Emma in the eye. “You what?”

Emma lowered her voice, but did look away. “You were in my head. You know.”

Regina did know, and the way Emma seemed to understand her—the way she looked at her so plaintively—was disturbing. The woman holding her arm wasn’t the woman she’d raced through the Enchanted Forest with. This was Emma Swan tamed. And committed. Matured. Earnest. Open.

“I lo—“

Regina covered Emma’s hand with her own, halting her confession. “Don’t.” She squeezed. “If we go making declarations I’d rather it not be at a time like this. Not when I’m furious, not when Henry’s missing. Not—“

“When you’ve made out with his grandfather?”

Regina looked away, but didn’t disagree. She took a deep breath. “I’ve been careless in the past.” She’d given passion and affection freely. Loved completely. Been undone by its loss absolutely. “I
can’t afford that now.”

“Yeah well I’ve spent the past ten years of my life barely alive. So I can’t afford to sit around Regina. How I feel? This isn’t just something that sprung up on me. What I feel—“

Regina shut her up with a kiss. It was a useful tool. One she’d employed many times. But rarely did the person acquiesce so easily. Emma’s grip loosened. She sighed against Regina’s lips and she let herself be kissed.

Regina pulled away and saw that Emma's eyes were closed, her lips parted and wet.

"I know what you feel," she confessed. "You don't need to say it."

She hoped too that Emma would know—would understand—just how terrified Regina would be to hear it.

And Emma gave her a crooked smile instead of admonishments or truths that could never be hidden again.

"I know."

She pressed something into Regina’s hand then, and she looked down, surprised at the warmth of the locket. Emma had removed it and while Regina remembered it being blisteringly hot to the touch it was now only warmed by the heat of Emma’s body. Emma curled Regina’s hand into a fist around it and pressed her lips to Regina’s temple like an overly familiar lover.

“Now go find our son.”

####

Regina had always been a very busy mom. Every day Henry would watch her balance motherhood and work as the mayor. He’d sit in her home office and study her as she hunched over her desk, efficiently working through paperwork. He and a book would join her for town hall meetings and appointments with Ursula over at Waterworks.

As a little kid it had sometimes been exhausting to watch the special face his mom wore for the world. Because it was a cold face, with eyes like onyx in the dimly lit meeting rooms. Her smiles were always tight. Her posture rigid. And everything seemed a little…false.

At home she’d be warm. Caring. But as Henry grew older he started to notice the ways she was still that distant mayor. How her eyes crinkled a fraction too much when she smiled or how they’d watch him dangerously when she thought he wasn’t looking.

Henry grew older and saw that neither the woman at home or the one at town hall was the real woman. They were the masks she wore for all to see. It had worn on him to witness.

And in the end. It had broken him.

But there were times. There were times when he’d see a mother who could genuinely love. Not the stony monolith lurking in every corner of their shared home. But the woman she must have once been or could maybe one day be.

His mom.
The mask would slip and the woman who loved him most would appear. And it was always in those shared moments on a bluff overlooking the town. She’d carefully remove those other masks. The mayor one, and the one he’d come to know as the Evil Queen, and she would smile, and love, and for a little time she’d be happy. They’d survey Storybrooke and not be a guard and her ward, but a mother and her child.

When he thought he’d lost her ten years earlier he’d come to the bluff often. He’d press his back against the tree and his head between his legs and he’d cry and miss his mom desperately. He’d blame himself for guilting her into the portal. And he’d blame Cora. Or Gold. Even Emma.

The bluff stopped being about a place to remind him of his mother and it became a place where Henry could mire in his own misery. Focus on his own regrets.

With his wife gone, and possibly even dead, Henry found himself sitting on the bluff. It was one of the few places in Storybrooke that hadn’t been transformed by Cora’s reign. He’d told her it had been a favorite spot for Regina, so she’d posted a large fence around it and used imported help to maintain its grounds.

The dirt was soft and moist and soaked through Henry’s pants, and the air was heavy with humidity that dampened his hair. But…but of the whole town it still smelled like home and so he sat beneath a tree, surveyed the glass and chrome and brass city Cora had built, and he missed his wife, and his town, and even the mother who’d raised him in her image.

####

The locket took Regina to the outskirts of the city. Tucked between a pristine golf course and some sycophant’s castle was an untouched piece of forest wrapped in a high and ornate fence.

Regina shrank herself down to fit through it, but there was a smudge of mud on the wrought iron flowers curling out of the top of the fence that assured her Henry had taken the exact same path, only climbing over rather than sneaking under.

She found him sitting beneath a tree, digging into the soft earth with a stick and looking sullen, with his hair in his face and his tuxedo in disarray. He looked up at her, his eyes, a hazel somewhere between one mother’s green and the other’s brown, washed over her.

And dismissed her.

It was when she came closer to him that she realized where he sat.

Where they were.

A bluff she thought she’d been the only one to give any meaning to.

Through the proscenium formed by the branches and gnarled roots of the trees she could see her mother’s city. Blimps lazily floated through the sky and bright lights from some movie theater twirled and twisted against the clouds. The glow of the city was like stage lights, and she and Henry were the domestic drama.

“I’m sorry about Dorothy.”

He said nothing.
“She could still be alive.”

As quiet and sullen as ever.

“We’ll find her Henry. I promise you.”

He nodded finally, but didn’t agree or disagree. His skin was sallow in the sickly light cast by the city, the hollows beneath his eyes filled with dark shadows. He looked ill. Like when he was six and had that terrible cold that kept him in bed for three days and made his voice scratchy and harsh.

There had always been two ways of dealing with Henry, on his level, or towering above it. She’d shied from the former—wary of giving him too much power in their relationship, and always hated the latter—reminded of her own relationship with Cora.

And this Henry wasn’t the son who’d laid sick in his bed, or given her a lock of his hair for the locket and smiled happily when she’d praised him. This was the man who wore his anger and abandonment issues like a cloak.

She could not tower above who Henry had become.

And she would not kneel.

So she sat beside him. She ignored the wet ground and the air’s chill or even the way others might judge her for dirtying her suit. She put her hand on his knee. It was all sinew and hard bone beneath her finger. Not the softness of the child he’d been.

“We used to come here when you were a child,” she said conversationally. “Remember?”

He nodded, his grimace threatening to turn into a smile. “The Hamm brothers always hated how I’d get to leave early sometimes and go on a picnic with my mom. You’d get those cool candy cookies.”

“I’d always have to leave work early to pick them up.”

“You didn’t make them?”

“Slave over the stove half the day? No. Granny made them.”

He shook his head, the news filed away. “You always picked all the M&Ms off yours,” he continued. “and gave them to me.”

She smiled and leaned against him, laying her head on his shoulder, “We’d just sit out here in the shade and make up stories.”

“Like how Archie was out to prove the guy at the cannery was secretly a merman.”

“Right. Or the one about Granny’s sordid affairs with Gold and the florist.”

“Yeah. Gold was madly in love with her but couldn’t tell her because she seemed so happy pouring coffee for Moe French.”

“But Moe was head over heels for Gold.”

Henry laughed. Then caught himself. His brow furrowed. “But really Gold was Rumpelstiltskin and he abducted Moe’s daughter and held her prisoner and she Stockholmed herself into love with him and Granny’s a widow who’s vowed never to marry again.” He was suddenly rigid beneath her cheek so she sat up and he glanced at her, the whites of his eyes stark in the darkness—his gaze
suddenly piercing. “And you knew all that.”

She tried to be cheery despite the note of accusation in his voice. “It was fun wasn’t it?”

“At the time maybe, when I was older out here was the only time you felt like my mom, but in retrospect…”

In retrospect he was disgusted because she was the Queen, and they’d sat out here making stories for those worthless people like they were dolls in a playhouse and that disgusted him. Regina sighed. “I came out here to help you Henry, not suffer accusations.”

“It’s not an accusation Mom. That means you might be innocent, but you aren’t. You knew.”

“I did. I also knew Snow White was your teacher, Red Riding Hood your waitress, and Dr. Frankenstein your doctor. Should I have leaned over and told you while he was giving you a shot in the rear?”

Henry sighed, “No. That’s not—that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what are you saying Henry,” because I like to think we’re both adult enough to move past things well in our pasts.

He threw the stick he’d been playing with out into the trees. “I don’t even know. That’s the problem you know? I had shit figure out. My life was figured out and where you used to be a big problem for me you were this…hero.” He grinned like a predatory jackal. “My mom the martyr. And that was fucking tidy Mom. But now you’re alive and all the shit I told myself I’d never have to deal with needs to be dealt with.”

“It doesn’t—“

“It does! Because right now I should be crying because my wife could be dead and I won’t know until the barrier is gone or she’s back here and all I can think about is how we used to sit up here telling stories and every time you opened your mouth you were playing a part, telling your lies, and I was sitting here being your idiot audience.”

“You were a child. I also lied about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny but I don’t see you wanting to string me up for that!”

“It’s not about the curse—“

“Isn’t it?”

“It’s about how instead of a mom, I had you, pretending.”

Pretending.

Pretending?

That day Rumpelstiltskin—Gold—called her and said the child was coming and a woman in a leather jacket with a savvy snarl was allowed to pass through the barrier and she came to Regina’s doorstep with a bundle in her arms and knocked on her door. Regina opened it and she didn’t see the woman, or Gold and his cane lurking near the topiaries.

She saw the squirming child. Wrapped up so tight he looked like a worm, with a face an angry red from crying and eyebrows surprisingly blond, like flecks of gold painted on.
How could that first day—that first moment—have been pretending?

“You think I never loved you?”

“I think you loved me as much as your curse would let you.” An errant tear, but probably sweat, tracked down his face.

“What—"

“I had the book Mom. I know the cost of that curse. I know who I’m named after.” He turned suddenly, piercing her with a stare too aware to be comfortable. “And I know about the void that can never be filled.”

Maleficent’s words. Parroted back decades later.

The destruction of love was the price exacted by the curse. And the void where love had once presided was its lingering tax.

Regina had told herself she had changed in those early days after the curse first began—that the void was one of circumstances and not the curse’s making. But here was her son, the man who knew her best, revealing the truth.

“You knew,” her voice cracked.

“Why do you think I was so miserable? I figured out, you know? That something was wrong before I could put it in words. And then Grams gave me that book and I had it all laid out. Explained.” His mouth ticked up in a sad smile, “You were Snow White and some evil queen took your happy ending. It was why you always felt…off except for when we were here. But I kept reading, and watching and one day I realized that you didn’t have your happy ending stolen. You’d sacrificed it to steal everyone elses.”

Henry had known. Her hand covered her opened mouth. He’d known. At least as long as he’d had the book he’d known what she was. What she was incapable of. She swallowed. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

He laughed bitterly, “Don’t—you spent a year of my life trying to convince me I was insane. You honestly think it would have been different if I’d told you I knew?”

“Yes!”

“Are you delusional? A year of my life Mom. You nearly had me committed!!”

“But once I knew—once you knew. I was better. You saw that right? When we knew the same thing I was better.” She’d offered him the world then. The world and knowledge no other boy could posses.

“And to get to that point you had to nearly kill me trying to put Emma in a coma.”

That stupid apple. And Emma’s wretched quest—“Emma could have been insane Henry. She was your birthmother and as far as I know she moved to Storybrooke to stalk you. I did what was necessary to protect my son.”

“You did what was necessary to protect yourself. Let’s not pretend it was for any other reason. Everything you did after Emma came was about you—“
“That’s not true.”

“Making sure I heard she thought I was nuts? Mary Margaret’s murder trial? Sydney.”

“Stop.”

“Graham.”

It was Henry’s voice that cracked.

They didn’t say his name. Ever. After he died she and Henry never said his name. He had spent holidays with them. He’d picked Henry up from school. Stayed with him at night when she worked late. He’d been as close to a father as Henry would ever come. As close to a husband as Regina thought she’d ever be. And—

Henry said quietly, “The rest of them don’t know—or don’t want to, but it wasn’t hard to figure out. The curse was breaking him. So you broke him first.”

She remembered his heart. And the white hot rage. It was the first emotion without control she’d felt in years. There had been nothing cool or calculating. She hadn’t been Storybrooke’s stony mayor. She’d crushed his heart in her hand out of love.

Because of Emma. Because she’d come and their world was changing and there were cracks in the cold armor the curse had bestowed upon Regina.

“If he’d lived they would have taken you away—“

“Don’t—“

“If he’d lived,” her voice rose, “he and Emma would have carted you off and you think I was unpleasant, well how about life with an orphan and a man raised by wolves. I was protecting—“

“You weren’t—“

“Us. Not you Henry. Us. Our family. I was doing what was right. You want to talk about betrayal? The how about tonight? How about you? “She leaned in close, “You were going to let me murder my own sisters. That’s betrayal.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” He didn’t look away. “If it came down to me or them I was going to let you kill them and tell you later, but that’s because we both know how you feel about family. It’s everything right? And two blood related sisters trump an adopted son any day.”

“Yes, they are family. And I suppose you missed this particular lesson, as hard as that’s to believe with the Charmings polluting your brain, but you don’t give up on family.”

He stood up and tried to move away. Regina quickly stood too. Calling out, “Family is all we have.”

“Family is all you have.” He rounded, his eyes bright, “Don’t think I haven’t noticed that the people getting second chances aren’t your son, or the woman you helped raise, or that woman you think you love, but the sisters who tried to murder me and the mother who fucked you up.” He loomed over Regina, sweat in his eyes and on his lips. “Cora destroyed you Mom, but she called and you came running back.”

She’d begged for forgiveness, and Regina had felt the need to acquiesce. She’s felt known of the disgust that dripped off her son’s words. Dark and horrid.
No, she shook her head. “I’m not the only one putting family first.” He threw up his hands and turned away again. Regina gave chase. “No. No if you want to say this then you get to listen too.” She grabbed his arm and spun him around. His eyes flared in anger and Regina squeezed. “In case you forgot your great grandfather forced me into marriage and into being Snow’s mother and she knew. She watched me sit around in misery for ten years because her father was happy and then had the gall to blame me when I got justice by the only means possible.”

He yanked his arm away. “I don’t care about Mary Margaret Mom. Or David or Cora or even that asshole Grams calls a dad.”

He was slipping away. Twisting away from logic to make his hurtful point, so Regina through out the card she rarely used and ignored the bad taste it put in her mouth to use it.

“Then what about Emma? She abandoned you Henry. She had a choice and she didn’t want you—“

“You did,” he shouted—cried. “You wanted me Mom.”

“That’s—“

“You wanted me. And you loved me and you failed me. You think I care about what they did—the idiot grandparents and the woman who gave me up. But it doesn’t matter, because they’re not my mom. You are. And you lied.”

All these years she’d assumed he’d hated her because she wasn’t the real mother—but it was so far from true. She couldn’t sob, or truly cry, but she shed tears all the same. “You put me on a pedestal and I’m going to fall. No one can stay up there.”

His eyes were rimmed with red. Blotches of it spread across his cheeks too. “You lied. You took the world and you kicked it out from under me and then had to gall to say it was still there. But the worst part is I forgive you. Ten years thinking you were my mom when you were really just an evil queen wasting her time and I forgive you, because nobody wanted me, and you did. Nobody loved me, and you did.”

“I do.” She amended.

But Henry wasn’t hearing it. He was shaking his head and biting his lip and vibrating with the rage of the impuissant. “We’re just a circle Mom.” He was close to listless. His voice gravel. “You and me and Cora, we’re going around and around fucking each other up and forgiving each other because we’re family. And it doesn’t matter who gets hurt. Dorothy or Mary Margaret or Emma. We just keep on going.”

She held her hands up like approaching some feral dog. She was soft. Careful. Henry was unleashing such hatred and hurt and Regina could do nothing but say, “You’re not me Henry. I’m not Cora.”

He rubbed angrily at his eyes, fighting the tears and the redness.

“Then why do I understand why you forgive her?”

All this time in Cora’s Storybrooke she’d assumed her Henry had been lost. That the boy had grown away and into a man. But there he was. That child she’d taken in her arms and loved as well as she could.

“But because you’re a good person,” she said with confidence. The evil were not so ruined by
perceptions of themselves.

“I’m evil. **We’re** evil. We’re using everyone around us and killing the people we love and—“

She grabbed him before he could say another word. Wrapped her arms around him and forced his head onto her shoulder and she said nothing. She couldn’t tell him it wasn’t true, and she would not lie again. She could only hold him and listen as he wept.

“She’s gone,” he said. Again and again.

Daniel loomed in her mind. Daniel. Dorothy. Lovers lost to a family feud. She held her son close and had she had faith in more than love and hate she might have prayed.

###

It was ironic, Henry thought, his hand in his mother’s as they walked home, he lost his wife that night.

But he finally got his mom back.

###

The caves the Charming family called home were dark when they returned. And so quiet that she could hear David and Snow snoring loudly. Regina led Henry to his own room, where bits of his life with his wife lay casually about. She’d thought of looking for somewhere else to put him, but Henry walked like a zombie to his side of the bed and clutched his wife’s pillow. So Regina lay on the covers beside him and rubbed his back until he finally fell into a fitful sleep.

The exhaustion—the years—were painted on him in the lamplight. The boy she’d raised had become the leader of this little resistance, and he’d sold his soul in the process. She would fix it. Henry. Cora. Even Emma. She’d fix them and find Dorothy and there wouldn’t be another night like that one. The cycle Henry dreaded would be broken.

Her feet, aching in her tight shoes, led her down the path to Emma. Not to the cage she so often called home, but an actual room. Barren but for the bed and a chair. Emma was cross-legged in the chair, dressed in a tattered white shirt and tiny blue shorts. Her glasses were perched on her nose and she looked over the top of the frames. For a moment she wasn’t Henry’s mom or Snow’s daughter.

She was what she **could** be.

Warmth blossomed inside of Regina at the sight.

“Did you find him?”

Hair had fallen out of her pony tail to softly frame her face and she was using a candle for light, its flickering glow rendering her in soft shades of light and shadow.

Regina nodded.

Emma stood, the book she’d been reading thumping lightly onto the chair. “He’s okay? Safe? Not crazy—“
“He’s fine.”

She came closer. “What about you?”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?” Her eyebrow was raised. Her suspicion apparent.

“Emma.”

She cocked her head to the side. Oblivious to all the emotions clamoring inside of Regina. Oblivious to the exhaustion. The misery. The affection. The hope. The—

“Shut up,” she breathed scant moments before her lips were on Emma’s and her hands were under her shirt and splayed across her waist. “Just shut up.”

And Emma Swan, this victim of a dystopic world, obliged.
There was a hand between her thighs and it wasn't her own, and Sinbad was a parrot in another world and Circe and those wretched Sirens were both things of the past. So yes, for a moment Regina was alarmed. Then a curtain of blond hair was obscuring her vision as wet lips tracked a path across her breasts and she involuntarily rose up—the fingers of that wicked hand curling up inside of her.

She gasped.

"I was hoping for something more vocal."

The hand between her thighs twisted and teeth pulled at her nipple and…

And Regina got very vocal.

"Better."

“You’re up early,” she gasped again. Her hands scrambled for purchase and settled on grabbing Emma’s face. Pulling her up for a kiss, their naked bodies pressed together, the weight of Emma’s form on top of her keeping her from surging right off the bed. “Don’t stop,” she breathed into Emma’s ear.

Emma’s hand did not stop. Her maddening thumb rubbed a rhythm that left Regina panting. Her arms stretched out across the bed, grasping for purchase and her hips rose, her body seeking more of the fantastic ecstasy the stroke of Emma’s fingers provided.

And as she moaned Emma’s name and crested a rise she’d sorely missed Emma suddenly withdrew and sat back on her heels.

“Why,” she breathed in frustration, “did you stop?”

“Because ‘princess,’ you’re being a real princess.”

Regina blew the hair out of her face and propped herself up with her elbows. “Excuse me?”

“Five times,” Emma said, holding up her hand, four fingers and thumb slick with Regina’s enjoyment. “Five times since last night and all you’ve done is—“

Regina raised an eyebrow.

“Five to two Regina. I’m just looking for a little give on your part.”

“Are you…withholding sex to procure more orgasms Ms. Swan?”

“Five,” her hand still held up, “to two,” she made bunny ears with her other hand. “I’m just saying if you really cared you’d—“
“Even the score?”

Regina sat all the way up and reached for Emma’s knees, forcing her to straddle her. She still had to look up at Emma, and while she’d never consider herself a particular affectionate or sentimental person she had to admit that Emma looked…gorgeous. Naked, sticky with sweat, and hair mussed by sex, and Emma Swan was like a modern interpretation of Venus (a sentiment that might have led to Regina’s smiting if she ever saw the actual Venus again).

She caught Emma’s lips with her own and carefully massaged her thighs until Emma relaxed, her weight settling onto Regina.

“I’ll admit,” she sighed, her hand working between their bodies, “that I’m not entirely accustomed to giving rather than receiving.” Emma’s whole frame jumped at Regina’s touch. “But I’m a quick study,” she said with a thrust.

Emma’s fingers dug into Regina’s shoulders and she thought she heard an expletive related to Jesus Christ. Sex for Regina was often a tool. A method of escape, or a method of control. That wasn’t the case for Emma, who’d taken her to bed the night before and undressed her slowly and kindly, almost graciously. She’d been tender and she’d carefully asked if she’d ever had sex with a woman and then she’d helped her forget the awful night preceding their time together.

For Emma Swan sex was pleasure, but also emotional connection. As Regina’s mind wandered Emma seemed to sense it and caught her by the chin. “Hey,” she breathed with an incandescent smile.

And that smile was enough. The way it lit up Emma’s entire face and exposed all the woman usually hidden behind bravado and smirks. At the last moment it seemed to falter. Emma’s insecurities peaked through as it fell.

And Regina was compelled to kiss her again. To stop the growing discord in Emma’s eyes

So she did kiss her again and twisted them so she was on top and Emma was beneath her and she could caress her face with her hand and allow, if only for just a moment, a bit of her own guard to crack and a bit of her own most private bits to be revealed.

And it was enough for Emma.

####

Later, not minutes, but some unquantifiable passage of time denoted only by cries of pleasures and silly jokes beneath the sheets, Regina held up one hand and extended all five fingers and then added one more finger. “Six,” she panted.

Emma grabbed her hand and kissed it before laying it flat between her breasts so she could feel the heavy drumming of Emma’s heart. “Still ahead.”

“No you’re not.”

Emma sat up, “Excuse me princess, but—“

“The last one was just one and you’re counting it as two.”

She blinked. “Oh.”
“And I’ll never be able to walk again.”

Emma reached blindly for a glass of water beside the bed, “That’s what they all say.”

“I thought that was supposed to be my line.”

She sipped her water, “Sure princess.”

“Stop.”

“What,” she asked innocently enough.

“I know the vernacular Miss Swan and I am not a pillow princess.”

It was definitely the way Regina crossed her arms over her bare chest and shot Emma her best “I mean business” glare—the one she used to use when dealing with city contractors—that did the trick. Emma held her hands up in surrender and Regina relaxed her shoulders.

And then Emma said, “Whatever you say your majesty.”

She narrowed her eyes, “Why it is that I’m hearing ‘princess’ in that honorific?”

“I’ve no idea, Madam Mayor,” she grinned.

“By all means Emma. Lie down and spread your legs and we’ll reverse the roles.”

She gulped down some more water and smacked her lips. “That’s the most enticing come on I’ve ever heard.”

Regina took the water from her and finished it off. “I’m sorry I’m not more scintillating. Dehydration does that to you. As does starvation. And emotional exhaustion.”

“And being a pillow princess?”

Regina frowned. “Where was the tender and evocative woman from last night?”

Emma surrendered, “I was kidding Regina. I was just doing that thing we do. The back and forth thing. You call me an idiot, I call you entitled—“

She sniffed, “You are an idiot.”

“Anything you say princess,” she said with a smile. She leaned up to kiss Regina again. It started pleasantly enough but quickly turned…flat. Disjointed. Regina opened her eyes and Emma opened hers and they stared at one another, a wave of immense awkwardness overtaking them both.

Emma sat back and coughed. “Sorry.”

Regina knew precisely why she’d felt awkward. Because the kiss hadn’t been about sex. It had been about familiarity and she hadn’t kissed someone like that—for that reason—and felt pleasure in.

Well in years. Decades.

The realization that it was really happening, that Regina was really moving on and really finding someone compatible—someone she could be with—had struck her at the precise moment Emma had pressed her lips to hers.
But the locket still around Regina’s neck was warm and a flare of emotion had passed through it. A bit of Emma still connected and touching upon Regina.

So she tilted her head and looked quite seriously at Emma. “Why,” she asked.

Emma glanced up in surprise, “What?”

“Why are you sorry?”

She seemed to peer at Regina. As if squinting her eyes and studying Regina’s face would somehow deliver a curious truth she’d yet to attain.

“Is this just sex for you?”

It was Regina’s turn to be surprised, “What?”

“Here’s the thing, I know all about Evil Queen Regina sashaying around, and back when you were mayor you were known to, you know, use your assets. So what’s happening right now—is this just you trying to feel good? Or is this a real thing.”

“It’s real.”

“How—“

She squeezed Emma’s knee. “It’s real.” It had taken her years with those three idiots on a boat and all the sirens and witches and gods fighting to keep them away—but she knew the truth. She knew what she was feeling wasn’t just affection for a woman she had to share Henry with.

It was a whole wealth of other things. The frustrating challenges she provided, and the balm-like comfort and now the way she sighed when Regina was between her thighs. It was all wrapped up together into something not quite perfect but achingly real.

“I care about you Emma. More than I’m comfortable admitting out loud.”

“And I—“

“Don’t,” she said with a shake of her head, “Anything you say is going to make this treacly and emotional and Henry drained every bit of emotion I had last night.”

Regina conjured a glass of water for herself and took a long drought. Emma used the silence as an opportunity to stare again.

“What?”

Emma tilted her head, her hair falling in a cascade of blond. “You’re the absolute worst person I could fall for.”

“Did I say something?”

Emma blinked, then shook her head and coughed a bitter laugh. “No. Never mind. Tell me about Henry instead. Did you manage to pry the stick out of his asshole?”

She shuddered at the imagery. “No. Henry doesn’t need anything…pried from places.”

Emma shrugged and looked away.
“What,” Regina said.

“What?”

“No. You clearly have something to say. What?”

She took another breath and then leaned forward, “Henry is a total asshole. You know that right?”

“He has the weight of the world on his shoulders—“

“Yeah and he acts like it too. I just kind of hoped when you two talked it would, I don’t know, mellow the kid out.”

“I don’t think he needs mellowing Emma. What he needs is for this war between you all and Cora to be over.”

“And you think that’s gonna fix him?”

“I do.”

Emma smiled. “You really are an optimist aren’t you? You go around acting like some evil witch but deep down you are all about the good in people.”

“I believe in our son so I’m an optimist?”

She ticked them off, “Henry, Cora, me. Everyone sees killers and you see, I don’t know, people.”

“Warm,” Emma said. She formed a fist around the locket. Her brows knitted into a frown. “I’ve hot.”

“So?”

She used the locket’s chain to pull Regina close. “I’m guessing you don’t remember what you told me about how magic feels,” she said, her lips brushing softly against Regina’s.

She had no idea what Emma was talking about. She opened her mouth and her tongue darted out, close enough to taste Emma’s breath—sour after hours in bed. “No,” she said eventually.

Emma was breathing quickly again, her bare chest rising and falling. Her eyes focused on Regina’s mouth. “Never mind then,” she breathed before slipping her tongue into Regina’s mouth and pulling her down on top of her.

They kissed not with the temerity of the new lovers they were, but with the need of the desolate. They kissed like it might be their first, and last and a whole lifetime spent together needed to be communicated in that simple press of lips. Their hands roamed over their bodies. Regina lifted herself to throw away the sheet between them and luxuriated in the feel of Emma’s naked self, sweaty and hot against her own cool skin.

Gasps and sighs replaced words. Their eyes drifted closed as each reached for the other—not wildly,
but with the surety of the blind but familiar.

The sensations were all so very different from any Regina knew before and played like flashes of light before her eyes. Pinks and whites and yellows and reds. A blinding fire of something more than she’d had with any lover before or might have with any after.

And then. Abruptly it stopped. As she slunk her way down between Emma’s legs and kissed her inner thigh the door open was flung open, their son sauntered in like the room was his own and, seeing the sight before him and naturally being alarmed, Henry screamed.

Not a manly scream.

Or a sexist “girly” scream.

No, it was a high wailing scream of such alarm that poor David came rushing into the room wielding a tiny knife to protect him. He saw the sight.

And fainted.

####

It was with great effort that Henry kept his hand from shaking. He couldn’t afford shaky hands. In the event he gouged out his eyes later he’d need sure strokes to minimize nerve damage.

Grams hovered over his shoulder and poured him a cup of tea that was gratefully scalding. It burned his hands when he cupped it between them and he relished the pain.

“What happened,” she asked with concern.

She had only heard the scream and been rushing towards Emma’s room when Henry’s ashen face had appeared. She’d guided him back to the kitchen, never asking after her husband and the others and wordlessly prepared the pot while he sat in his chair and tried to scour the image from his mind.

But he couldn’t.

Because Emma had looked so happy. Not happy proud or happy amused but glowing happy. That was what stuck more than their state of dress or the smell of the room or even his mom’s position—elsewhere. For the first time in as long as Henry could remember Emma had appeared rapturously joyful and it was a visage seared into his mind’s eye.

“Henry?”

“Everything’s fine,” he managed to say. “Just fine.” Henry’s own world was tilting again. His wife gone and his mothers…content in one another’s arms. Even with his grandmother hovering just beside him he felt impossibly alone. “My moms were busy.”


He saw Emma’s face again and drank his tea—coughing when it burned his tongue.

“And where’s your grandfather?”
Regina wiped her mouth dry and carefully stepped out of the bed, tip toeing towards the unconscious man on the floor.

“He left him,” Emma asked in outrage.

“It would appear so.” Regina extended a bare toe and pushed David’s shoulder. He moaned.

Emma shot out of the bed and went to work angrily pulling on clothes and trying to tame her hair—stringy and dulled from their marathon. “The only way this could get more uncomfortable is if my mom popped in.”

Regina sucked in a breath and Emma involuntarily did the same, the both of them watching the door and waiting for Snow to magically appear, probably sword in hand and haughty rage darkening her face.

When she didn’t appear after a few beats Regina and Emma both sighed.

“I always thought Snow would be the first to try to skewer me if she found out we slept together.”

“Always?”

Regina shrugged and crossed her arms over her bare breasts.

“Mom doesn’t really come here. Kitchen, cage and their bedroom is about it.”

“Why?”

“She wasn’t the same after we got back.” Emma knelt next to her father and carefully examined him.

Something tickled the back of Regina’s mind. Some answer lurked there responding to every question she’d found herself asking since coming home. But she blinked and the answer skittered away.

“But always? Really? How long have you been thinking about us sleeping together?”

Years. There’d been dreams and sirens and long nights with another witch as blond and sleek and—

“We should deal with David.”

Emma eyed her suspiciously, “We’re not killing my dad.”

“I didn’t mean—“

“Or wiping his brain.”

Regina glowered.

“You can put on some pants though. If you want to maybe?”

She looked back down at her nakedness. At the scar from her mother’s knife and the stretch marks on her breasts. Emma had seen all of it. Could see all of it. She was watching Regina patiently, her eyebrow lifted in expectation.

Regina snapped and was dressed in something casual. A red cashmere sweater, dark slacks and heels.
“Do you just have a whole wardrobe sitting in your mind?”

“Yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Every well groomed witch does. And we’ll need to work on establishing your wardrobe soon, because jeans and tank tops every day are a bit much.”

Emma tugged at her white tank top, the fabric pulling taut over her stomach. “It gets hot down here and—”

The door crashed open and both women spun around, tensing for a confrontation with Snow.

But it was Red instead. She looked at David, looked at them, and then sniffed the air. The ensuing grin was positively wolfish.

“Don’t,” Emma warned.

“I’m just saying.” Red gave a thumbs up.

Regina cringed—though only on the inside. Her outside remained impassive. She had wanted to keep their evolving relationship quiet but now Henry was off somewhere in a catatonic state, David had images likely seared into his one eye, and Red was looking at them like a wolf finding a few suckling babies abandoned in the woods.

“What are you even doing down here?”

“David said we were having a meeting this morning about that barrier again. I showed up and found Henry with a thousand yard stare and Mary Margaret nervously making baked goods in the kitchen.”

Emma sighed. “Damn it. I’ll go talk to the kid. You two get him up and ready for the meeting.” She hopped past Red and out of the room, leaving Regina alone with the mutilated werewolf, who was still staring at her hungrily.

“What?”

“No. Sorry. It’s just—at some point you two really need to shower.”

“Comments like that are how wolves become pelts.”

Red rolled her eyes. She kicked David and he groaned again, his eye sluggishly opening.

“Oh Regina,” she said without looking up, “hurt Emma and I’ll rip your throat out.”

####

Emma found him at Three Bears Bar. She took a seat beside him and glared.

And glared.

And glared.

“I should have knocked,” Henry said finally.
“Ya think?”

“How was I supposed to know—“

Her glare didn’t waver.

“Okay. Sorry. I should have knocked.”

“Your grandfather fainted.”

“I know.”

“And your mother is mortified.”

“I know.”

“And I didn’t even get—“

“I should have knocked,” he shouted in apology.

Emma snaked her arm around his waist and leaned her head on his shoulder. Their reflections were warped by the mirror behind the bar, her shoulders seemed wider, and Henry’s head narrower.

He balanced his head on top of hers.

“How you holding up,” she asked. She meant the night before.

That was one of the things he loved about Emma. She had a gift for empathy that led her to communicating with others with far fewer words that average people. She could look at Henry and he knew what the topic of conversation meant.

With her low voice and fond eyes reflected in the mirror he understood.

“I’m trying to keep it together,” he said. His mouth turned up into a smile but he couldn’t hold it long.

She tightened her grip around his waist. “She’s gonna be alive.”

“You’re being optimistic.”

She shrugged, “Your mom’s influence. She brings it out in me.”

“My mom’s optimism borders on delusion, Emma.”

“Hey,” she frowned and sat up, facing him fully and forcing him to turn on his stool. “How about you watch it okay? She’s trying.”

“I know.” He did know. But snide comments were a habit and when they involved his mother it was a habit near impossible to break. “I’m happy she’s…better.”

Emma raised her eyebrow.

“I am! She is. She’s more…comfortable somehow. You know?”

“Yeah,” she shook her head, “She’s a helluva lot easier to talk to.”

“And she listens.”
“You noticed that too?”

She’d listen last night. Let him bare his soul. She hadn’t judged him or offered fixes or tried to control him or the conversation. She’d just been a sounding board and a motherly hug.

“She’s special,” Emma said, her voice soft and her look distant. “Her mom changed her but somehow she, I don’t know, fixed it. Kind of gives you hope doesn’t it kid?”

“What—if she can do it anyone can?”

“Or us at least. I’d like to be able to walk around upstairs without worrying about someone coming from nowhere to slap me, or, you know, me blowing up a city block or two. And maybe you’d get to stop being the little general and go to college or something.”

Henry groaned. “God, she got to you.”

“Regina’s right kid. You need a college education.”

“Neither of you have one.”

“I live in a cage and your mother is known as a fairytale villain. We are not role models.”

“She makes you better too you know.”

His mom blushed.

“I’m serious. You two are good. Together.”

“I think we’re all a little better kid.”

“Even me?”

She lightly jabbed his shoulder, “Maybe. With time.”

####

The great meeting of minds was a complete flop. Regina had somehow gotten it in her head that the Charming’s living room would be filled with the best and brightest of Storybrooke’s rebellion. Instead it was the Charming family and Red. “August is having a termite thing,” she’d said when Regina had looked around for more people.

“And there wasn’t anyone else,” she asked.

“What are you expecting,” Snow said, “Your mother created ‘paradise’ and’s gotten rid of just about anyone who disagrees.”

Yes, her mother was efficient. But she’d still expected, she didn’t know, someone.

“What about those two children. The ones who ate a house?”

“Hansel and Gretel can go to hell,” Henry announced. He’d slipped into the room with Emma on his arm. His eyes caught Regina’s briefly but he looked away, a blush creeping up out of his collar. “Besides, they’re B-team. Team Good and Evil is the best.”
“Best at leaving a man behind,” David grumbled.

“Hey dad,” Emma said brightly, “how about you tell us about your big plan.”

“You have a plan,” Snow asked in surprise.

Charming stood up, hitching his pants, “I have a plan,” he declared.

Everyone stared waited and Regina was horrified as she realized that three-fifths of the room had led to her defeat in the Enchanted Forest and the other two-fifths had overcome her curse in Storybrooke.

It was humbling to realize she really had been defeated by a group of idiots with luck and gumption.

“Regina,” David said.

“Excuse me.”

“You’re my plan.”

“I’m you’re what?”

He looked around the room and stepped closer, “You’re the one that knows magic, and Cora. **You’re** the plan.”

Perhaps he wasn’t so stupid after all. “Well, I don’t have anything ready made, but I can tell you some problems with the last plan and we can move from there.”

Henry bristled.

Regina began ticking them off, “One: my mother keeps important things close. She won’t just leave the key to her power in a trophy room. Two: Having the trigger is only part of what maintains the barrier. Three, and most importantly: Destroying the trigger would have brought down the barrier, but it also would have killed every single person in Storybrooke not born on this world.”

“So…”

“We’d all be dead and Henry would have been left with some very prime Maine real estate.”

“Whelp, I’ll say it,” Emma said with a hefty sigh, “I’m glad we failed.”

“I’m with her,” Red agreed.

The only person not sighing in relief at their close call was Henry. His eyes were flinty and his jaw set firmly. “Whale didn’t mention that,” he protested.

It was another side step of his.

Regina allowed it. “I doubt my mother or Rumpel would explain it all to him. Especially the magical theory involved. The man knows science, but this is…complicated and my mother wouldn’t trust him to understand it.”

Snow stood up and returned to the kitchen, her movements a little stiff. Something about them distracted Regina. She tracked her all the way to the kitchen—her mind trying to once again supply an answer to questions—some she’d asked and some not yet formed.
“Knew,” Emma supplied.

She snapped back to the group gathered around the table. “What?”

“Knew. Not knows.”

“I ate him,” Red revealed.

####

He knew his mom had changed because instead of something witty about whale blubber being bad for a dog’s diet she blanched and smiled politely.

Henry paced in front of them. “But back to the trigger. If we can’t destroy it what can we do?”

In the kitchen Mary Margaret had taken a knife out of the cutting block and was honing it. A pile of onions were sitting next to the sink waiting to be chopped.

Sitting at the table with her back to her mother Emma spoke up, “I thought the whole point of the trigger was it keeps the barrier up.”

“It does, but its original purpose would still be intact and that was to destroy the entire town and everyone in it.”

“Helluva trigger.”

“A failsafe,” David said. “In case we broke the curse, right?”

“At the time, yes.” She didn’t defend herself or seem uncomfortable. Creating a tool of genocide was merely an act committed in Regina’s past. “But my mother has turned it into something else entirely. It’s a barrier not just between worlds, but times and if we destroyed it now it might rocket what’s left of this world to the stone age or create two entire worlds or send anyone passing through a portal a thousand years into the future.”

“So what do we do Mom?”

She looked around the room. Seemed to absorb the fact that everyone there was willing not just to hear what she had to say, but do as she asked. Had that ever happened to her without magic? Had she ever had that kind of…respect?

She tugged at her sweater and sat a little straighter. In the kitchen Mary Margaret’s knife was loud with each methodical slice through an onion and into the cutting board. A rhythm of white noise filling the room.

Clack.

Clack.

Clack.

The beat timing Regina’s silence.

She glanced at Emma, her brown eyes warm, glittering with emotions he wasn’t used to seeing expressed by his mom. He thought he saw her reach for her hand beneath the table.
She breathed in through her nose, her chest puffing up as she prepared to outline whatever course she’d come up with in the instance.

“First we stop my mother.”

The chopping stopped briefly. “You’d attack her,” Mary Margaret asked.

“I’d do what’s necessary to bring the barrier down.”

“We get the trigger from my mother and Emma and I should be able to,” she glanced at Henry’s birth mother, “use our magic to undo what she and Rumpel have done.”

“Aren’t they the best magic users ever or something,” Ruby asked.

“Once. But with my skill and Emma’s power we’re nearly a match.”

“I don’t like the sound of nearly,” David said.

“Better than not at all,” Emma mused.

“Not when it’s my daughter. And what are you two going to do? A full frontal assault on her palace?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Regina huffed. “She’s usually in her zeppelin.”

“Dirigible,” Emma reminded her.

“Flying palace,” Regina clarified. “And there are fewer guards up there. It would really just be her and Rumpel.”

“Against you two.”

“Children attacking their parents. It’s terrible.” Henry shivered, because he hadn’t even noticed Grams had stopped chopping onions. She was standing beside him, the knife glistening with onion juices.

“It’s necessary,” his mom shot back absentmindedly.

“I could go,” Ruby offered. “She keeps Belle up there. Maybe me returning her heart to her would distract Rumpel.”

Regina agreed and Emma protested and the three began hashing a plan much more sound than Henry’s had been and much less dangerous. And he joined them. He didn’t really register the queer look his grandfather was giving his grandmother as she stood stock still beside him or the way Ruby noticed something too and was half out of her chair. If she’d been a wolf her hackles would have been raised.

He didn’t even notice his mothers stop talking.

But he saw their faces. Saw the sudden shock bloom there as the red bloomed across Emma’s shirt. Like a splat of paint flung from a distant brush.

But the problem was it was all at the same moment something seemed to sit in his chest and his grandmother grinned, her eyes dead and her smile serene and her face so close he could see the little mole above her lip.
She stepped back and Henry had to wonder why he couldn’t breathe. Had to wonder why she’d stepped so close and why now her knife was gone.

“Children must love their parents,” she cooed, “or there is chaos.”

He did. He agreed but he was having trouble saying the words. Having trouble finding the air to expel them from his throat. There was a loud roar in his head.

And then he was on the floor and Red and his grandfather and pulled his grandmother all the way to the wall where they held her firm and she smiled so pleasantly.

He couldn’t see much. Turning his head was hard. It was Emma who did it for him. Her hand sticky and cold. She tilted his head so he could look at her. She was crying.

Sobbing.

Her face was read and it looked so garish with her blond hair and bloody white shirt.

But his other mother looked worse. His real mother. Her hand was in his chest and he could hear shouting. Begging. She was bargaining with gods and magic and gifts beyond the mortal world. Her eyes were purple with the magic, but the whole of her undone with the despair.

####

He came into her life a bundle. The first time he cried she didn’t cringe. She hovered over him and worried that the room was too cold and he was sick. His first cough led them to the hospital. His first laugh was heard in privacy as they lay on the floor, him on a blanket and her hovering over.

He’d been so fragile then. Too insubstantial to feel real. That young he was not yet human. No thoughts or concerns. Little more than a ghost to anyone but her. His bones seemed to have bent with a touch and his heart hammered against a chest so thin she would not have even needed magic to reach inside of it.

She’d never wondered what Henry’s heart felt like. You didn’t wonder about the insides of your own children.

And now she knew. Shredded when Snow’s chef knife had plunged into his chest and then been yanked out with brutal efficiency it felt like muscle. It was wet and bloody and no magic she used could make it whole. Could turn it into the resilient charm she’d forged from so many other hearts.

It had always been easy. Plunging her hand into a chest. The heart was always surprisingly smooth and soft, like bare skin, and neither hot or cold. It was never wet. Reaching into a person was never messy.

Except now. Blood was climbing up the sleeve of her sweater and trickling down the sides of Henry’s torso. It was in his mouth. Choking him.

Emma begged for her to save him. Begged.

Henry’s hand, clumsy and cool, slapped against the arm buried to the elbow inside of him.

She risked looking at his face again. At the streaks of spittle and blood coming out of his mouth and painting his beard. And at his eyes. Gentle eyes. He called himself a killer but there was the gentle
boy who’d defend bugs from birds and cry over a dead mouse. He used to pat her cheeks with skinny little hands and tell her he loved her.

Regina stared into those gentle eyes. As if that alone might bring comfort and erase the mute terror she saw there. Terror for what she could not stop or control.

But it didn’t. Until the very last his eyes were filled with fear and confusion.

It was only when the shredded heart in her hand stilled and the frantic choking ceased that she saw what was hidden beneath it all.

Calmness.

Henry didn’t flee the world of the living.

He was stolen from it, but left bravely.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Should I be creeped out that most people get huge amounts of feedback when characters finally bang but I get huge amounts of feedback when I have characters do unspeakably violent acts? Whatever. THANK YOU. And stay strong. It gets dark, because it's the middle part of a trilogy, but nothing is quite what it seems and there's still much AWESOMENESS ahead and you would not believe how stoked I am to put part 3 of this monster in front of your eyeballs.

Warning: There’s a potentially triggering scene involving non-consent about 3k words in. So please be cautious.

When a heart shredded by a knife stopped beating it no longer felt quite like the powerful muscle that kept a person alive. There was nothing potent or strong in it.


Regina pulled her hand out and it made a sucking sound. The air rapidly cooled the gore and her fingers were tacky as they stuck together. The room stank.

Emma sobbed.

And Snow watched with cool menace.

Regina curled her bloody hand into a fist and heard the squelch as the gore squeezed out between her fingers.

Snow blinked and immediately tears welled in her eyes and confusion took over her face. “What—what happened?”

She knew though. She had to. She saw everything. Saw Emma. Henry. The knife, still lying inert and deadly on the floor. Saw Regina’s hand.

Because she then did something very unusual for Snow White. She didn’t accuse the woman she’d once called mother.

No. No instead she said softly, to herself, “What did I do?”

I.

And holding her there Red and David weren’t horrified. Not like Emma, whose confusion and woe came off in waves. No, they were ashamed.

“David,” Snow asked, and she looked at her husband for answers with the familiarity of one who’d done it many times and he looked away and fire skittered through Regina.

She waved her hand and Red and David were both flung back. One smacking against the wall and
the other into a chair that shattered with the force. She pushed Snow into the counter, shackling her arms to the countertop with stone and leaving her chest thrust out in indignant anger. The knife rose from the floor with a flick and hurtled through the space between the two women.

Regina grinned as the blade disappeared into Snow’s chest, buried to the hilt.

There was only a small exhalation of air at the blow. No screams to accompany that of her husband and friend. Snow wasn't even surprised.

“You know what you did,” Regina said. The knife was pulled out again, the sound not as wet as when Regina had pulled her hand away from Henry.

She plunged it in all over.

David and Red both tried to stand and get to Snow. But their feet tangled, their limbs went askew. One became trapped as the wood from the chair turned alive and clawed at her ankles. The other collapsed to the floor as a rug climbed up his body.

Snow sagged. Only the shackles supported her.

“Say it,” Regina said. And she could hear a roughness in her voice she wasn’t accustomed to. Her throat hurt. “Say what you did.”

There was no blood on Snow’s lips. They were almost as pale as her skin. Like snow—that was what the she’d been named for. Ugly little flowers lurking beneath the snow.

“Regina I’m so—“

She twisted her hand, the muscles in her forearm pulling painfully, her knuckles popping, and she gritted her teeth so tightly they might crack. “Say it!”

But Snow could only scream as the knife twisted in her chest.

““You killed…!”

Regina couldn’t say the word. Words had a power thoughts did not. Words made tangible realities best left to shadows of minds.

“You killed him,” she spat.

“She didn’t,” David choked. He pushed at the rug unsuccessfully before sagging, pleading with Regina to see that truth her mind could only flirt with. “You know she didn’t,” he insisted. She wavered, her head tilting to finally look only at David. His eye was watery and pink around the edges and there was a comfort in the absolute pain she saw on his face.

All the years of trying to hurt Snow White as badly as she’d hurt her and now she’d finally elicited that exquisite torture she desired.

But not in Snow. In her husband.

And it didn’t feel as good as expected.

“He’s right dear,” Cora’s voice wasn’t in the room. It was Snow’s voice, charged with her mother’s poisonous inflection. She looked back, warily, and found Snow’s tears drying on her cheeks, smooth and still as marble. “You must know it was just her hand doing my will.”
“Mother,” Regina’s voice cracked.

The worst—no not the worst—or the most awful—just the most vexing—part was that Cora was right.

Regina had known. She’d seen the truth. Danced with it and walked along side it, but never looked. She’d known so long, in some unexamined corner of her mind. Known back when she’d saved a dying Snow on Killian’s ship. She’d asked her if she’d save her if their positions were reversed.

Snow had said no.

Snow would have said yes. As hypocritical and haughty as she was she still would have said yes.

“In the land of the giants Snow was separated from the others. That’s when you did it. Isn’t it?” The truth was hollow, expanding the emptiness inside.

“I knew you’d figure it out,” Cora with Snow’s voice said with pride. “It really was quite obvious with a bleeding heart like this.” She waved her fingers at the knife. Blood was oozing out around the wound.

The knife wouldn’t kill Snow. That was the problem with the magic of a heart removal. It made the body resilient. Near unkillable as long as someone possessed that heart. Perhaps it was irony that a body with no heart could survive so much worse.

Hearts made a person vulnerable.

“But now it’s out in the open,” her mother said, her smile sickening. There wasn’t even blood on the lips.

There’d been blood on Henry’s lips.

“Shut up.”

Her mother frowned. “Regina—“

“I want you to listen Mother. Put that pulsating piece of trash to your ear and listen. We are done. After this I will dismantle your kingdom. Your seat of Power. You.” She stalked close, "You want a monster to rule this world? You have one. And I’ll reign standing on your corpse."

There was a flicker of some kind of humanity. Perhaps Snow’s own. Maybe Cora realizing the breath of horror she’d brought down on her own head. “I’ve done this—“

“You have taken that which is…” She couldn’t say it. Out loud. She couldn’t talk about him. Or what she felt. Or what she’d just lost to her mother’s “love.” “You are no longer my mother.”

“Don’t say that.”

“What you did today—“

“I saved your life!” Snow pulled against her bindings. “Don’t you see? Henry was ruining you. He was destroying everything you could be—“

“He was my son!” Regina’s words wrenched another gasp and sob from Emma behind her.

Was.
Because where there had been a man with a future now there was just flesh and a broken heart.

Her mouth worked inertly for a moment before she could continue. Her heart beat so loud blood roared in her ears. “He was my son.”

Pity. That same pitying look Cora had every time Regina said his name. “He was never yours. Not like you are mine.”

“And that’s where he was lucky.”

Imperceptible to nearly anyone else Cora’s face fell. Slackened around the eyes. Regina’s words had cut deep and she had no intention of ever taking them back.

She left quickly, that uncharacteristic sneer still distorting Snow’s face.

And in her absence there was only silence. White noise of sobs and quick breathing. And the void of silence created by their collective loss.

Snow broke first. With a whisper.

One Regina had to strain to hear.

“Kill me.”

Regina stepped closer. David and Red both struggled futilely and begged her not to.

“What,” she asked. She’d heard, but the words begged repeating.

“Kill me.”

“Why?”

“Henry’s gone—I can’t be trusted. Kill me Regina.”

Regina’s hand lashed out, wrapping around that pristinely pale neck. Her nails dug pleasantly into the skin of Snow’s throat and she pulled herself so close she loomed over her former step-daughter. “If I’d killed you my son would be alive.”

“Do…it.”

Her husband and best friend both again cried out.

“If I’d killed you years ago none of this would have happened.”

Snow’s face was ashen and her lips taking on a faint blue color. Her eyes still pleaded with Regina—begging for a measure of peace.

Snow’s pulse raced beneath Regina’s fingers and her throat undulated against her palm. She added her other hand. Repositioned them both so her thumbs pressed against Snow’s trachea. It felt so good.

So right.

Snow’s hands jerks in her bindings. Her legs twitched. The knife’s hilt pressed against Regina’s chest.
Here at last was her revenge.

“Regina, stop.”

And there was Emma. Standing behind her. Calm. A malaise draining all her passion and fire.

“Emma—“

And there was Emma’s hand. Laying lightly on Regina’s shoulder.

“I can’t lose her,” she said softly. “And I won’t lose you.”

Snow’s face was purple. Her eyes bloodshot.

“Please,” Emma said.

She didn’t beg. Or cry. It was just a simple world spoken in a dull tone.

Regina let go.

####

Pinnochio, limping and rotting from a termite affliction, built a beautiful place for Henry to rest in. They took him deep into the cave system where fairy dust clung to the walls and cast an eerie and beautiful glow. It was surprisingly cool so deep down. A gift of the dust that illuminated the…

The tomb.

They wouldn’t bury him. Not yet. They sealed him in that bit of wood built within a few hours and Regina dressed him in a handsome suit and fixed his hair just so with her magic. A wave of her hand and the blood disappeared. He was pale, waxy.

People said he looked like he was asleep.

But there was something impossibly alive when one was in slumber. A sensation. The dead seemed distorted. Their features too still, their cheeks too hollow. Dolls, life sized and laid out.

She took his wedding ring before sealing the coffin.

They confined Snow to Emma’s cage. It still stank of the filth from Whale’s murder and Snow lay crying softly on a mat not far from where flecks of gore hadn’t been fully cleaned off the metal grate.

Red watched her from the other side of the cage. She said nothing. Sometimes her glowing eye flickered. The wolf had known. She’d smelled it on her best friend, or perhaps just seen the little quirks.

He’d known too.

She found Charming sitting in another cave, far from his wife and far from the ruin she’d dealt. It too was illuminated by fairy dust, and there was a pool of water taking up most of the cave. The glow of fractured light distorted Charming’s features—making him old and haggard. He’d removed his eye patch—the first time Regina had seen him without it. She hadn’t known what to expect to lurk behind the patch. But socket was entirely empty and the lid was scarred. It was completely dry versus the tears shed by the good blue eye beside it.
He motioned to it, “The tear ducts were ruined when your mother carved it out of me.”

She peered at it, like a detective examining a crime scene. “It’s not as gruesome as I would have thought.”

He managed the saddest smile ever. “Mary Margaret can’t look at me with the patch off. Part of me thinks she would have had a problem even if she had a heart.”

“Snow may be as empathetic as a serial killer but she loved you. I hardly think she’d be shallow enough to be disgusted by a little gaping eye wound.”

He shrugged, “I don’t know, but between the curse and your mom it’s been forty years since I last talked to that Snow. Most days I can’t even remember how we fell in love.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“We were for the ages.”

“Love isn’t immortal David. It’s not some invincible dream enduring by will alone. Love breaks. It falters.” She stared. "It leads to mothers who murder and fathers who lie.”

He looked up at her, his good eye narrowing in realization. The lid around the socket of the empty one twitched as it tried to do the same.

“You knew Snow had lost her heart, and you hid it. Why?”

He tilted his chin up defiantly. “Why’d you hide the curse from Henry?”

“This isn’t about me—“

“This is about family. You lied to keep him safe. Right? To protect him? What do you think would have happened if Emma had known? She would have killed herself to get her heart back.”

“The question begs,” she leaned in close, “why didn’t you?”

“She had her hand on my heart when she took my eye.” He was as feral as that dog watching Snow. “Did you know when a witch takes it you still see out of it?”

She hadn’t. It had never even occurred to her to try.

“She left it beside Mary Margaret’s heart.”

“Left?”

“The deal was to keep the peace. We get to pretend to be rebels and she gets to be queen and everyone lives. When Henry broke that deal she crushed it.”

“Henry—“

“Never knew. I made sure no one did.”

“It wouldn’t do for the people to know Snow White and Prince Charming’s great rebellion was a mere puppet regime.”

“I just wanted…I needed to keep them safe. I was doing the best I could.”
“And my son is dead because you weren’t good enough.”

To his credit he didn’t even flinch. The bastard was too noble to be offended.

Or perhaps just too broken.

Like a tree infected he just seemed to sag, the life—the will drained from him.

And oddly Regina felt no satisfaction in this man’s defeat.

Something queer was inside of her—bubbling to the surface and begging for attention.

Empathy.

She swallowed bile—sick of at her own weakness—and sat beside him.

Their arms brushed and he was rigid. But like that dying tree it was all illusion. With a touch she knew he’d crumble.

“Can she forgive me?”

He was asking it of her. The father asking the lover.

“Emma’s capacity for forgiveness is remarkable.”

“I know. She forgave me the first time too.” He looked over at her, and he seemed older somehow. He was, for that moment, not Snow’s lover, but Emma’s father. And like a father he seemed worldly. Protective. And wary. “She always forgives us Regina.”

He wasn’t just speaking of himself and Snow. Stunned by that realization Regina could say nothing.

“So we have to be better for her. We have to work twice as hard to not fail her, and when we do, we have to punish ourselves twice as much.”

He didn’t look away and that one bright blue eye seemed to pierce Regina. It was so much like his daughter’s green. So sure and good and somehow there was none of Snow’s righteous indignation.

“I won’t take advantage of her.” And surprisingly enough. Regina knew what she’d just said was true.

####

Emma didn’t watch them put her son in the coffin. She didn’t watch them put her mother in the cage. She didn’t watch her father disappear into the caverns. She stayed in the kitchen.

She cleaned.

That was where Regina knew she would be hours later. On her knees, her hands raw and red and clutching a sponge and scrubbing. Constantly scrubbing.

"I had this foster mom obsessed with the Loretta Young show. Always going on about how cleaning makes everything better because she saw Loretta Young clean a house one time."

Her knuckles were white from gripping the sponge so tight.
"I don't even know who Loretta Young is, but you're not her."

Emma just nodded.

Kept scrubbing.

“You’re not Lady Macbeth either,” she said softly. She’d meant to say something profound, but that poor attempt at humor had been uttered instead.

Emma paused only briefly. Because she was startled by the interruption.

Then back to cleaning she went.

“She was guilty,” she said. “I’m not guilty.”

Emma reminded Regina of an angry child, and she found herself responding to her as such. Her voice was soft and gentle and she moved forward slowly with her arm outstretched and her shoulders slumped. “She was insane.”

Emma kept scrubbing. “My mother’s insane,” she said. “My father’s insane. I’m not insane.”

“That spot on the floor would disagree.”

A tremulous sigh.

“Emma…”

“I should have noticed.”

“You couldn’t have.”

“She was my mom—“

“You barely knew her.”

“Because of you.” She turned again, her red rimmed eyes accusing, the whites startling. She did look a little mad.

So Regina knelt. She wouldn’t argue that particular point. Not today. “Because of me.”

“You should kill yourself.” The venom burned.

Regina’s voice was raw. “I won’t.”

“He’s dead—“

“Because I couldn’t kill her.” Because she’d had a chance to kill Cora and she’d been foolish enough to let her live. Foolish enough to think she’d save her mother like Henry and Emma and those three thieves had saved her.

“You could have killed her.”

“I know.”

“You should be angry.”

“I know.”
“Sad.”
“I know.”
“Upset.”
“I kn—“

Emma slapped her. Then she sank her wet hand into Regina’s hair, pulling her close enough for their foreheads to touch.

“Cry,” Emma demanded. The tendons in her neck bulged.

“No.”

Her nails scratched at Regina’s scalp. “Cry! Scream! Be god damned angry! Do something.”

She covered Emma’s hand with her own, forcing Emma to maintain her grip. And forcing her watery eyes to meet Regina’s. “He’s dead.”

“It should have killed you,” she said through gritted teeth.

“We’re here.” Emma tried to jerk away but Regina held fast. “We’re here and we have to make—“

Regina lived with grief in all its forms. Grief that formed wrath. And grief that formed heartache. And grief that destroyed everything. Leopold so grieved his first wife he destroyed his kingdom and Regina to overcome it.

So she knew why Emma was no longer trying to look into her eyes or force her to feel some emotion completely lost to her. She knew why Emma was instead focused on Regina’s parted lips and why she was breathing roughly.

Grief made them do funny things. Unnatural things.

Grief made women who had once hated one another kiss like the world was ending. Emma thrust her tongue into Regina’s mouth and blindingly pressed her finger tips to Regina’s skull and consumed. There was no tenderness or affection. Teeth and lips and spit. It was messy and painful.

“Please,” Emma grated.

Their roles were reverse. In those long hours since Henry’s death Regina had found something in the familiarity. She was so accustomed to loss it was easy to exist with it. She found herself stronger and more sure—more confident—than she’d been in ages. And Emma, that destined savior of Storybrooke, was shattering.

Shattered.

She lurched back, breathing hard and she tried to see Emma. To understand her. Empathizing ached. But with Emma, and their shared loss, and their shared magic, it was so damned easy.

She cupped Emma’s cheeks in her palms and dropped kisses all over her face. Laid them on tear wet eyes as her thumbs stroked sooth circles on her cheeks. Soothing Emma soothed herself.

“It’s all right,” she said in a hushed voice. “It’s all right.”

“He’s gone.”
She knew. She’d felt the heart beat its last time. It would be cold now, in a puddle of something cool and congealed. She squeezed her hands reflexively and Emma did the same and they crashed together again, two forms undone by grief but bound together all the same.

She pressed Emma into the counter, inhaling her sharp exhalation as the edge of the countertop jammed at Emma’s back. Regina shushed her cry of pain before kissing her again.

Emma gasped Regina’s named, part in pleasure and part in concern.

She couldn’t hear her. Not now. She tugged at Emma’s shirt. It was stained with a faint mist, once red, now brown. She pulled it over Emma’s head and cast it far away.

“We need this,” she muttered, dropping her head to Emma’s shoulder. She kissed and licked and bit until she heard a gasp of pleasure. Then she sucked at the spot. And nipped at it. Watched the bruise form.

Emma nails dug into her back—a mingle of sharp distracting pain and the pleasure of human touch. She pinned Emma to the door with her knee. Her hand skimmed Emma’s waist, her thumb pressing into the scarce softness where waist met torso.

“I know, but…”

She thrust her thigh up, grinding it against Emma’s center and relishing the ensuing spasms.

“We need to forget.”

“Regina, we—“

Regina’s other hand worked at Emma’s pants, nimbly slipping them open. Her fingers dipped between Emma’s belly and underwear, black to match the bra Regina planned next to remove.

“You want this,” she insisted. Her fingers found proof in slick wet heat. “I want this,” she breathed against Emma’s throat, her fingers stroking her lips.

“Stop.”

“We can just—“

“I said stop,” and with a buffet of magic Regina was cast back. She stumbled. Fell.

“How dare—“ She pushed her self up and yanked her hair out of her face. But as she looked up and the recrimination fled her.

Emma was breathing hard, and her cheeks were flushed, but with panicked anger. “I’m not fucking you on the kitchen countertop,” she spat.

Regina hand landed in wetness. Water that stank of bleach.

To clean the blood.

“Not—“ Emma’s voice cracked, “Not here.”
Here in the room where he’d died. Where they would cook and clean and do anything to mask the memories.

He’d cried.

Not sobs, but quiet tears to go with the terror.

Regina stood. Tilted her head up proudly. A queen never apologizes, Cora would say. A queen is always right, Leopold would intone. “I’m sorry.”

“You want to forget,” Emma said. Not a question.

“Yes.”

“You know what the kid taught me?”

Regina tilted her head in interest.

“It was a pretty damned big lesson seeing as he was ten. He taught me that we can’t always run Regina. Sometimes we stay.” Emma crept across the gap between them, her head ducked low and her voice soft. So like Regina had been earlier.

When she thought she was in control.

“Screwing our brains out isn’t gonna fix this.” She reached up to hold Regina’s face. There was no tremor there, and her touch was cool. The locket on Regina’s chest blazed with warmth. “You running isn’t gonna do it either.”

“Then what do you propose,” she asked quietly.

She gave her a broken smile, scared and timid. “I don’t know.” Her lips pressed sweetly to Regina’s own. A sweetness that hurt to experience. That drew grief and ache and longing.

“But I want it to be with you.”

#

It was a lie.

When Regina woke up later in a bed with cool sheets and no partner she knew it was a lie. Emma had lured her. Made her feel safe and secure.

And then after insisting that running wouldn’t solve anything Emma had run.

She pushed herself back up against the headboard, and glared at Charming who was looming over her looking concerned.

“Are you all right,” he actually asked. His eye patch was back on, but his hair was messy and he desperately needed to comb his beard.

“What’s happened?” Besides Emma being gone and David standing there looking worried. Red was in the doorway, an ice pack pressed to her head. Regina felt sick. “What did they do?”

“They left,” David said. “Did Emma saying anything?”
“If she had do you really think I’d just be lying around?” She shoved him out of the way and threw back the sheets. “Where’d they go?”

Red spoke up, “Emma knocked me out and took Mary Margaret and the chains we usually use on the full moon. What do you think?”

On the one hand she was delighted Emma had at least thought to tie Snow up before frog marching her to Cora.

On the other hand that idiot had likely frog marched Snow to Cora—essentially surrendering them both to Regina’s mother.

“Did they leave a note?”

“Yeah.” David grimaced. “Saying how they’re giving themselves up and it was all for love.”

“What kind of idiot sacrifices themselves for love?”

Red and David both stared at her like she was the idiot.

“Um, Regina,” Red said, “Emma is clearly lying and planning to murder Cora so you don’t have to.”

“She took Mary Margaret so your mother believes she’s surrendering herself.”

“Oh.” She swallowed, her eyes unfocusing, “Oh. They’re going to be killed.”

David agreed, “Which is why the three of us have to save them.”
Chapter 19

In the immortal words of a dude about to reboot the system in a theme park populated by dinosaurs, "Hold on to your butts."

Stealing three uniforms and teleporting up to the zeppelin wasn't that difficult. Her mother's magic was as familiar as Regina's own, and working around it—hiding from it—was far easier than doing magic in Bluebeard's castle or the land of the Queen Mother.

"Wish we'd had you years ago," David muttered. He was pressed up against her. His hand on the small of her back for…comfort she assumed. Red was holding onto him in a similar manner so it appeared to be a habit among the idiots.

"Yes imagine how nice that would have been," she said sharply. "Now kindly stop touching me."

He held up the offending hand in apology. His other hand was wrapped around the hilt of a sword in his belt. His one eye searched the shadows.

"Can you find her," he asked.

"I can smell her," Red said. "All of them actually. Close too."

"How many's all?"

She jerked her chin in the direction they were heading, "Belle, Gold, all of them."

"Alive?"

Regina's hand shot up to the locket around her neck. She'd added Henry's ring to the chain for safekeeping, and it seemed to make the pull towards Emma all the stronger. "They're alive." And remarkably calm.

There was no fear coming from Emma.

“So what do we do,” Charming asked, “because so far every plan has devolved into us just running in guns blazing and it hasn’t worked out so well.”

“Worked with Whale.”

“And I don’t think the plan was the problem with that assault on Cora’s palace.”

“We can’t just charge,” David insisted.

“Well, Genghis do you have a better idea?”

Red snorted in amusement.

David glowered at her before returning his focus to Regina, “I have lots of ideas. Like how Ruby should use the rope running around the outside of this blimp to sneak into that throne room and put
Belle’s heart back in her body and gets her out of here while I make a play for Snow’s heart and you keep the big bads distracted with some heart to heart—pun intended.”

As plans went it was a rather excellent one. Except. “How would you even know where Snow’s heart is?”

He tapped his eye patch, “I saw the inside of the place hundreds of times. Through those doors is Cora’s throne room.” He pointed at a shiny brass spiral staircase, “and up those stairs is Cora’s bedroom. If we’re lucky even the trigger’s in there.”

“Then we have all the cards.”

“And Cora goes down,” Red growled.

####

It was easy to make plans. To consider every outcome and prepare. But execution was very different. These were fickle witches and wizards with powers bordering on godlike.

And the one sitting on her throne looking serene was Regina’s mother.

"Come for my head," she asked. She was unfazed. Sipping her drink, staring at Emma and Snow, both shackled and on their knees.

In Regina the mother with no child wanted to lash out. Take Cora’s head and her heart and rend apart her body with her bare hands.

Emma glanced sadly over her shoulder.

Just that one look, of regret and sorrow, was enough.

It instilled a measure of calm in Regina. Enough to temper her wrath.

"I came to put an end to this," she said. Mother had nearly graced her tongue, but she couldn't say it. Not without betraying the memory of that sweet—

"I believe you said something about ruin dear. Wasn't that the plan?"

She tilted her head up defiantly. "You have to be made to pay for your crimes."

And Cora laughed, the sound silken and catastrophic at once. It raked against Regina's insides. "Like you paid for the curse that put them all here?"

"She has paid," Emma said.

"Is that so?"

"She learned from her mistakes Cora. Something anyone with a soul can do."

"But not me, right?"

"You have no heart," Regina felt the urge to call her mother again. "How can you have a soul?"

"She can't even love," Snow muttered.
Cora held her hand out as though she were prepared to rip a heart from another chest. “What I can or can't—"

"I'm not Regina," Snow growled. She straightened up, her sloped shoulders rigid, "And I'm not stupid. We can't love Cora. And I know because I remember what it was like."

Cora’s hand drifted down. The fight shocked out of her.

“This isn't it,” Snow said. She was crying. Which she always seemed to do. She’d wept as long as Regina had known her. Wept for joy and grief and love. But this time the tears were just full of anger. Wrath. “We’re not whole. And its time to stop pretending we are.”

The only one more thunderstruck by Snow's bold statement than Cora was Emma, who looked at her mother in horror.

And Snow looked back—for once more than inadequate grief painted on her face. For once genuine, "I remember what it was like to love you. And I’m sorry I’ve never had the chance to show you."

Even Regina’s mother seemed…moved. Like she understood. Like she felt something beside her all consuming thirst for power.

Until—

“Touching,” Rumpel said. He was leaning against Cora’s throne, half cloaked in shadows, the handle of his cane glimmering gold like his eyes once did. “But I hope you aren’t being effected by all this theater my dear.” He pointed the tip of his cane in Emma, Regina and Snow’s direction, “Because these three bints are playing you.”

Cora blinked and the moment was lost. “I know my love.” His lip curled in resentment. “Though the question is, how?”

That was the moment Red chose to slip into the room. With the dead limbs and the bright eyes Regina would have expected clumsiness. But the werewolf was impossibly quiet and lithe. Had Regina not been looking she wouldn’t have even seen her.

Stalking up behind Belle.

Drawing the heart from a satchel.

Stepping close and covering Belle’s mouth with one hand while plunging the heart into her chest with the other. The two women slipped back into the shadows.

David just had to get Snow’s heart then. Get her heart and send a sign.

That was all that was left. The world would slot into place afterwards. They’d hold the cards and Cora would surrender and if she didn’t Regina would undo Emma’s chains and they would wreak havoc.

####

The sign came when Cora suddenly drew Rumpelstiltskin’s dagger from a pocket of her dress and held it before him and demanded, “You will do whatever Emma Swan says.” Rumpel blinked. “Emma,” she called, her voice stilted and familiar. “Take the dagger.”
Rumpel was the only one besides Regina to figure out what had happened. Charming had done it. Found his wife’s heart.

And found her’s as well.

The heart she’d ripped from her own chest years ago. One she kept in a box and had often warned a young Regina never to touch.

Somewhere in the shadows David was holding the glowing muscle to his lips and whispering commands Cora was obliged to obey.


Rumpel was grinning madly, his eyes on the shining dagger.

“You think holding my heart is enough,” Cora shouted through gritted teeth.

“Looks like it,” Rumpel crooned.

Emma stepped closer, her hand tentatively stretched out, her fingers grazing the dagger’s blade. But her eyes were on Cora. Wary.

Rightfully so.

Magic of the heart had rules. To control one was to give oneself over to the darkest of magicks. The magicks that made Bluebeard a god and Rumpel a force of nature. When a powerful sorceress held a heart they could command the person connected to it to do anything. The person became an extension of the sorceress. The stretch of their long arm.

David was no sorcerer. The darkness Cora, Rumpel and even Regina had made peace with long ago was new to him. He wasn’t committed.

He was too good a man.

“Emma now,” Regina shouted. She could feel David’s grasp of the magic failing. Could see it in her mother’s stone face.

Emma lunged for the dagger, but David’s tenuous control slipped and Cora swung, the sharp glinting edge flying towards Emma’s bare throat.

Regina shoved with all her might. No time for tricky impressive magic. Just a raw wave of it, flinging the two women apart. Emma flew past her and Cora smacked into that great wall of glass that made up one whole side of the room. White cracks spiderwebbed across the wall from her point of impact.

David came rushing from the shadows, Cora’s heart still clutched in his hand. “Tell me where her heart is,” he shouted.

Which meant…he hadn’t done it.

“David,” she heard herself say—her voice weighted by melancholia.

He was trying not to cry. The great Prince Charming. Not undone by magic or war, but by fatigue. “Mary Margaret’s heart wasn’t there. Where is it!”
“Traded for peace,” Cora said. There was blood on her lips and she wiped it away with none of the grace of a queen. “There’s a war coming and I’ve done what’s needed to keep us safe. I don’t know where her little imp took it.”

“Who!”

“A queen, that you’ll never meet. Rumpel.” Her hand tightened around the hilt of the dagger and her eyes were instantly on her own enslaved imp.

With a flash of smoke he was beside David, jamming the tip of his can into David’s torso and plucking the heart from his suddenly slack hand.

Snow screamed.

And it would have been gut-wrenching tragedy were it not so very funny. Watching David fall to one knee and grasp his side in shock, and Snow throw off her chains in violent rage and Emma come to stand beside Regina, too tired to cry.

Regina laughed. A sharp barking laugh that was enough to distract everyone.

“Cracking dearie?”

Splitting in half.

Rumpel sneered. “Allow me to finish the job.”

He squeezed the heart to ashes and Cora tipped over. She didn’t collapse grasping her chest. She just rocked to one side and fell like a board. No last words. No final moment of villainy. The peach she’d consumed long ago was worthless when a god had her heart in his hand.

She was alive.

She was dead.

Rumpel dusted his hands.

Snow shouted again.

To which Rumpel could only reply with a shrug of his shoulders. “Guess you aren’t getting that other heart back.”

“Why,” Emma asked beside Regina. Her voice was hollow. Chilly.

“Because none of you would have the guts to do it yourselves.” He examined his nails, “A thank you would be nice.”

David coughed and squeezed his side, a fresh gout of blood leaking out between his fingers. “Go to hell.”

Rumpel tsked in annoyance. He extended his hand and his dagger went flying from Cora’s cold grasp.

The next part Regina watched in mute silence—barely able to comprehend it.

For as Rumpel called the dagger towards him Snow lunged. She snatched the blade out of the air and stalked him with cold menace in her green eyes and he seemed shocked by that turn of events.
The man who could see the future and anticipate every outcome just watched as she lurched towards him with that blade. His hand came up belatedly. He meant to block her blow, but the former bandit queen was faster. All those years just chop chop chopping food in that dank little kitchen had somehow left Snow faster than the Dark One himself.

Or maybe he was tired.

Maybe he thought Belle was lost because she wasn’t in the room, and the son he’d come all that way to find was dead somewhere beyond the barrier. Maybe he just gave up.

Whatever his reasons for so poorly defending himself it ended with his knife buried in his throat, the hilt sticking out like a garish charm latched to his neck.

He tried to laugh, one last gurgle of amusement at their insane world, but the blade cut off all the sound. There was just blood in his mouth and he was falling too.

Evil was supposed to explode in a gout of flame or scream at the injustice of their death. But Rumpel went like her mother, falling over, his body striking the ground with a wet slap.

And the air was suddenly cold with portent and those cracks on the glass were spreading and Snow’s eyes which had always been green like the forest ground were liquid gold and black.

“Now we’ve really won,” she said.

The Dark One lost their heart when they took on the dagger’s curse.

Regina had no idea what would happen when there’d been no heart in the Dark One’s body to begin with.

It couldn’t be good. So Regina stepped in front of Emma and held out her hand. “Give me the dagger.”

Snow hefted it in her hand just once before flinging it at Regina’s head with a snarl.

That was when the fight broke out. Emma caught the knife, dropped it, and charged her mother. Snow defended herself with magic, and when she used that power—when she saw what could be done with it—every last bit of goodness ever in her disappeared. Shouts of what was and wasn’t right and cries for calmness were lost in the din. Mother and daughter disappeared into their heady war waged with the most primal of forces.

Regina had to dodge and deflect to make it to David. He’d taken up a position of safety on the throne, using its high back as a barrier. She knelt beside him.

“That was foolish,” she said.

“I thought you controlled someone when you have their heart.”

“You have to want to. You didn’t.”

He slumped back, his head thumping against the thick wood of the throne. “I just wanted Snow back.”

“She’s the Dark One now.”

“Can we—anything—stop her?”
“True love could, if she had a heart. But without one—“

He chanced a look over the throne. “My wife is gone.”

Regina tried to focus on his wound. Healing was always more difficult then destructive magic and she had to pay attention or she’d—

David grabbed her hand.

“Charming what are you—“

“You said the barrier around us has to do with time?”

“Yes but—“ a cold pit formed in her stomach.

David drew the small black stone from his pocket. It didn’t glow. Didn’t even have an aura. It looked completely normal. Odd for something so deadly. A trigger disguised as a neatly cut gem.

“So I crush this and time goes backwards.”

She covered his hand, “You crush that and it is as though we never existed here. We all die.”

He glanced at her—looking as lost as his daughter. “Isn’t that better?”

“No,” she smiled.

He wrapped his fingers around hers. “There has to be—“

And there was.

There was a way.

A path Regina had refused to consider, let alone take. She’d known it the moment Emma had disappeared out of her cage in a crack of light, the tendrils of reality raw at her departure.

Because the barrier would keep them all trapped in this time and this place but if the curse was broken on the inside and someone could somehow move to the outside then for just an instant, this entire world would be in flux. The world before the barrier and the world of the barrier and the world with no Storybrooke at all would all exist at once. It would just be a matter of unmaking reality to move through it and choose the right world.

Something she’d only seen Emma do.

David squeezed, his fingers slippery on Regina’s. “Please Regina, if you know how—“

“There is a way,” she said, “but we can’t do it.”

“What? No, we have to.”

“I would need Emma to teleport like she does.”

“The lightning,” he clarified.

“Yes, but…the problem is…”

He looked so earnest. So curious. Not as old as the beard and eye patch and even the start of gray at
the temples would suggest.

“The curse has to end,” Regina said.

Emma and Snow were still throwing raw magic back and forth, their battle kinetic and nonsensical and as wrong as the world was. Regina knew the world was wrong.

And David knew too.

His face fell. “Emma has to die. That’s what you’re saying isn’t it?”

“It’s the only way to truly end the curse.”

He looked down, as if she’d written a letter and set it in his hands. His eye scanned the empty space. “To save my daughter, to save my wife, I have to kill the only person I have left.”

“We can find another way. Emma and I may be able to bring the barrier down and if we get the dagger from Snow—”

“She’ll still be a monster.” She’d be a feral dog on a leash. Not a wife or a mother or even a friend. "But you can save her,” he said with conviction.

“If I kill Emma—“

“You’re as powerful as Emma. You can do what she did,” his voice pitched high, “And then you can save her. You can save all of us Regina.” He looked back up, his eye flashing with the fervency of a zealot. “Emma, Snow. You can save Henry.”

“Do you realize what you’re asking?”

“I threw my daughter away to save the world remember?”

“Precisely,” she hissed, “you’re asking me to use her again.”

He reached out and cupped her face. His hands were surprisingly cold and clammy against her skin. “There’s a right and wrong and I don’t know what side of it I’m on now, but if you can fix this world I believe that’s the right thing. I believe you can do the right thing.”

“But I wanted to be…” Better. She’d wanted to be better.

He pressed his forehead to hers. His skin slick and cool. “Be the hero Regina. Make the tough call.”

“And what are you going to do?”

He smiled. And it hurt because she knew that smile. She’d seen it in the mirror every day. “Make a tough call too.”

Tight around the eyes. Bitter at the corners of the mouth. Resigned. But defiant. The loser seeing their victory dismantled and too recalcitrant to except it.

But there was just a hint of peace there too. The kind of peace too tranquil to be possessed by the living. The peace of one already dead.

So she couldn’t even be surprised when David leapt off the throne, grabbed Snow and ran for that giant wall of cracked glass. He smashed through it, carrying that screeching shadow with him, and
plummeted to his final peace.

Leaving Regina all alone with Emma.

Who was too shocked to do anything more but stand.

###

The wind was an angry scream over those sharp edges of glass. A painful whistle through the cracks. It ruffled the dark folds of Cora’s dress and whipped through the greasy hair around Rumpel’s face. But they were still.

As still as Emma and Regina, standing there in silence.

The wind was so loud.

And Emma… Her voice had been stolen by shock but the cry of pain and grief was there in her knitted brow and downturned mouth.

“I could have stopped all of this,” Emma said.

“You were outmatched.”

“She couldn’t have killed me Regina. Not without ending the curse, and she couldn’t have controlled me. I could have—“

“Been a prisoner again. No one who loves you would want that.”

“The last person to love me just threw himself out a window. So it doesn’t really matter.”

“He was giving us time,” Regina said. Because no “sorry” would suffice. No attempt at consolation would heal Emma now.

“For what?”

“There’s a chance… I have a chance now—to save the world.”

“Okay.” Dull. Emma couldn’t even cry. Her eyes were pale. All they lacked was that film that formed on the eyes of the dead.

David had left Regina no choice in the matter. Killing himself and attempting to take Snow with him was all an attempt to force her hand.

To finish the job Cora started with that knife in Henry’s lung. To lay to rest this dying world.

“Will you kiss me,” she asked.

“Why?”

“Because if I save the world this is goodbye.”

“Okay. Then no.”

“Emma—“
She shook her head, every second filling her suddenly with life. With fight. “I’m not losing you. Everyone is gone and I’m not losing you too.”

“The thing is, you won’t be the one losing someone they love. I will.”

Emma was breathing roughly. Her shoulders moving with each breath. The air passing over pink lips that seemed so warm and very alive.

“I can save the world, but I have to lose you.”

The realization softened Emma’s features and even her voice pitched higher. Curious and high like a child’s. “I have to die?”

It was easy to consider the abstract. To ignore the concrete. So Regina could only nod.

“And what. What do you get? What do you save?”

“The world. I can make this all never happen. I can save Henry and David. Your dwarves. Even Snow.”

“Time travel. That’s what you’re saying.”

“There’s a moment right before the barrier and I can be there. I can stop it from ever going up.”

“If I die?”

She nodded again.

“No. No you have to say it Regina. If you kill me you save the world.”

“Emm—“

“Say it.” A command given by a queen.

How regal Emma was in that moment.

“I can make it quick. You won’t feel anything.”

She angrily rubbed at her eye, “That’s bullshit and you know it.”

“If you think I want to do this then—“

“You get Henry. You get your mansion. You play your cards right you even get Cora.”

“And you! You live too.”

“No,” she shook her head, but didn’t let her eyes drift from Regina’s. She came closer too. She seemed taller. “You won’t get me, Regina. It took me nearly ten years to fall in love with you. She won’t love you.”

“She’ll be alive.”

“And that’s enough? Alive and barely tolerating you or me?” She snatched Regina’s hand. Pressed it to the space between her breasts. Her skin was hot. Magic. Life. Skittered over Regina’s fingers. “Because I’m right here. Alive and in love with you.”
“But you don’t love the real me Emma. You love that hero that sacrificed herself in the Enchanted Forest.”

“I love you.”

“You love a **good** person—“

“I love how you get fussy about stupid shit…”

“And we both know that what I’m about to do isn’t what a good person does.”

“And how you always put our son first.”

“I cursed you.”

“And I love how you’re not afraid. Not when it counts.”

“I’m about to kill you.”

“You love madly and bravely.”

“I’m doing this because I love you.”

“But you don’t love me enough.”

####

Blood was hot as tears but both cooled the same when the wind passed over them. Life plucked from the core and a body unwieldy in heavy arms.

Screams of a land lost, ripped apart as the forest returned to claim what was its.

And then wet sand on knees and good friends at each arm.

“What happened?”

“You only just left!”

“Who’s blood—“

The world was dead.

But it could still live.

####

Emma figured things were gonna change when they went hopping back through the portal to Storybrooke. She’d talked to birds! Used **magic**! She and Regina had kind of bonded! She and Mary Margaret had kind of bonded! Regina had laid a big fat wet one on her (complete with some serious tongue action)!

Yeah, of **course** it was going to be different.
But when the three of them climbed out of that well it wasn’t a little different. It was full blown awkward different. Regina was all stiff and not the least bit upset about their abandoning of Mulan and the others.

Which, granted, wasn’t **that** weird. Emma had kind of suspected Regina **wanted** to leave them all behind in the first place.

But Mary Margaret wasn’t upset either and the two of them had something going on. Some creepy **vibe** that had the hair on the back of Emma’s neck standing up.

They’d survived the Enchanted Forest but something wasn’t **right**.

As none of them had cellphones and Emma wasn’t crazy about the idea of trying that thing where she talked to birds and they relayed messages the three of them had walked the couple miles back to town. Ruby had been the first one to see them and she’d shouted out like she was a high schooler seeing her BFF after the summer break and run across the street to grab Mary Margaret and swing her around. Then she’d dropped her and put her on on Emma’s shoulder less like the sort of friends they were and more like the sort of aunt Henry’s book **said** she was.

A stiff “Regina,” had been all Regina had gotten, and she’d smiled nastily in return.

Which, again, weird. Mainly because Emma had felt a little disappointed in Regina and Regina hadn’t even looked at her afterwards.

And she didn’t ask about Henry either and when they saw him she’d hugged him with rigid arms and didn’t even squat down. That was the real alarm bell. Regina **always** tried to be on Henry’s level when they talked. She’d be telling him he was grounded for years and he’d only see Emma over Regina’s cold dead corpse but she’d be at his eye level when she did it.

Someone, and Emma honestly couldn’t remember who, had insisted that they have a “Welcome Home” celebration the next day. She’d tried to catch Regina’s eye so they could both be annoyed at how happy and gooey everyone was and how the party was clearly to celebrate the great Queen Snow White’s return, but Regina’s eyes had been narrowed in though—her head far away from the overly ecstatic scene.

She’d followed Regina out after that.

“You okay,” she’d asked, because they’d bonded enough that just asking Regina about her headspace seemed to be something Emma could do.

“I’m fine dear,” she’d said. Her timbre frosty.

“And you’re gonna show up for this party tomorrow?”

“Oh yes. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

There’d been a little too much menace for Emma’s comfort but she’d let it slide. Because things were weird and Regina was being just about the weirdest of all.

But it was **because** Regina had been so weird and off since climbing up out of the well that Emma was forty kinds of surprised to find her knocking at the apartment door at eleven o’clock at night.

She spied her through the peephole and opened the door saying, “Thought you’d be sleeping on your thousand and one count sheets dreaming of my disemboweling by now.”
A dumb joke.

Stupid.

But Regina’s eyes watered.

“You okay?”

“How’s Henry,” she asked, ignoring the question.

“Fine. Just like he was earlier. What’s up?”

Regina shook her head. She smiled. Her eyes focused on Emma’s face.

Or her lips to be real accurate. She even stepped close, glancing up into Emma’s eyes only briefly before—

Okay it was like she was drinking Emma in. Like she hadn’t seen her in years and like she’d been thinking about her in all those years and thinking really lusty—

She grabbed Regina by the shoulders and pushed her back. “What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to see Henry.”

“At eleven at night?”

“I saw your parents leaving earlier. I wanted to do it while they weren’t here.”

“Yeah, admitting to staking the place out isn’t helping. Neither is you being—Regina what’s happened? Because a couple of hours ago you couldn’t wait to get away.”

“I wasn’t myself.”

“And now?”

She smiled, the smile forming lines around her eyes. It was sincere. Confident in a way Regina usually wasn’t. “I am.” Not confident. Serene. When Regina smiled there was always something behind her eyes. A nasty plan or a buried secret. She was not a person who was just “at peace.”

Until a few weeks ago she would have even said it was as bizarre as Mary Margaret shooting an orc with a bow and arrow.

Apparently things changed.

Emma sighed and stepped out of Regina’s way. “Come on in. He’s asleep upstairs.”

Most people would have waited for Emma to guide them up the stairs, but Regina marched up them like she owned the place and had visited them a thousand times.

Which got Emma to wondering if maybe she had. Thirty years in a town where time never passed. Maybe she used to sit on a stool eating ice cream and watching Mary Margaret sleep. Or clip her toe nails on the couch, and mix them into the box of cereal on the counter.

She followed Regina up. More out of boredom than worry.

The loft where Emma was sharing a bed with Henry was dark compared to the rest of the apartment,
and surprisingly quiet. No rattle of the AC or noise from the other apartments in the building. There was a little light in the corner. A nightlight that hadn’t been there when Emma had gone on her Enchanted Forest road trip.

She had decided not to ask about it when she saw it earlier that night.

And Regina didn’t notice it either.

Just like she didn’t say anything about Henry and Emma sharing a bed.

Instead she sat on the edge of the mattress and trembled. Her hand, shaky with unspoken emotion, reached for Henry. It stopped shaking as soon as it touched his skin. And Regina sighed.

“See,” Emma said. “Just fine.”

“I don’t know what I thought— I suppose I was scared.”

Clearly. Because she’d just said as much to Emma.

“I thought I’d never see him again,” she glanced over her shoulder, “Either of you.”

“Regina…” What? What was she supposed to say to Regina? Was she supposed to tell the woman she was clearly exhausted and crazy and saying things that were definitely going to force them to revisit the kiss they were both not talking about?

Regina bent down and pressed her lips to Henry’s cheek. She snuggled (for lack of a better term). Just like a mom. Just like the mom Emma had wanted to for Henry when she gave him away.

He sighed in his sleep and shifted and Regina sat back up. But she didn’t stop touching Henry. She was enamored with his every sigh and gentle twitch.

And Emma had to admit she was a little enamored too. Watching the two of them and seeing them so comfortable. Of course. The kid was most at home with his mom when he was passed out and she was a little loopy. The two of them only got their happy ending when one of them was unconscious.

Which— Gross when she actually formed that thought into a sentence.

Regina stood and tugged at her jacket. “I should go,” she said. “I have things I should—“

“You can stay,” Emma heard herself saying. “I mean, we thought we were all gonna die and we didn’t and then we just kicked your ass to the curb while we had family time.”

“Emma—“

“So stay. We can split the bed. You on one side of Henry and me and the other. Or you could use magic and put a cot in here. Just—“

Regina slipped into Emma’s space so quickly that most people would have said she used magic. She didn’t kiss her like before. This time it was tender.

And soft. A press of the lips to the corner of Emma’s mouth.

Friendly even.

“That’s twice,” she whispered.
“The first was a distraction.” It had worked.

“And the last?”

“A thank you.”

###

Twelve hours later and Emma was still confused. She sat at the Regina-less party staring at her mug of coffee, wishing it was beer, and wondering why the hell Regina Mills had kissed her twice. And why both times, instead of talking about it like adults Regina had bolted.

She rubbed her mouth angrily, not for the first time.

“You’re gonna get chapped lips if you keep doing that,” David said. He slid into the booth opposite her and tilted his head. “What’s wrong?”

Did he really have to ask that?

He read the question in her frown and shrugged. “Sorry. Bad question.”

“A little.”

“But something’s up right?”

Something besides parents she could have gone to high school with, a town full of people she’d learned about from cartoons and a destiny involving curses and battles and stupid crap.

Somehow she felt telling David that Regina had kissed her, twice, wouldn’t go over well.

“Did someone say something?”

She rolled her eyes.

“Do something? Was it Leroy? Because if it was I’ll deal with—“ She grabbed his wrist to keep him from getting up.

“No one said anything. I’m just thinking.”

“You don’t think,” he fired back confidently. It was meant to be a compliment.

Emma raised her eyebrow.

David blushed, the red going all the way to the tip of his ears. “I mean. You take action Emma. Even before I knew you were my daughter. It’s what I admired about you.”

“Really?”

He smiled. “Yeah.” He nodded at the badge on her belt. “That’s why you’re sheriff, remember?” He leaned in. “So what’s wrong?”

What’s wrong took that moment to waltz into Granny’s with Gold on her arm. He was scowling and she was smiling and Emma might have smiled too, because any time Gold was annoyed was a time
Emma wasn’t, but Regina’s smile was…

Menacing.

She stepped out of the booth and wished she’d worn her gun even though Mary Margaret had insisted she leave it at home with all the other weapons no one was allowed to carry to the party.

Emma’d never felt so motivated to shoot Regina in the face before. It was terrifying. The utter revulsion at seeing Regina smile like that.

David joined Emma. Standing close and providing a solid kind of comfort that the rest of the party couldn’t. He squared his shoulders, “Regina you were invited, he wasn’t.”

“I’m afraid you failed to invite either of us,” she said.

Leroy hitched up his pants under his protruding belly and stood on the other side of Emma, like a squat little knight, “Listen sister, this is a party and its staying that way. Come back tomorrow for the drama.”

“Oh but my dear, today suits me better.”

Dark purple smoke swirled around her feet and quickly enveloped her, and when it dissipated all of Emma’s insides sank like strapped to a stone.

Cora was now standing next to Gold, and she popped her neck like wearing her daughter’s skin had worn her out. “Today I claim my kingdom.”

Mary Margaret gasped and grabbed Henry, hugging him protectively in front of her. The other “dwarves” quickly gathered in front of the two of them like a wall and Archie sidled up next to David, holding his ever present umbrella like a sword.

Cora just laughed. “Isn’t this adorable?”

Ruby honest to God growled.

Leroy jerked his chin at Gold, “Never figured you for the evil team ups Gold.”

Gold continued to stand mute and scowling. Cora produced a twisted looking dagger from her voluminous skirts. “I’m afraid Rumpelstiltskin doesn’t have a choice.”

“That’s a dagger, not his heart. You’re gonna have to do better than that,” Leroy growled.

“No problem little man.” She looked at Gold expectantly. “Rumpel?”

Gold clutched the top of his cane with both hands and tapped its tip against the checkered tile underfoot. Dark smoke bloomed from the point and raced towards Leroy like a wicked snake.

Which was when, Granny, little grumbly, old, not so spry Granny leapt over the counter and flung herself between Leroy and the smoke, the platter in her hand deftly blocking the spell.

She tucked into a roll Emma would have been hard pressed to pull off, and came up holding the platter like a weapon and her other hand before her like a guard.

It was an impressive as hell little move.

So impressive that no one really knew how to respond. Even the aging Bonnie and Clyde were both
confused.

“Weren’t expecting that one were you love,” Archie asked. His pose was much more “let’s duel to
the death” then it had been before, and if he hadn’t possessed Archie’s gravely voice she would have
sworn it was a certain lost pirate taunting Cora and Gold.

“I have no idea what you are, but I’m sure it can wait until you’re dead. Rumpel kill them, Spare the
boy and the princess.”

He started towards them, ready to do exactly that.

But the whole building rumbled, and the glass windows at the front undulated in their frames like the
whole wall was caught in an earthquake. Then it split from the building. Separating neatly and flying
backwards into the street. Dust plumed and glass shattered.

Sun shined through it like they were all having a religious experience.

And two shadows took shape in the middle of the mess. As the dust began to settle she could make
out Regina, her arms outstretched, her face a mask of focus, and a thick lock of hair in her eyes.

Aurora was standing beside her, dressed like a Robin Hood reject and holding a fancy bow, an
arrow notched and aimed at Cora.

“Have they heard of us,” she asked.

Granny shook her head. Like a cloak the form of Granny disintegrated, Mulan standing in her place.
“I don’t think they have. Killian, care to do the honors?”

Archie shimmered too, another cloak of magic falling away to reveal Hook, his eyes sharp and his
grin dashing. “We’re the Four Thieves—”

Regina’s grim focus wavered. Her own small smile formed. “And we’ve come to steal your heart.”
Aurora let her arrow fly. The arrowhead pierced Cora’s breast with a thunk. She grinned, yanked it out, turned it into a ball of fire and flung it back.

So…immortality was new.

“We got to get Henry out of here,” David said.

Emma agreed. Big time.

She watched Aurora dodge the fireball like a freakin’ acrobat. Regina caught it and snuffed it between her bare hands with a snarl.

Hook leapt from his place at Emma’s side and lunged at Gold, his sword an extension of his arm. Gold deflected with his cane. When Mulan launched her own attack a sword materialized in Gold’s other hand and he parried.

Despite the odds the three were evenly matched, Gold was faster and stronger than could be humanly possible and he just barely kept the two others at bay. And Hook and Mulan…

They moved like dance partners. There were no words and yet they read each other’s every motion as though intent were telegraphed. One ducked under the slashing blade of the other and one thrust at Gold’s blind side while the other blocked both swords. They were disturbingly simpatico, and the part of Emma that loved a good fight movie was enchanted.

Then Regina raised both of her hands as though she was holding two marionettes on strings. Behind her the rubble lurched upward into the shape of two enormous—

Humans.

She was making giant people out of stone and glass and the board Granny used to announce specials. The special was coconut meringue. The creatures both screeched and as their vocal cords were made of metal and rock and glass it was worse than fingernails on a chalkboard. Everyone not currently engaged in mortal combat covered their ears with their hands.

“Cool,” Henry shouted in awe.
“Not cool,” Emma shouted back. “Mary Margaret we got to get him out of here!”

Mary Margaret nodded, grabbed Henry and shoved him towards Leroy. “Get him back to my place and keep him safe. Don’t let him out of your sight.”

Leroy caught Henry by the shoulder but didn’t actually move, “What are you doing?”

“We’re providing back up,” she said, then without even flinching reached out and caught a freaking arrow that had nearly flown into Leroy’s face.

“Sorry,” Aurora called from the other side of the fight.

Cora had brought her own monsters made out of the diner into play. They were dinky little things made out of bench cushions and stools and—

There was a scream of metal and then the oven from the back of the diner came charging through the dining area like it was a flippin’ bull in a china shop. It smacked into the dinky monsters to make one massive monster that roared with the heat of that industrial oven.

Hook stopped fighting long enough to gape. “That’s not good-“

The monster smacked him so hard he flew over Regina and Aurora and into the cloud of dust where the street used to be.

“I’m thinking…” David started.

“We should get out of here too,” Emma finished.

Which was easier said then done. Leroy and the other “dwarves” had gone out the back and the whole point of sticking around was to give them time to get away. Following was kind of the opposite of that point. But going out the front meant weaving through the battle between witches and a wizard.

Hook came charging forward again with a battlecry only to get smacked again, this time in the face with the hilt of Gold’s sword.

Ruby, who hadn’t fled with the others, growled “To hell with this,” and then she charged Gold, shifting into a god damned wolf as she went.

Emma’s resolve to not call the whole battle “cool” wavered. Just a little.

But she didn’t have too much time to worry about cool factors because Cora’s oven monster decapitated one of Regina’s ruined front of the diner monsters and its head, a plate of glass shaped like a giant guillotine blade, made a beeline for Emma’s neck. David shoved her out of the way, and used his arm to deflect the glass. It shattered, shredding his jacket and flinging tiny shards of glass into his face.

They leapt over the bar and landed on the rubber mat beside Mary Margaret, who gasped in horror.

“David!”

“I’m fine.”

Fine was subjective. Most people with a piece of glass as big as Emma’s thumb sticking out of their eye socket would not be considered fine. She fought the urge to retch.
Mary Margaret tried to fuss over him but David just grimaced and yanked it out with a grunt. Blood poured out and Mary Margaret reached above him for a towel and stymie the flow.

Emma had no idea what she was supposed to say after witnessing that.

“Maybe Mother Superior can fix it,” Mary Margaret hoped.

“I’m fine,” his good eye focused on Emma, “you okay?”

So that was how to play it. Act like a guy wasn’t half blind. She could do that. She nodded, “I’m fine, but we need to figure out a way to stop this or the insurance premiums for the whole damn town’ll go through the roof.” And more decent guys would lose an eye.

Mary Margaret peeked over the counter, but ducked back down when something smashed into it. “We’ve got two witches in a full blown war and a Dark One fighting a pirate, warrior, and a werewolf. What we need is to get this whole show away from town.”

There was a brief shadow and then Aurora flopped over the side of the counter. Her hair was a wreck and she was breathing hard, but she was focused too. “Regina insists you all are useful,” she panted. She just barely glanced at David and the makeshift bandage Mary Margaret was tying around his head. “Cora is wearing a satchel and we need it.”

The three all furtively looked over the counter as one. “What’s in it,” Emma asked in a stage whisper.

“Someone’s heart I think. Regina wasn’t clear on whose. We just need to get it.”

“She stole someone’s heart?”

Mary Margaret blanched.

Aurora shrugged, “I guess. I just need you all to get the heart and keep her busy. Then we can stop Cora. Which means no war, and no Dark One trying to kill my girlfriend.”

Said girlfriend had found rope and was quickly tying a makeshift lasso while the werewolf and pirate kept Gold busy.

“You and Mulan are dating,” Mary Margaret asked in friendly surprise.

“We haven’t been official because the last time I dated someone I was engaged at sixteen and in a coma for thirty-five years but yes we are.”

“Mulan’s the girl pirate right,” David asked.

“She and Aurora were both in love with the same prince,” Mary Margaret helpfully explained, “he got cursed into a coma when Emma and I were sucked into the Enchanted Forest by the wraith.”

“And no one lived happily ever after—could you all focus,” Emma snapped.

Her would be parents both looked duly chastised. Aurora just look bored.

“So we get the heart and this all stops?”

Aurora nodded.

Emma rooted through the cabinet under the counter and produced a box of vodka so rough that
Emma had it on good authority could strip paint. “Then let’s get to it,” she said.

####

Emma fell madly in love when she was eight. She was fourteen, had thick black hair, actual boobs, and a penchant for cigarettes. She wasn’t the neighborhood slut, because that was her sister. Instead she was the queen and all the boys and a lot of the little girls were her loyal subjects.

And it was that fourteen year old girl, sitting in a throne made out of rotting crates and old tires in an abandoned lot between a 7-Eleven and an empty office building, that taught Emma how to soak a rag, stick it in a bottle of something flammable, light it, and fling it.

They’d used Snapple bottles and gasoline, but the paint peeling vodka from under the bar and the roll of paper towels David found worked nearly as well. Emma chunked them like a world class softball player, delighting as each smashed at Cora’s feet and splashed flame everywhere.

David laughed nervously as he lit and handed her bottles. “Should I be worried at how much you’re enjoying this?”

Some spiel about abandonment formed in Emma’s head, but hashing out those issues in the middle of a literal fire fight seemed like a bad idea. So she just took another flaming bottle and flung it.

The fire startled Cora, and she had to pause to whirl it all up into a giant ball of flame over her head. Before she could lob it at Emma and David Regina caught Cora’s arm in a long tendril of vines from the little garden that used to be in the front of Granny’s diner. The tug was enough to ruin Cora’s aim, and her ball of fire instead smashed into Gold, who stumbled under the onslaught as Mulan, Hook and the giant Ruby wolf leapt out of the way.

All of it was just a giant distraction. While Cora reeled Mary Margaret scuttled under flying balls of fire and pointy arrows to cut the satchel away from Cora’s waist in one smooth motion.

Cora screamed in frustration and appropriated half of one of Regina’s rubble monsters to fling as debris at Mary Margaret. She tossed the satchel to David with one hand and used her other to pull herself behind an upturned table. Glass and rocked plinked uselessly against the wood.

Regina cried out too, calling to David and asking for the satchel.

But his face hardened.

“David,” Emma warned.

The original Prince Charming wasn’t living up to the name in that moment. As soon as he had the satchel the attempts at light humor and optimism vanished. His face was like stone and that one remaining eye had turned into a chip of ice. He drew the heart slowly from the bag, and seemed to marvel at it.

She wondered if he’d even seen one before.

Emma hadn’t. She’d seen Regina reach into a body but she’d never seen the heart come out. She’d expected something…gooey. Something alive.

But it was translucent and a bright red glow emanated from its center—too red to be real. Not like the blood dripping down David’s face. It wasn’t a heart but a vessel, one for the kind of magick with a k
Regina had intoned a couple of times in the Enchanted Forest.

“David please you don’t know what you’re—” Cora flung Regina back, silencing her protest.

“Give it back,” she demanded. Her hand was held out and the fingers curled cruelly.

But…

The hairs rose on the back of Emma’s neck. Regina was trying to push herself back up and Ruby was holding onto Gold’s ankle with her teeth while Mulan had him bound up in a piece of rope and Hook was stalking towards him with a scowl and that glinting silver appendage and Cora was just glaring.

She wasn’t rushing David or using her magic. She just had her hand outstretched like claw.

It wasn’t—

“I won’t let you hurt my family,” David pronounced, “or anyone else.”

He was thinking of himself in the moment. Of the place where he’d just had an eye minutes earlier.

David squeezed the heart and Cora did look a little uncomfortable, but it was Mary Margaret, partially hidden by a table, that drew Emma’s attention. She was clutching her chest and grimacing in pain.

Shit.

Things slotted into place as David’s fingers dug into the soft flesh.

Mary Margaret had said she’d been alone with Cora. She’d mentioned it just yesterday. And then she’d insisted they all leave their weapons at home before going to the party and—

“DAVID NO!”

The heart was there and then it was ash. A deathly white kind the same shade as Mary Margaret when all the color drained from her face. She slumped forward, her empty palm facing upward and her fingers curled in that specific way of the dead.

Even the battle with Gold stopped when Cora started cackling. Snow white ash drifted softly away from David’s inert hand. The color of it made it all click in his head and he tried to walk towards Mary Margaret but his feet didn’t work right. He stumbled. His knees struck the ground and dust—or maybe just leftover heart—coated his jeans.

Emma felt dead.

The closest she’d even been to dead was feeling Regina’s death through the stupid locket around her neck. It didn’t hurt half as much. It wasn’t even pain. This was a distinct lack of pain. A hole where grief for a dead mother should reside.

She’d never even bothered to call her mom. Mary Margaret had always just been easier.

Cora laughed, “Did you really think I’d just keep my heart with me?”

“Mother,” Regina cried. She sounded angry. Like she was actually upset by Mary Margaret’s death.

“There’s your revenge dear. Aren’t you happy?”
“No.”

“She was your enemy. And now she’s gone.”

“God. You ruin—” Regina couldn’t say the words. Maybe because she’d sound like she was fifteen. Or maybe because deep down that was still her mom standing there and it was hard to truly hate the person that had brought you into the world.

Emma didn’t know.

Then.

Then Mary Margaret coughed.

####

There was no coming back from a crushed heart.

None.

If the heart was destroyed the body died. No magic or science or wishes to a worthless fairy godmother could fix that.

A heart had to exist for a body to live.

Snow coughed and stirred like a living person.

Right after Regina had watched Snow’s husband crush her heart.

Cora and Rumpel both gaped and their open mouths and wide eyes would have been funny if Regina wasn’t fighting a more bitter laugh.

Of course Snow White would survive.

Another Cora had sent her heart away and somehow it had ended up outside of Storybrooke when it was destroyed and now, with its original owner evaporated into time itself it clung to this Snow and gave her a second chance.

The object of everyone’s shock looked around in confusion. “What happened?”

Her husband shook his head because he had no idea.

So it was Rumpel, of all people, who said, “It’s a miracle.”

####

“It’s a miracle,” Gold said, like he was seeing Jesus fricking Christ sitting there on the ground.

The only one who found that line more ridiculous than Emma was Regina with her sharp bark of laughter.

“A miracle,” she said haughtily. “Snow White defies all odds and survives certain death and you’re
saying it’s a **miracle.**”

Gold must have felt pretty sure of his assessment because he looked at Regina like she was stoned out of her mind and a little crazy on top.

“The woman survived because of **magic** you idiot.”

“Magic doesn’t bring back the dead, as you well know,” he sneered.

“And I’m beginning to think what you know of magic could fill a thimble Rumpel.”

“Blame that one on me,” Hook claimed, pointing at his self with his sword, “a few years in my company and the Dark One doesn’t seem quite so all knowing and evil.”

“Oh enough of this,” Cora shouted. “I don’t care how Snow survived. She dies. Again. Now.” That last word with the flight of that dagger. Handle over razor sharp edge it flew through the air.

Only to be intercepted by Regina. A flash of purple smoke and she was standing in front of Mary Margaret, the blade caught smoothly in her hand and its tip just a few inches from Mary Margaret’s surprised face.

Cora’s face fell as she struggled with— “Regina, I’m trying to help you.”

Regina tilted her chin up defiantly. “I made a promise.”

“Who would force you to do that?”

Emma had to admit to being curious herself. Regina had once assured her that she and Mary Margaret would make it through the portal alive because of Henry, but she’d just stepped between Mary Margaret and death when she could have invented a whole slew of reasons not to.

It didn’t make sense.

Just like it didn’t make sense when Regina’s eyes flickered over to Emma and then back to her mom. It was the way they remained on Emma just a fraction too long, and the way a spark of heat flared in the locket.

It felt kind of like Emma had fallen asleep during the important part of some movie.

She was completely lost.

“Why can’t you understand this is all for—“

**Your** own good,” she spat. “You want to build yourself a kingdom and use me as an excuse to do it, and I can’t allow it.”

“I’m doing this because I love you.”

“You can’t love. Not without a heart. All you can do is…” She shook her head. Blinked like trying to clear a fog in her mind. “All you can do is…” The blood seemed to drain from Regina’s face and she fell to her knees.

Slowly, like unwrapping a precious gift, she unfurled her hand. The dagger dropped to the ground with a heavy clang, and red welled up for all to see.

A cut clear across Regina’s palm. She pressed the thumb of her other hand into it and stared with
wonder.

“Oh my darling,” Cora said in sympathy—her own urge to argue vanished.

“What,” Emma asked. “What the hell’s happening?”

Gold limped over and knelt to pick the knife up off the ground. Regina and Cora made no move to stop him, both too focused on the deep cut in Regina’s hand.

Emma called Regina’s name and it was like only Emma saying her name worked. It snapped her out of her shock long enough for her to look at Emma with…

Sorrow.

“What’s going on,” Emma asked again.

Gold spoke softly to Regina, “You don’t have much time.”

“For what,” Emma asked. “Seriously what’s happened?”

Regina looked back down at her hand and truly happy laughter erupted from her mouth. And Emma knew the difference. She’d heard her laugh in evil delight. Heard her full on cackle. Even heard a mad laugh.

But this was just a disturbing kind of joy. Unnerving and so sane as to be insane.

The laughter rang off the ruins around them. Seemed to touch every single person there. Gold, of all people, looked almost ashamed.

“Of course,” Regina said to herself. “Happy endings come with a price don’t they?”

Emma took a careful step towards her, but the heel of her boot crunched the glass underfoot and Regina looked up sharply. There were a number of emotions that quickly flitted across her face. Ranging from grief to horror to longing and even to love. Too many emotions for Emma to really understand and Regina seemed to get that too. Like she’d looked to Emma to wordlessly communicate something critical and realized she’d failed.

Her face went slack as every ounce of those emotions evaporated. She looked back down at her bloody hand and in silence disappeared.

The purple smoke from her departure lingered just a little longer.

Gold held the knife up and red glittered on its edge like jewels. “Even a nick is fatal if your name’s not on the blade.”

“Regina’s—“

“As dead as you all will soon be,” Cora declared. Magic actually flared around her body and she raised both her hands. Wind whipped at her skirts and blew dust into Emma’s eyes. The whole sky darkened with thunderclouds. Lightening bolts smashed into the ground around them with screams and sparks.

Gold tilted his body so his knife was turned away from Cora and his eyes suddenly shifted from their usual brown to something like gold paint. He sneered.
“If I cannot have my daughter,” Cora boomed, “then you cannot have your li—“

Her threat was interrupted by a sound like a hammer hitting a melon. Her eyes rolled back up in her head and she collapsed in a heap on the ground. Immediately the sky returned to its normal blue hue and cloudless state and the harsh winds turned into a gentle breeze.

Standing directly behind her and holding an actual hammer was Aurora. “It’s all the theatrics they do,” she explained, “leaves them wide open.”

Mulan was the one to break the stunned silence, “Did you get it.”

Aurora nodded and held up a box. “The heart of the Queen of Hearts. As requested.”

“That’s lovely,” Hook said, “only Regina’s been nicked by Rumpelstiltskin’s knife and fled.”

“But I’ve got Cora’s heart. We can make her not evil.”

“I don’t—“ Emma tried to form words and kept having trouble. She finally settled on “What the hell is going on!”

####

It was Hook who explained it. Aurora and Mulan hunched over Cora’s unconscious form and Gold winced as they tried to figure out how to put the heart back in the body. Emma, her “parents,” and Ruby gathered around Hook and listened to him spin some tale about how the four of them were a “band” of “thieves” and they’d concocted some plan to save Mary Margaret (who’d had her heart stolen) and Cora (who’d removed her heart decades earlier).

“And you didn’t mention any of this before hand because?”

“Well, a good plan’s rather worthless if the enemy hears it isn’t it? And you lot would have been so upset about her missing heart that you’d blow the whole thing.”

At every mention of the word “heart” Mary Margaret would put her hand on her chest like she was trying to feel for what, according to Hook, wasn’t there.

“But I destroyed a—her—the heart. How’s Mary Margaret still alive,” David asked, pulling his wife closer.

Hook shrugged. “That’d be a question for one of the heart experts. I just steal the things.”

“No, you’re a distraction while I steal the things,” Aurora said. “She had it in Regina’s back yard surrounded by a ring of fire—”

“That’s not—“

“Breathing pygmies.”

Emma snapped her fingers in between them. “It’s like you two aren’t even speaking real words. Can we focus on what actually matters now? Regina’s missing and we need to find her.”

“There’s nothing to find,” Gold said. “She’s dead. Or will be soon enough.”

“You would say that,” Hook glowered, “but I know the woman, and she’s survived tougher scrapes
than one from your dagger.”

“It’s fatal, and if you come a bit closer I can show you just how.”

Hook actually started towards Gold, before Emma stepped between them. “No. No more fighting today. And you,” she pointed at Gold, “there’s got to be a way.”

“He could die and then Regina’d live,” Hook said over her shoulder.

Gold continued to scowl, “And she’d be the Dark One. Which I suspect Henry would frown upon.”

Shit. Henry.

If his mom went and died saving Mary Margaret it would definitely improve his view of her. Downside: her being dead and Emma suddenly being a single mom. Also: having to explain it to Henry and watching his little face fall as he realized she was gone.

And knowing the kid he would absolutely blame himself for it.

“Ah ha,” Aurora shouted, her arm elbow deep into Cora’s back. “I did it!”

Gold winced. “You should take your hand out now unless you want to kill her.”

Aurora paused just long enough for Mulan to thump her arm. When she finally pulled her arm all the way out the unconscious Cora began to stir.

Gold limped over to her, leaning heavily on his cane. “We need to get her somewhere secure before she fully comes to. She was a piece of work even before she lost her heart.”

“Seems to me we should put you both somewhere secure,” Emma said.

“As long as I have my dagger we won’t have a problem dearie.”

“The padded cells as the hospital,” David said, sticking his thumbs in his belt loops, “We can put her there. I’ll call Mother Superior to help make it secure enough.”

“And Regina,” Mary Margaret asked. She’d gone from just keeping her hand on her chest to bunching the front of her blouse up in her hands. “We can’t just…let her go.”

“We won’t,” Emma assured her. “David you and Gold get Cora to the hospital and then Gold? You’re going to figure out a way to save Regina. The rest of us need to spread out and find her.”

Instead of agreeing they all looked at something right behind Emma.

“You’re looking for my mom right?”

Son of a—

Emma closed her eyes and cursed all 6 of the stupid “dwarves” and the one guy who couldn’t remember being one. Henry was a genius and all sure, but was it really that hard to keep an eye on him?

She slowly turned around to face her son, who was trying to stare at her but kept being distracted by the wreckage that used to be Granny’s diner and the bedraggled state of all the participants of the battle.
“Isn’t he adorable,” Aurora asked, only to be silenced by a swift elbow to the stomach from Mulan. Emma took a deep breath and stepped closer to Henry. “Yeah kid, she’s…gone.”

“Why?”

“Because—“ Because her mom tried to kill Emma’s mom and she got in the way and wanted to go off and die in peace?

How the hell did you tell a kid that?

“How the hell did you tell a kid that?”

“Because she got hurt saving my life,” Mary Margaret said gently, “and she didn’t want us all to see her hurt.” She smiled like that fourth grade teacher Henry used to have. “You know how she is.”

He nodded sagely, and Emma had to admit she was impressed with how Mary Margaret had cut through the bullshit. Even if it reminded her that the two people who knew Regina best were the kid, and the woman who wanted to be her mom.

“So we got to find her and make sure she’s okay. And you need to—“

“I’m going,” Henry insisted. “I know my mom, maybe better than any of you, and I’m gonna help.”

####

Magic always comes with a price.

It was the first rule of magic. The only true rule of magic. Everything else was flexible.

But price was non-negotiable.

Regina saved the world. Saved everyone she cared about.

Knowing Aurora she’d even saved her own mother.

And Regina was going to die because of that.

The blood leaking from her hand was no longer red. It was pitch black and it had worked its way up her veins, turning her whole arm gray. And numb.

She’d expected impending death to hurt more.

It had hurt when Emma had died. She’d felt the aftershocks of it through the locket. Pain so immense as to make a woman breathless.

But Regina’s own death was just cold and sweaty. And bleak.

She wanted to be terrified. She was terrified.

But Henry was safe. Henry was alive.

Emma was alive.
So a short and bleak future wasn’t so scary. She’d get to rest. And maybe there’d be an afterlife. One with Daniel and Emma, who both tell her in soft, haunting voices that she couldn’t love them enough. One where Henry and her understood each other. Where they could speak with a look and love with a touch. A mother and son united by their own terribly warped senses of self.

Would he forgive her for not saving him? Would he love her?
Would any of them?

The Henry she watched sleep the night before hated her. She knew that. He was still young and naive and he despised her and her curse. He couldn’t even wake when she’d kissed him in the hospital. Emma and him. That was True Love.

She didn’t have him. Or Emma. She hadn’t even had Daniel.

She had no one.

How terribly bleak.

“Mom.”

She didn’t know her eyes had fallen closed until she opened them again. She was drifting in and out and at first thought that small voice was in her head. But when she pried her eyes open she found Henry and Emma were standing over her and looking down. They reminded her of nesting dolls with their identical frowns.

She smiled up at them and it was a great effort. Dying did that. Sapped the strength. She could barely do more than turn her neck. Her arms and legs were useless.

Henry knelt beside her and he was surprisingly warm. Or perhaps she was just that cold.

He took a hand in his burning hot one and held it so tight.

“Do you remember this,” she asked.

And he frowned again. His young brain trying to catch up with her terribly old one.

He looked around then his frown deepened. “We used to come here,” he finally said. “We had picnics.”

He did remember. “Good.”

“Regina,” Emma started.

“Save your breath Ms Swan,” she managed to say with a little of her old regal flare. “You won. And evil is vanquished.”

“Maybe we can—“

“It’s the price.” She managed to put just enough fire in her voice to force Emma to look her in the eye. “Someone has to pay it,” she said fiercely.

One corner of Emma’s mouth twitched upward in a half smile. As if to say “I never thought it’d be you.” But wry jokes about impending death weren’t appropriate in front of a child.

“You saved Snow White’s life,” Henry whispered.
“I know.”

“But you hate her.”

“And someone I loved more made me promise to save her. To save all of you.”

She’d first begged for her own life and when it was being stolen from her that other Emma had instead begged for theirs. “At least keep them safe,” she’d whispered as her body turned heavy and unwieldy in Regina’s arms.

Heny frowned. Like he did when he was working on a puzzle at the kitchen table while she made dinner. Only he was missing a piece of this particular puzzle and Regina didn’t have the energy to give it to him.

“I want you to promise me something Henry.” The furrow between his brow softened. “Be good.”

####

They’d found her sitting against a tall tree on a bluff overlooking town. Barely moving. The woman looked like hell, and a big part of Emma knew that this was going to be it. That this time she’d feel her die and there’d be no coming back. She was gray all over. Not gray like a doctor would use the word. Actually gray. The poison was turning her blood black and had leached all the color out of her and provided its own absence of color instead. She looked more like a statue that a person.

And she was staring at Henry with completely black eyes and telling him to be good.

“Regina—”

She ignored Emma and with her uninjured hand reached out for Henry. Her hand dug into the thick fabric of his coat like a claw. “Be good,” she said again, “and know trust yourself. Know how clever you are. And how brave.”

“Mom…”

“And know that you were wanted. And that I love you. And that in the end,” she smiled, “I was good too.”

Emma would remember that smile. She’d be old and infirm and rotting away in a hospital bed somewhere in Utah and she’d remember that smile.

It was incandescent. She wasn’t a religious person, but that was the kind of smile that showed you a woman’s soul. Regina said those words and believed and Emma, even knowing all she did, believed them too.

And then that was it.

“All she wrote,” foster mom number one would have said.

Everything that Regina was seemed to fade and there was just a sad gray body left behind.

“Mom?”

Emma had to close her eyes. Just for a minute. She knew she had to be brave and be the adult, but
for just a second she closed her eyes so she wouldn’t have to ever know that look on her own son’s face.

“Mom,” he said again and as often as he used that term when talking to Emma she knew it wasn’t for her.

He was shaking Regina. Jerking her back and forth as much as an eleven year old could manage a grown woman. And she wasn’t getting up.

“Kid…Henry.”

He couldn’t hear her. He was tugging on his mom and then hugging her and begging her not to go. And would if it were so easy. If you could just beg and a person would stay. The kid wasn’t supposed to know that wasn’t true. He wasn’t supposed to have that lesson yet. No kid should.

“Mom please,” he cried. He tucked his head into the crook of Regina’s shoulder, his face pressed up against her neck. “You can’t leave me.”

His lips pressed to her neck. It was a kiss a kid gave their parent. A peck. Ephemeral.

It was enough. In the end.

Henry once told Emma Regina wasn’t his real mom and that she could never love him. But he could love her. And he did.

###

Death wasn’t supposed to smell so much like antiseptic. And there wasn’t supposed to be so many beeping noises, or scratchy sheets or loud talking in the distance.

Regina opened her eyes.

Death definitely wasn’t supposed to involve that hideous ceiling or those awful flower arrangements near the window. And it wasn’t supposed to hurt. But there was her arm, on fire. She looked down expecting to see her hand engulfed in flames, but it was just wrapped in thick white bandages.

“You’re alive,” Emma said softly.

She wasn’t supposed to be wherever death was. Yet there she was, sitting in an uncomfortable chair beside the bed, and leaning forward, her elbows balanced on her knees.

“You’ve been asleep for the last week. Apparently even True Love’s kiss doesn’t just go and heal whatever mojo’s in Gold’s knife.”

“How—” Regina’s voice was thick and her throat dry.

“Henry figured out where you were. Made me take him up into the forest where you two used to picnic. Do you remember?”

She remembered slowly dying. And Henry holding her hand.

“He knew,” she croaked.
“Kid’s smart,” Emma said. “And he keeps campaigning to live here until you’re awake.”

“Where—“

“Mary Margaret took him to watch the fairies rebuild Granny’s. Apparently they’ve got enough fairy dust or whatever to do it right.” She shrugged, accepting that she’d just referred to fairy dust as something real. “Kid’s not the only one that’s been haunting this place either.”

“Mulan—“

“Your ‘Four Thieves’ or whatever. Which you’re going to have to explain some time, because somehow they think you guys spent nearly three years together when you were only gone a couple of hours.”

Regina nodded and tried to sit up.

Emma tilted her head. “And they’re not the only thing I’m curious about. A lot of things aren’t adding up Regina. There’s how you knew where Cora’s heart would be, and who convinced you to save Mary Margaret, and how she’s alive when she doesn’t have a heart. But you want to know what the really big question is—”

She held her fist over Regina’s head, and her locket dropped down. No. Not Emma’s. Or this Emma’s. It was the locket the other Emma had given her. Because this Emma’s locket was visibly around her neck.

The one in her hand caught the sun light and Regina squinted.

“Why the hell are there two of this locket?”

Chapter End Notes

The Monomythical Adventures of Regina Mills and Emma Swan will continue next month in Dangerous is the Vexed God.

Summary: Emma Swan just wants to adjust to life in a post-Curse Storybrooke. She wants to get to know her kid. Get to know her parents. And maybe learn how to use her magic. But the town has an epidemic of flying monkeys, there’s a drunk pirate walking down Main half naked, Regina Mills keeps looking at her like she’s seen her naked, and, oh yeah, someone’s killing off fairy godmothers.

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