When you think all is lost, look again

by gingerandhoney

Summary

[S2 Canon divergence: Rumpelstiltskin dies before Cora can use the dagger in "The Miller's Daughter." Neal dies protecting him.]

After the events in Gold's pawnshop bring up best-forgotten memories, Henry, Emma, and Regina struggle to come to terms with each other. Meanwhile, a mysterious prankster wreaks havoc on Storybrooke.
A Prologue, of Sorts

When she was a young child, perhaps five or six years old, Regina discovered the kitchens that were tucked away underground in a back corner of the manor house.

She’d never really thought about it before: where the food came from. It appeared on a tray in the corner of the nursery, the same every morning, not a tea spoon or crumb of bread out of place. She would eat alone, or under the hawk eyes of the nursemaid, and then the tray would disappear and come back again at regular hours with toast or tea or supper.

But one autumn afternoon she’d lost a marble down the steps of the forbidden staircase—the one hidden behind the walls, with the rest of the dirty things—and there they were: a whole world of people scurrying like mice through narrow, darkened hallways, carrying trays and buckets of cloudy water and shouting at each other in accented voices.

At first, nobody seemed to notice Regina standing halfway up the stairs, marble all but forgotten. Then an old woman in a stained brown dress came briskly through a doorway, wiping her hands on a rag. Catching Regina’s eye, she froze, her wrinkled face pulling into a frown.

“Girl, what are you doing down here?”

Regina, unused to speaking to anyone apart from the nursemaid, found her voice had deserted her.

“I—I lost my marble,” she managed after a moment.

“Well, did you find it?” the woman asked, tucking the rag into a belt at her waist.

“No.”

The woman seemed to consider her. “If your mother catches you down here, little lady, we’ll both face her wrath.”

Regina shivered at the dark look in the woman’s warm eyes, remembering the steel-cold touch of her mother’s magic on her skin. But she felt a bit bold, standing on the forbidden staircase.

“My mother never comes to dirty places,” she said knowingly. “She won’t look for me here.”

The woman stared at her. Then her face crinkled up and she let out a sudden bark of laughter.

“Alright then,” the woman said, holding out a hand for Regina to take. “Let’s find your marble.”

The next afternoon, Regina dropped a rabbit figurine down the stairs. The next, she couldn’t find one of her slippers. And the next, the woman beckoned her into the kitchens without waiting to hear what Regina had lost.

The woman, Regina learned, was called Nadine. She had two grown up sons—a farmer and a soldier—and she’d come from Regina’s father’s land to cook in Prince Henry and Lady Cora’s kitchen when they had been first married.

Nadine taught Regina how to roll her tongue through words like arroz and carne; how to peel potatoes so the skin came off in a single spiral ribbon; how to build a broth from water and roots and spices. And while everything was bubbling away in a pot, she would take Regina’s hand and show her how to hold her skirt and hop-step, hop-step like she had as a girl in her village hall on summer nights.
Regina loved the kitchen. She loved the crackling fire and the perfume of the herbs hanging overhead and the way it felt to make things come together into something more than they were before. She loved the long curtains of yellow sun streaming down from the high window and the way it warmed the worn stone floor under her feet. She loved the smoke-and-honey sound of Nadine’s voice when she sang, and the way it drifted up like the steam from the pots and wrapped them into their own little world.

At night, when the shadows of the too-dark nursery seemed to press in around her, Regina would pull the blankets tightly across her chest and pretend they were Nadine’s arms holding her, pretend that she was Nadine’s little girl and that her life in the manor house was a mistake. She would dream of herself in simple brown dresses, running through the wheat fields of her father’s homeland, eating *asopao* from wooden bowls at a rough kitchen table, hearing the richness of smiles in people’s voices as they spoke around her, feeling their kindness like a warmth in her hands.

And then one day she came down the stairs and the kitchen was quiet. Empty. She called for Nadine, but no one answered. She walked up and down the halls, hoping for a flash of brown skirts or white hair. Sooty-faced chambermaids and footmen with polishing rags hurried around her, not noticing the tears stinging Regina’s eyes.

She came back to the foot of the stairs and saw her mother standing there in a blue silk gown.

“My dear,” Cora said, her voice curled like a sleeping tiger. “You know this is no place for a lady.”

Regina twisted her hands together, avoiding her mother’s eyes. “I was—I was just—”

“Looking for your friend the cook.” Cora swept down the stairs and gathered Regina into her arms. “I know, dear.”

Regina stiffened, her mother’s perfume sickly sweet in her nose.

Cora pulled back and smiled at Regina. Her eyes were gentle and loud and hard. “But she’s not here. She’s gone and she’s not coming back. And neither are you.”

Regina gasped, understanding tightening her chest before the thought of Nadine gone could really settle in her mind.

“It’s for the best, my dear,” Cora said breezily. “Come along.”

Her mother’s hand was cold around Regina’s wrist as she pulled her up the stairs.

Regina never asked where Nadine went. For a while she supposed that, like most people, Nadine had found somewhere better to be. Regina imagined her at home with one of her sons, dancing under the stars with flowers in her white hair, chopping herbs in the kitchen with a little rosy-cheeked child.

It wasn’t until she watched her mother pull the heart from Daniel’s chest that she realized—stupidly, belatedly—what had truly happened.

Now the little girl with the marble is as dead as the rest of them, suffocated under the years of hate and blood and magic. And magic is at the root of it all.
A Musical Interlude in Three Movements

III. Henry runs home.

Henry lies on the couch in the dark and listens to the *tink-tink-tinki-hummm* of the refrigerator in Mary Margaret’s kitchen.

He can’t sleep.

They’d been talking about *her* again. They were setting out plates and napkins and arguing over the last serving of funeral potatoes and talking about whether they should arrest her or banish her or shove her through a portal. For safety. Just in case. Just in case she tries to kill Mary Margaret for making her kill her mother. Just in case she tries to take *him* away.

Henry’s not supposed to know this. He was supposed to be upstairs changing out of his suit before dinner. But it’s not his fault they were trying to have a private conversation in an apartment without walls.

He’d wanted to go downstairs and yell at them. He’d wanted to say, “That’s my *mom* you’re talking about.” Even though he’s not sure what he really means by that. Even though thinking about her makes his stomach go queasy. Even though she hasn’t really been his mother for months. Now it’s Emma who makes his lunch—peanut butter, usually—and walks him to the bus stop and pulls out an extra blanket for him at night.

Nothing is the way it’s supposed to be anymore.

And now he’s on the couch, trying getting a good night’s sleep before his first day back at school since…everything. But it’s hard to sleep when your father—does he count as your father when you’d only known him for three days?—is dead and your mother isn’t the Savior you thought she was and your grandparents are plotting the murder and/or disappearance of your adoptive family. It’s really hard to sleep when you don’t know if your mom is even going to be in the same world as you tomorrow and people are talking about it like it won’t make any difference to you.

And Henry is a little surprised that it *does* make a difference. Maybe he’s just mad at everybody for making everything so complicated and for talking over his head like he’s a little kid. And maybe it’s part of that same feeling he got when he saw people with pitchforks running down Mifflin Street on the day the curse broke.

But, whatever it is, he decides it makes enough of a difference to that he wants to see her and make sure—something. Make sure she’s still there, maybe.

So he sits up slowly and pulls his sneakers on over bare feet. He crosses the room on his tiptoes and tugs his coat and backpack from the hook by the door. He listens for David’s snores. He watches the shadows on the stairs to make sure Emma is still asleep.

She is.

So he opens the door, slips outside, and heads for Mifflin Street.

II. Emma dreams of blood.

In the dream, she’s calm—a false calm, like she’s been drugged, like the panic center of her brain
has been stuffed with cotton.

Other than that, the events replay themselves just as they had on the day in Gold’s shop: Cora breaks through the barrier seconds too late to take the Dark One’s power. Still, Neal steps between the dagger and his father’s body. Cora, somehow both crazed and calm, catches him in the hands, the neck, the chest with a dagger that’s powerless but still sharp. He topples; Emma’s body moves in time to catch him, though her mind remains frozen. She sits with him on the floor, clamping her scarf on the neck wound, her hands coming away red. Regina comes in, wild-eyed, and shoves a heart into her mother’s blood-spattered chest.

And then they’re both sitting on the floor, cradling dying bodies.

Neal’s blood seeps into Emma’s jeans and she thinks of the time she spilled warm coffee into her lap. The effect is basically the same. But the blood will be harder to wash out and—

—Emma’s carrying a tray of lasagna in the prison cafeteria. The baby’s pushing on her bladder and she has to pee and she has to sit down, but everywhere’s full and she’s just about to ask someone to budge up when she feels warmth between her legs.

She looks down and sees red blooming through the rough prison-issue pants. She drops the tray and clutches her stomach, screaming for help. There’s something wrong with the baby. There’s something wrong with the baby…

But everyone’s eating, just shoveling lasagna into their mouths and taking long swigs of milk. There’s a music video playing on the television—a sweaty man lit neon pink is swinging the microphone and mouthing words Emma can’t hear.

She falls, feels the cold tile under her back, feels liquid warmth leaving her body, feels blood pooling around her like molasses, feels knives carving into her belly, feels the baby dying like a thread being cut—

Emma wakes up with tears in her mouth and hears the noise of her sobs before she remembers enough to shut herself up.

*That was an old dream. Haven’t had one like that since…Phoenix.*

She listens for noises downstairs and hears none, though she can almost wish Mary Margaret had heard and decided to come up.

Emma’s memories from the funeral are mostly cold wind and dry leaves and Mary Margaret’s wet eyes. Mary Margaret’s *understanding* this afternoon had been suffocating. Mostly because Emma thinks she’s trying to *understand* something that was never there. Emma doesn’t want to know what Mary Margaret would think of the relationship she’d had with Neal—and she doesn’t really want to try and explain what it was and what it meant, even to herself. Especially now.

There was no fairytale, but Emma lets Mary Margaret grieve for her daughter’s true love because she doesn’t want to be the sort of person who doesn’t believe in that kind of thing. It seems to run in the family.

Besides, she thinks she needs somebody right now who can do things like they’re supposed to be done.

And right now, she thinks she could be convinced to hug her mother if she came upstairs to see her after a nightmare.

But there is no noise on the stairs. So Emma watches the moonlight trace patterns on the rug and
slips back to sleep with tears drying on her face.

I. Regina cuts the strings.

Regina rolls a starry blue marble between her fingers and thinks of the light going out of her mother’s eyes as she held her on the dusty floor of Gold’s shop.

She’s sitting on the cold tile in the upstairs bathroom of an empty house and feeling the old pain whip her magic into a storm that cuts through her veins like ice. It feels like an old friend, like a favorite drink, like the pleasant burn of spice on her tongue.

Is this where it all ends?

All of their corruption and creation and planning, years—decades—of meticulous threads woven together, lives stolen and ended and begotten. All for this:

Cora, dead by her daughter’s unwitting hand. Rumpelstiltskin, dead by the dagger that made him. Baelfire, the boy for whom all this had been given, dead protecting the father who abandoned him, bleeding out in the arms of the Savior as the letters on the cursed blade, and then the blade itself, fade into nothingness.

Snow White, defiled by dark magic, a killer, a manipulator.

It all seems at once inevitable and empty. In the end, there is no sweeping victory, no righting of the universe, no quiet settling of the aftermath. Just three bodies in the ground; the jarring feeling of the world suddenly ending; and life continuing on around them, as tangled and inscrutable as it had always been.

And somehow, she is still standing. She’d survived the end of it all.

Regina thinks of the strings on her wrists, the ones tied there by her mother and Rumpel and…herself. She wonders if her life has always been about those strings, those invisible lines tethering her to the wishes of others; if even in those moments when she felt most powerful, it was only borrowed power, slack given in the cord with which she would eventually hang herself.

Most days she can barely remember the girl she was before the Queen. Most days she doesn’t care to; the act of remembering reeks of the kind of remorse that could break her. She cannot afford to be apologetic about her own survival, whatever it may have cost.

But tonight, she remembers. Tonight she gets up and looks in the mirror long enough to meet her own eyes; she sees the same slimy fear that once took her pain and sold it to the highest bidder in exchange for the intoxication of control. With the icy-hot swirl of magic pressing at her skin, eating her from the inside, she had never been anything more than in-the-moment, never anything less than all-powerful. Any flash of self-doubt was quickly smothered by the next high. Any twinge of pain could be burned through with the twist of her wrist and the snap of a neck. It was easy. It still is.

With the magic using and exhausting every emotion that would have choked her before, she was untouchable. And she’d played straight into their hands.

And she’s disgusted with herself because she’d let them tell her what she wanted. Power.

Revenge. She’d let them shape the hole in her heart to fit their designs, and when nothing she did could fill that hole, she’d let them tell her there was nothing for it. That she had to taketaketake what she could and leave the rest for people with weaker hearts.
They’d needed her unhappy. And she’d let them make her that way.

Regina looks at the steaming goblet on the bathroom counter, at the potion she’d made in breathless desperation that evening when she’d really thought she might just lose her last scraps of control and poof across town to rip Snow’s heart from her chest.

It’s been nearly six hours, and she hasn’t touched it. Yet.

But now she looks at the potion and thinks of Henry’s eyes when she’d told him she loved him he’d dared her to _prove it_, and of the hollow hopelessness that came when she realized she didn’t remember how to be anything else.

She thinks of the empty, shifting days between Emma’s disappearance and her return, when everything seemed suspended in midair, when it seemed like she might catch the important things before they shattered on the ground.

She thinks of the strings on her wrists and the light in her mother’s eyes and of the words _you would have been enough_. She thinks _damn you to hell_ and thinks she means it.

She picks up the goblet and remembers the night she’d walked into Granny’s with a pan of still-hot lasagna balanced on one arm. She’d realized in that moment what it had felt like those last weeks, abstaining and compromising and _trying_, fitting herself into a new box, building herself a new skin, for Henry. It felt like coming in out of the cold, like warming icy hands over a fire, a pleasant, prickling pain spreading slowly as the heat seeps back in.

It felt like waking up again, after all the magic-numbed years in the Enchanted Forest and then the sluggish fever dream that was Storybrooke before Emma came.

It felt like the long-forgotten memory of a lost marble, and dancing in a kitchen underground.

But then Archie disappeared and Cora pulled on the strings around Regina’s wrists and Emma stopped believing…

And Regina wonders for the thousandth time if there was really any choice, any _trying_ at all, if everything would happen as it did regardless of intent or desire. If all action was preordained, what did anything like hope or vengeance or redemption matter? As long as the magic was there in her chest, the strings would pull and she would follow, unaware until it was too late, and she would build or destroy in someone else’s name and congratulate herself on her own cleverness.

Regina looks again in the mirror and then at the goblet in her hand and wonders who is pulling the strings this time. She is past deluding herself.

Still, with something like hope pushing her hand to her mouth, she drinks.

“Cheers, Mother.”

Henry will never have to wonder whether he would have been enough.
Mifflin Street is quiet as Henry passes the hedges in front of his old house. He runs through the garden gate and up the steps and through the unlocked front door. Inside, the house is the same: the same clean walls, the same neat table and chairs across the hall, the same flowery smell coming from that sniffy candle in the living room. He finds all the sameness weird, because nothing is really the same anymore.

There’s a little pool of light outside the bathroom upstairs, so Henry flicks off his shoes and climbs the steps.

He doesn’t know if he should call out to her. He doesn’t want to scare her by shouting, but creeping up on her in the bathroom probably wouldn’t be much better.

He thinks about just sneaking quietly by and spending the night in his old bedroom, just to be there. Just to forget about curses and evil witches and dead fathers for a night, to pretend it’s two years ago again and nothing has happened to make everyone hate each other.

But then he walks by the bathroom door and sees her.

On the floor. Unconscious. In a pile of glass.

“Mom!” he yells, running a few steps into the bathroom before he remembers he’s not wearing any shoes, and that stepping on glass wouldn’t help anybody.

Besides, he’s not really sure what he would do even if he could get to his mother. She’s too heavy for him to move, and he can’t drive anyway, so there’s no way he could take her to the hospital if she needed to go. Which, looking at the cuts on her hands, she probably did.

“Mom! Mom! Wake up!” he yells again from the doorway. She doesn’t move.

He could call 9-1-1, he thinks as he runs down the stairs for his shoes. But he doesn’t trust Dr. Whale—or anybody, really—not to try and ship his mom off to some alternate universe just because she was unconscious.

Then, he thinks maybe…*maybe* Emma.

He runs to the kitchen and grabs the phone off the cradle, then skids back across the entryway, snatches his shoes, and runs back up the stairs to the bathroom.

His mom still hasn’t moved.

Henry grits his teeth, breathes in once through his nose, and dials Emma’s number.

One ring. Two. Three.

“Comeoncomeoncomeon—pick up!” he whispers. He looks across at his mom. Her chest is rising and falling. Her eyes are still closed.

“H’lo?”
“Emma! You have to—”

“Henry?” Emma’s voice sounds suddenly wide awake. “Henry, what—Where are you?”

He can hear her flipping back the covers and stumbling down the metal stairs in Mary Margaret’s apartment. He knows she’s seeing the empty couch.

“My mom’s house,” he says quickly. “You have to—”

“What? Why—Henry! It’s the middle of the night! Did she—”

“No! I just wanted to see her, but I got here and she’s hurt and she won’t wake up and there’s glass and I can’t drive and she’s bleeding—”

“Henry,” Emma interrupts, her voice urgent. “Go to your room right now and lock the door.”

“What? No, we have to help her! Please.”

“I’m coming, kid. I’m grabbing my keys right now and I’m out the door. But listen to me: if someone hurt your mom, they could still be in the house.”

“Oh.”

“Uh-huh—” he hears her car start up. “So I want you to go right now to your room and lock the door. And then you stay on the phone until I get there. Okay?”

“Okay. But—”

“Henry, just do it.”

Taking one last look at his mother—still breathing—he runs down the hall, locks his door, and crawls all the way to the back corner of his closet. He can hear Emma’s breath through the phone and the scream of the sirens on the patrol car. He picks at the hem of the dress pants hanging by his cheek.

“Henry? You there?” Emma says, her voice distant. She must be on speaker.

“Yeah. I’m in the closet.”

The phone crackles with Emma’s sigh. “Good boy.”

She’s never called him that before.

Then he can hear the sirens outside the house. The front door opens, and Emma’s boots clomp around downstairs for a minute before he hears her on the stairs, then in each room down the hall.

“Henry?” she yells.

“I’m in here!” he calls back, pushing his way out of the closet and hanging up the phone.

“You can come out. There’s no one here.”

He opens the door and sees Emma holstering her gun, red jacket pulled on over a crumpled t-shirt and unzipped jeans. She looks him over once and then turns quickly back down the hallway.

“Did you see her?” he asks, running to catch up. “She’s in the bathroom. On the floor.”
Emma keeps walking. “Yeah, kid. I saw her.”

She ducks into the bathroom, her boots crunching on the shattered glass.

“Regina?” she says, crouching down next to his mom.

“She’s still breathing, right?” Henry asks from the doorway.

Emma turns. “Henry, stay out there.”

“Right?”

“Yes. She’s breathing.” Emma leans over and shakes his mom’s shoulder. “Regina? Regina, wake up. It’s—Emma. And Henry. Come on. Regina.”

She looks back over her shoulder at Henry. “We should probably call an ambulance.”

“No! You can’t!”

Emma looks surprised. “Henry, she’s not waking up. We don’t know how long she’s been—”

“You can’t. They’ll send her away. She can’t use her magic if she’s asleep.”

Emma’s face scrunches up. “Kid, what are you talking about?”

Henry feels a bubble of frustration burst in his throat. “I heard you, ok? I heard you guys talking before dinner! You’re going to put her in jail, or make her leave Storybrooke, or send her through a portal! I heard you! And if you take her to the hospital, they’ll do it right now! And she can’t stop them! Because she can’t use magic when she’s asleep!”

Emma just stares at him.

“Henry?”

It’s his mom’s voice.

“Mom?” Henry whispers, taking a step into the bathroom.

“Henry!” Emma yells. “The glass!”

Henry scowls, stalking over to grab his shoes from where they still sit, next to his backpack by the top of the staircase. He shoves them on his feet and hop-steps back to the bathroom. But something like shyness makes him stay in the doorway.

He watches through the crack between the door and its hinges as Emma helps his mom sit up.

“I’m fine,” his mom is saying, jerking her elbow out of Emma’s hand.

Emma eyes the partially dried blood on his mom’s hands and frowns. “No, you’re not. You’ve got glass in those cuts, and you’ve been unconscious for god knows how long…Regina—what happened?”

His mom curls her lip, looking up at Emma defiantly. “I fell.”

“Yeah. Right,” Emma says shortly, glancing over at the mirror—or what’s left of it. The mangled frame is sitting on the counter behind the sink, having fallen from its hook on the wall. It looks suspiciously like someone’d punched it.
“Miss Swan, while I’m not surprised to see you making a hobby of home invasion, I’d prefer if you’d take your little party elsewhere.”

“Regina—”


“You know what?” Emma grits out, raising her hands and standing up. “Fine. It’s not like you’re still sitting in a pile of bloody glass on the bathroom floor. It’s not like I drove out here in the middle of the night because your son—”

His mom’s eyes forget to be angry for a moment. “Henry?”

“Yes, Henry. Now will you let me help you?”

“No!”

“Regina…” Emma reaches back down to take one of his mom’s hands. But that was a mistake, and Henry sees it in his mom’s eyes a second before it happens.

Suddenly, Emma is flying backward into the opposite wall, her arms flailing out and her hair whipping around her face. She hits with a loud thwack and then stumbles forward, barely catching herself on the bathroom counter.

She stays like that for a moment, hunched over and panting with one hand gripping the edge of the sink.

Then she raises her head, eyes burning with surprise and fear and anger, and says “Jesus, Regina. Jesus.”

She sounds like she’s about to cry.

But she doesn’t. Instead, she turns and stomps out of the room, pieces of the broken mirror skittering across the floor, leaving his mother staring after her with empty eyes.

“Let’s go,” Emma says, not bothering to look at Henry.

“But—”

“Henry, just do what I say for once! For once, just do it!”

His breath catching, Henry jerks his backpack over one shoulder and stumbles down the stairs after her, wiping his cheeks on the back of his hand.

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Emma wakes up at six the next morning so tired she feels like she could crack down the middle.

Grief is stupid. It weighs on you like water, but the flavor of it is bland enough that for the first few seconds of wakefulness you can’t remember why you feel like you’re drowning.

And then you have to make yourself remember.

So basically, grief forces you to stab yourself in the eye every morning.
Emma groans and turns over into a cool spot in the sheets.

Right. The funeral was yesterday. The funeral where they buried Neal’s body and Rumpelstiltskin’s ashes in the cemetery of a quasi-fictional town after Neal was murdered by a dagger-wielding sorceress, who was also murdered—by her daughter, the Evil Queen—because Emma’s mother, Snow White, decided to give up on the White part and light a two-ended death candle. And then they had the wake at Little Red Riding Hood’s greasy-spoon diner. Pocahontas brought cheesecake.

Am I leaving anything out?

Oh yeah. And the Evil Queen—also Emma’s son’s adoptive mother—had a violent encounter with her bathroom mirror in the middle of the night and her son—also Emma’s son—called Emma instead of the cops because Emma is the cops, which is why Emma still has glass shards in her sock.

Also, said son ran away last night.

Emma groans again and disentangles herself from the bedclothes. She pads to the shower, strips, yanks the faucet to hot, turns on some probably-passive-aggressively-loud music, and does not think about Neal.

Instead, she contemplates the fact that literally every freaking person in Storybrooke is related. Rumpelstiltskin is—was—her (not really) sort-of father-in-law. Henry’s grandfather. Which is just this week’s Shocker of the Century. But then there’s also the fact that the Evil Queen is Emma’s mother’s step-mother, which makes her Emma’s step-grandmother, and also Henry’s step-great-grandmother. And also Henry’s mother.

That’s what you get for suspending time for 28 years. (All magic has a price=inbreeding? Sort of?)

She hops out of the shower—slightly (pleasantly, distractedly) giddy-angry after trying once again to wrap her brain around the glittering fairytale train wreck that is her life—and sifts through the pile of clean-not-folded clothes on her chair for a shirt.

By the time she comes downstairs, David is piling eggs onto a plate and arranging flowers on a tray for Mary Margaret. He’d done the same thing every morning since that day in Gold’s shop.

“Breakfast in bed?” she asks, slipping onto a barstool near the coffee he’s set out for her.

David shrugs, his smile maybe a little apologetic as he takes the tray through to Mary Margaret.

Emma doesn’t say anything. Because probably if she did, she’d mention something about how manipulating your arch-enemy into killing her mother doesn’t exactly scream “pamper me with eggs and toast.”

But, hey, it’s not really her place to judge. Or maybe it is. (That might be the problem).

The couch creaks, and then Henry’s at her shoulder, all rumpled hair and sleepy eyes.

He climbs onto the stool beside her and pours some cereal into a bowl. The sound is like gravel on glass.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hmm.” Henry stirs the dry cereal around with his spoon and doesn’t look at her.
Emma thinks maybe this is the point at which she should deal with the massive knot of inadequacy-fueled parental guilt that’s been sitting in her stomach since last night.

“Henry…” she says, stopping to take a sip of the steaming coffee. “I’m sorry I yelled at you last night.”

Henry looks at her, his eyes squinting. “You left her there.”

“I—yeah, I did.” Emma says. She probably shouldn’t be taken aback by Henry’s protectiveness of a mother he’s barely seen in weeks. Hasn’t even wanted to see, as far as she knows. “But she had her magic to fix things. And you saw her. She didn’t want help. She threw me into a wall because she didn’t want help.”

Henry looks at her like he can’t believe she’s being so stupid. “She was scared.”

Emma thinks about this, about how right it feels to add the name fear to the tangled mess of things she’d seen in Regina’s eyes last night.

She thinks about how sometimes Regina is too much to be around—apart from the whole homicidal sorceress thing—because the things spilling out of her are just like the things that are twisted tight and locked away in Emma’s chest.

But instead she says, “Why would she be scared?”

“I don’t know,” Henry says impishly. “Maybe she’s doing something she doesn’t want us to know about.”

And just like that, the insightful boy slips away into the suspicious and resentful child.

“Henry…”

“There was a cup on the floor! Like the kind in Mr. Gold’s shop!” he says, his voice taking on that tone that makes Emma want to tie him to a chair to keep him from eating another apple turnover.

“So?” she asks, shrugging, as she takes another sip from her mug.

“So, maybe she was making a potion. Maybe it exploded and that’s what hit the mirror!”

“Or maybe she was just being super fancy and sipping her mouthwash from a gold cup. Sounds like your mother.”

“And then she, like, fell over into the mirror while she was spitting?” Henry asks disdainfully. “Come on, Emma. You know she was lying about what happened. You have your superpower.”

“Oh, I know she was lying,” Emma agrees.

“Then why don’t you believe me?”

“Henry—it’s not that I don’t believe you.”

“Yeah,” Henry scoffs.

“It’s not!” Emma puts the mug back down on the counter and turns to face him fully. “It’s just that I don’t think I’m…ready…right now to get in the middle of another fairytale conspiracy theory. So let’s just leave things alone for right now, okay? It was probably just some stupid accident.”
Henry shakes his head. “But what if it’s something bad? What if she’s trying to kill Mary Margaret? What if she’s trying to take me away again?”

Emma feels steel running through her veins. “We won’t let that happen.”

Henry groans, pushing his still-full cereal bowl back in frustration. “That’s what mean! If she tries to do anything, you’ll send her away!”

“Henry.” She looks him straight in the eye. “I don’t know what you heard last night, but I’m not going to let you lose your mom. I’m not going to let them send her away.”

“But if she kills Mary Margaret—”

“She’s not killing anybody.”

“How do you know? You can’t just say that! She’s really mad! She hates—”

“Look, Henry. It’s almost 7:30. Finish your cereal. Get dressed. I’ll walk you to the bus stop.”

Henry’s eyes flash. “You’re not even listening to me. You don’t even care.”

“I am listening, Henry” she sighs, getting up to put her mug in the sink. “But you’re going to be late for school. And I’m going to be late for a Skype meeting if I don’t leave right now to check on your mom.”

“I’m not—” Henry begins, scowling. Then his face clears up as he processes Emma’s words. “You’ll check on her? Really?”

“Really.”

“Just—be careful. If she’s trying to kill Mary Margaret…”

“I think I can handle it, Henry.”

He looks at her incredulously.

Emma leans her elbows on the counter across from him. “I’ll be careful,” she says seriously. “I promise.”

He holds her gaze for a moment, then nods.

“Ok. Cool,” she says, pushing back off the counter. “Now get a move on, unless you want me dragging your butt to the bus stop in your pajamas.”

Henry rolls his eyes and stuffs a spoonful of Lucky Charms into his mouth.

**

Regina sits at the dining room table with her aching head in her hands.

None of this makes any damn sense.

She growls and flips through Rumpelstiltskin’s spell book, hoping for the thousandth time she’d missed a page.

She hadn’t.
There’s just the one. The one she’s been staring at since before the sun came up.

_A Potion for the Ridding of Dark Magic_

She’s read and reread and reread it and she knows she made the potion correctly. She’s absolutely sure. She’d been hasty yesterday evening, but not careless.

And there is nothing on the page about after-effects or unintended consequences.

She slams the book shut and immediately regrets it; the noise echoes in her skull like a gunshot.

Well, obviously, it hadn’t worked.

The fact that she was still able to throw Emma across the room is evidence enough.

The fact that it was unintentional is troubling.

The fact that she can feel something insistently tugging at the coil of magic in her chest is just short of terrifying.

So, she still has magic, though she can’t call it forth with any kind of control. It feels as wild and inaccessible as it had when Rumpelstiltskin had first taught her how to reach for it.

She wouldn’t mind so much—after all, the destruction of her magical abilities had been the goal of last night’s little misadventure—except that something about her every breath feels _off_. The potion had _done_ something.

_Magic is different here_, she hears in Gold’s sneering voice.

She puts the book back in its locked cabinet, moving gingerly, feeling like one wrong step would send her tumbling into some dark, timeless place.

_What have I done?_

She goes into the kitchen and fills the sink with hot water and soap and washes a coffee mug just to do something with her hands. The cuts across her knuckles sting sluggishly underwater. If she’d had control of her magic, they would have been all-but-forgotten by now. As it was, she’d spent the better part of an hour last night picking the little needle-sharp glass shards out of her skin.

Though she’d been prepared to live without her magic—and, indeed, had lived without it for 28 years—something about the whole incident makes her feel eighteen again. Eighteen and afraid.

She dries the mug and stacks it back in the cupboard and contemplates perhaps putting something in her stomach besides caffeine.

She’s taking stock of the refrigerator when there’s a knock at the door.

She thinks about ignoring it before remembering that Henry had been in the house last night. Maybe…

Alas, Emma Swan.

“Hey,” Emma says, looking up at her from the bottom step of the porch, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of her wool coat. “I just came by to see how you were….after last night.”

Regina isn’t sure what to say, so she says nothing.
Emma shrugs her shoulders. “So, uh, how are you?”

“How does it look like I am?” Regina snaps, before she remembers she’s still in her pajamas with yesterday’s mascara probably halfway down her face and realizes she’s given more of an answer than she’d meant to.

“It looks like you haven’t slept.” Emma says, with all of her usual over-earnest confidence.

Regina smiles coldly. “Speak for yourself, dear.”

She steps back to close the door, but Emma’s body is suddenly in the way.

“Henry’s worried about you,” Emma says, her hands prying the door away from the frame.

Regina’s breath catches a little.

“He thinks you’re going to kill Mary Margaret.”

She freezes.

“Well, you can tell Henry,” Regina says, after a moment, her throat tightening on the words, “that unlike some members of his family, I’m fresh out of soul-switching murder candles.”

She shoves the door into Emma, slams it shut, and flips the bolt before running to the kitchen and throwing up in the sink.

The tugging in her chest from earlier grows until it feels like her ribs will break open. She can hear Emma outside banging on the door as she slides down to sit on the kitchen floor and puts her head between her knees.

The room spins, the ground seeming to roll beneath her like the deck of a ship. And then—

Regina stands in front of a long mirror as Flora draws the wedding gown over her arms. The yards of silk and silver stitching sit heavily on her shoulders, weighing her down like chain mail. The corset digs into her ribs, and the breathlessness only gets worse as Flora does up the buttons of the bodice.

Regina looks for herself in the reflection of her eyes and finds a stranger. It had scared her before, to look at who she has become, but today it gives her a detached kind of hope. Perhaps this new dead-eyed girl will be better equipped for this new dead-eyed life.

Behind her, Flora is folding a nightdress into a wicker basket. The dress is white and trimmed with lace and feels like liquid against her skin and when she’d remarked that it was far too nice to sleep in, her mother had said, “Oh, you won’t be sleeping in it, my dear.”

“I’ll have this sent up to the King’s chambers, your majesty,” Flora says, a certain gentleness in her eyes.

And that is as close as anyone has gotten to talking about what will happen tonight.

“Will that be all, your majesty?”

Regina turns from the mirror. “Yes. That will be all.”

Flora curtsies and disappears behind a tapestry with the basket.

Regina thinks of Flora’s brown eyes and how they’re warm like Nadine’s had been, and alive,
and bright with love as she talks about her husband and young son during the bits-of-nothing conversations she has when she’s braiding Regina’s hair. Regina thinks of the way they’d shone with simple secrets on the morning one of the scullery maids found a litter of kittens behind a barrel of flour, and how she’d laughed when she made Regina promise not to tell.

Regina thinks she would rip her heart out for another chance at sons and kittens and simple secrets.

She thinks her heart is ripping itself out, and perhaps that’s why the light is leaving her eyes, and perhaps it’s for the best that her heart isn’t anywhere near her body tonight.

She chokes on a sob and feels the dress pressing in around her like a cage and she can’t sit down and she can’t run and she can’t breathe and she looks again into the reflection of her empty eyes and pulls at the wild magic pressing at her skin and—

The mirror shatters.

Regina comes back to herself on the kitchen floor, breath coming in gasps, eyes struggling to focus.

Across from her, the glass door of the microwave has been blown apart. She can feel the residual heat of magic in her fingers and thinks she knows what must have happened to the bathroom mirror last night.

She pushes herself off the floor and stumbles out of the room, her head swimming. The idea of stairs is too much, so she makes her way to the study, one hand trailing against the wall just to have something solid against her skin. As she lowers herself onto the sofa, she’s glad, at least, that she is too tired to really think right now.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Henry waves goodbye to Nick and Ava near the Sheriff’s station before heading inside, feeling his cheeks thawing as he walks down the short hallway to Emma’s office.

She’s on the phone, so he drops his backpack on the floor and sits in David’s empty chair to wait.

“Yeah—no, I get that Moe,” she’s saying, her hand twisting in the phone cord. “But I don’t really get what you want me to do about it…I don’t know, call the dwarves. Or someone with a degree in botany…Fine. Fine, I’ll be there in five. Yeah, see you.”

Emma hangs up the phone and takes a disgruntled bite from a piece of pizza before standing and pulling her gun from the top drawer of her desk. Only then does she spot Henry.

“Hey, kid,” she says, shrugging on her coat. “How was school?”

“Good. Ms. Powhatan’s taking us on a field trip to the cannery next week.”

“The cannery?” Emma’s nose scrunches up like she’s smelling the dead-fish air down by the harbor.

“Yeah. We’re learning about local economies. And we get to bring a can of sardines home after.”

“Sardines. Sounds…super fun,” Emma says dubiously as she wraps her scarf around her neck and steps out into the main office. “Hey, listen, kid. I’ve got to take a call. Why don’t you head over to Granny’s for a hot chocolate and get started on your homework. I’ll meet you there when I’m done.”

“Can’t I come with you?”

“Henry…”

“I heard you say ‘botany’ on the phone. So, like, plants? It can’t be anything too bad. Can I come with you? Please? I only have spelling tonight, and you can help me practice in the car. I already know almost all the words by heart. Specialize: S-P-E-C-I-A-L-I…Z-E! Economy: E-C—”

“Okay, okay,” Emma says pulling him back into her chest, her gloved hand coming to cover his mouth. He grins against it. “I get it. You’re a genius.”

Henry twists out of her grip to face her. “So, can I?”

Emma rolls her eyes, a smile creeping across her face as she heads toward the door. “Yeah, come on.”

“Cool!” He grabs his backpack and skips after her.

When they’re in the squad car heading down Main Street, Henry asks, “So, how did it go with my mom this morning?”

Emma’s face gets all pinched for a moment. “It went…not great.”

“What happened?”
“Well, I tried to talk to her and she slammed the door in my face,” Emma smiles a little. “So I guess you could say she’s back to her normal self.”

Henry shakes his head. “But what about Mary Margaret? What about the potion?”

Emma sighs. “Henry…she’s not trying to kill Mary Margaret.”

“How do you know? You didn’t even ask her, did you?” Henry half-yells, feeling sickly-hot frustration creeping up his throat like it always has when people don’t listen.

“I know because when I told her what you thought about Mary Margaret, she looked like she was going to cry,” Emma says briskly, her hands gripping the steering wheel.

And again, Henry doesn’t know what to feel. He looks at his hands, at the grey woolen gloves Regina had always made him wear in the wintertime. He shakes his head. She’s his mom. She’s his mom. But…she killed people. And she lied. And she let him feel like he was crazy and…like he was crazy to think she’d ever loved him.

And that’s not what moms do. And it’s easier to hate her than it is to try and understand why he still loves her. He doesn’t know what kind of person he is if he still loves her.

“What?” he says, holding his hands up to the heater on the dashboard and decidedly not looking her in the eye.

“Hmm?”

“Do you trust her?”

He can feel Emma’s eyes on him, but he doesn’t look away from his hands.

“I—I don’t know, kid,” she says, sighing.

“Do you think…she’s a bad person?”

“I don’t know what she is. She’s been like six different people since I got here.”

Henry bites his lip and thinks about how Regina’s always been like that to him, like a revolving door of people, changing with every room she steps into. How it was so easy to decide she was just pretending to love him, because that’s how she’d always been.

“It’s not that simple, Henry,” Emma’s saying, looking at him with concern. “I mean, yeah, there are definitely some really shitty, horrible people who are just going to be that way no matter what. But…I don’t think your mom is like that. I think she’s really trying to change. It doesn’t always work, but…she’s trying.”

“She killed people.”

“Yeah, she probably did.”

Henry feels the lump in his throat getting bigger, his eyes stinging. “Then why do I still love her? I shouldn’t love her. But she’s my mom—”

Emma turns the car off the road and stops it. Henry feels her hand on his shoulder as he presses his palms into his eyes and rests his elbows on his knees.

He hears her take a deep, crackly breath. “Henry, can I tell you something?”
He nods into his hands.

“When I was seventeen, Ne—your dad and I drove around in a stolen car robbing convenience stores.”

Henry looks up at Emma, startled. But Emma is staring out the window at the swirl of brown leaves blowing across the road.

“Sometimes, we did it for food. Or money. But mostly we just did it because we could. Because we liked to think we lived outside the normal world. It made us feel safe to slip in and out of other people’s lives without them noticing, and make them feel as powerless as we’d always felt.”

Emma takes another deep breath, drawing her hand back from Henry’s shoulder and crossing her arms over her chest.

“One time, we were driving through this little town in Nevada. We saw a gas station near the highway—the old, no-name, sandwich-counter type that nobody important would notice. It was summer, so everybody was inside buying ice cream at the counter, and hardly anybody was paying attention to the front of the store. There weren’t any cameras. So Neal went up and made a big deal about ordering a cone with a scoop of every flavor they had, and I went through the aisles stuffing things into my bag. Mostly chips and jerky and stuff, but I also took this butane lighter with an eagle on it, just because I thought it was cool.

 Neal finished up with the ice cream counter and I met him at the register and he paid for the ice cream, but then the cashier kid asked us if there was anything else, and he looked straight at my bag like he knew. And we said no, and we walked away.

“But then we heard this click. And the kid said to turn around with our hands up, and we turned and he had a gun pointed at my head. He said he’d seen me take stuff, and that he’d pressed a panic button that called the cops, and he’d shoot if we tried to run.

Emma closes her eyes. “And it was obvious he was just some kid with a hero complex and he didn’t even know how to use a gun, and he probably couldn’t hit us if he tried. But he really had called the cops and we could hear the sirens and all I could think about was how I couldn’t go to jail and I grabbed this woman and got the lighter and held it to her neck and told the kid with the gun that if he didn’t let us go, I’d burn her. And I lit the lighter next to her ear.

“And the woman was screaming at the kid to just let us go, and he did. He put down the gun and Neal and I dragged the woman to the back hallway and I shoved her into the bathroom and we ran.”

Emma leans her head against the window, her eyes staring straight ahead. “I read in the paper that the woman had a five-year old son, and he saw the whole thing. And I cried for maybe an hour in a truck stop. And then we went out that afternoon and bought a gun just in case it happened like that again. And then the next day we robbed a mini mart.”

Henry feels like his body is made of rubber, and Emma’s breath is coming too fast, like she’s just run here from Nevada.

“Why would you tell me that?” he asks, his voice too quiet.

Emma looks a little surprised at his question, as if she’d forgotten he was there.

She looks at him. Her eyes are wet. “Because I wanted you to know…if you’re looking for someone perfect to love…you’re going to have to look harder.”
Henry can feel tears running down his cheeks. “But...you’re not like that anymore.”

“Maybe,” Emma shrugs, wiping her eyes roughly with the sleeve of her jacket.

And Henry thinks he understands what she’s telling him.

Suddenly, Emma’s phone rings. She pulls it out of her pocket and sniffs before answering.

“Sheriff Swan...shit. Sorry, we’ll be right there...It’s a tree, Moe. It’s not going anywhere. Yeah, yeah. Coming. Bye.”

Emma tosses the phone into a cup holder and rolls her eyes conspiratorially at Henry. He giggles a little wetly as they pull back onto the road and feels something peaceful settle in his chest.

**

Moe French has a literal tree growing in the middle of his flower shop.

To be honest, Emma had been expecting the whole thing to be some half-drunk hangover hallucination. Moe hadn’t exactly been in the best state of mind since Belle had gone to live with Gold...

But, no. Actual tree ahoy.

“I told you,” Moe says, somewhat smugly, half his body hidden behind the foliage of the ten-foot evergreen that’s sprouted up near a display case full of tulips.

“Yeah, I can see that,” Emma says, reaching out to touch a branch. Real. Solid. Prickly. “But, uh, what do you want me to do about it? I mean, I can borrow a chainsaw if you want, but this isn’t exactly my jurisdiction.”

Moe comes around the tree. “I don’t need a chainsaw! I can cut the tree down myself,” he says roughly, as if offended she would suggest otherwise. “I want you to arrest her.”

“Oh. Arrest who?”

“The Evil Queen, of course!”

Emma frowns, reconsidering the half-drunk hangover thing. “You want me to arrest Regina because there’s a tree in your floor?”

Moe’s face goes purple and blotchy. “I want you to arrest her because she put the tree in my floor. And because she locked up my daughter for 28 years and nobody seems to care that there’s a murdering psychopathic bitch still loose in town because they’re all too busy pulling your family through portals to the Enchanted Forest!”

Emma blinks. “Ok. Well. Setting aside the whole ‘psychopathic bitch’ thing, there’s still the problem that you have no evidence Regina’s responsible for this...tree.”

“Yeah, well who else would do something like that?” Moe crosses his arms and eyes the tree pointedly. “She’s evil.”

Emma snorts. “And she just had this evil urge to grow a Christmas tree in your reception area?”

Moe glares at her. “Look, Sherriff, all I know is there was no tree here yesterday, and now there is. That sounds like magic to me. And since Gold’s dead and the Blue Fairy sure as hell didn’t put
it here, it leaves the Queen. I don’t know why she did it. She’s crazy—who knows? But I’m telling you. It was her.”

Emma sighs and nods her head. “Okay. I’ll look into it.”

“You—will?” Moe asks, suspicious.

“Yeah. Just…call me if anything else weird happens.”

Moe grunts.

“And don’t move the tree.”

Moe eyes her incredulously.

“It’s evidence,” she shrugs. “Night.”

“Hmm.”

A bell tinkles overhead as she exits the shop. The sun is setting in that quiet, early autumn way—soft amber light flickering behind tree branches, the air crisp with the damp-earth smell of leaves—and she feels a strange prickle of elemental happiness, despite everything. She buries her face in the coils of her scarf and thinks of this time last year; it seems like another world.

“Hey,” Henry says, looking up from his homework as she opens the car door and plops onto the seat next to him. The car is warm and she can feel her ears defrosting as she fastens her seatbelt.

“Hey.”

“How did it go?” he asks eagerly.

“He really has a tree growing through his floor.”

Henry’s eyes widen. “Really? How did it get there?”

Emma smirks, putting the car into gear. “That’s what I’m going to find out.” She hesitates, then says, “He thinks your mom put it there.”

Henry wrinkles his nose. “Why would she do that?”

“She wouldn’t,” Emma says, matter-of-factly. “But he’s right about one thing: whoever did it probably used magic. Why the hell they’d waste magic growing a tree in the middle of someone’s floor, I don’t know. But they did.”

“This town is weird,” Henry says, looking back at his spelling list.

“You’re just figuring that out now?”

Henry rolls his eyes at her. She pulls a face in return and catches his smile as she turns back to the road.

“Hit me,” she says, nodding at the paper in Henry’s hand.


Henry finishes his list in less than a minute and the car falls into comfortable silence. Emma hums
along softly to the radio.

“Emma?”

“Hm?”

“Can we maybe make dinner tonight?”

“You mean like, can we make dinner at home instead of eating at Granny’s?”

He shakes his head. “No. I mean…can we make dinner and then…take some to my mom?”

She glances over at him. He’s looking at her with uncertainty in his eyes, like he’s afraid he’s said the wrong thing.

Henry has a tendency to hate (and love) on principle, a child-like inability to see grey spaces that scares her sometimes. And she’d worried: worried she’d said too much earlier, worried she’d screwed up and traumatized her son, who was just an eleven-year-old kid with no real concept of what it means to be that kind of lost, but—

She smiles gently, maybe a little proudly. “Yeah, Henry. We can do that.”

**

Regina swims into semi-consciousness when the phone rings. And rings. And rings.

And then there’s Emma’s voice on the answering machine, sounding as if it’s coming through a long tunnel.

“Um, hey, Regina. It’s…Emma. I was just calling because, um, Henry and I are going to drive over with dinner. So, don’t make anything. We’re making Alfredo…with broccoli, because Henry says maybe you’d eat it that way…Ok, I know you don’t want me there, but Henry really wants to see you, and I’m not going to make him carry a casserole dish across town by himself. Plus, it’s starting to rain. So just let me in the door when we get there and I’ll get out of your hair. Ok. Bye.”

Regina slips back to sleep and dreams of Emma and Henry baking her into a pie. Then, as they’re trying to decide whether she would taste better with garlic or oregano, the dream changes. Someone’s banging on a door.

It occurs to her that she should be worried that someone’s trying to break into her house. But she’s too busy floating in semi-darkness to try and rouse herself. She remembers vaguely that there are reasons to want to avoid wakefulness.

“Regina?” she hears, through the fog. There are people coming in through the back door.

“Dammit! Henry, watch the glass.”

“Again?”

“Yeah. The microwave’s been blasted apart. What the hell is going on in this house? Regina? Regina!”

Hurried footsteps.

“Maybe she went out somewhere?”
“Henry, she’s barely even been outside for months.”

“Should I check upstairs?”

“No. Stay with me.”

The voices get louder.

“Regina?”

“Mom!”

The footsteps come closer, and then the voices sound like they’re coming from directly over her head.

“It’s alright. She’s just sleeping.”

“Should we wake her up?”

“Nah. Let’s get the kitchen cleaned up. We can put the pasta in the oven until she wakes up.”

“Are you going to stay?”

“Maybe. C’mon. Do you remember where she keeps the broom?”

The footsteps move away. There’s the sound of a door clicking gently closed and the voices dim. Regina fades back into the darkness.

She wakes up some unintelligible time later trying to sweep odd dreams from her mind. *Something about Emma and Henry and pies…*

She groans and slowly pushes herself to sit up, blinking back sleep and taking stock of her body. The nausea seems to have receded, though her head is still tender. The cuts on her hands throb distantly.

She catches the barest edge of a memory from this afternoon—mirrors and white dresses and broken glass—and shoves it aside with a low growl.

*No.*

With her mind deliberately blank, she finds her way to the study door and opens it, her eyes aching at the bright light streaming in from the hallway. She shuffles to the kitchen, vaguely noting that she’s still in her pajamas, and stops short in the doorway.

Emma Swan is in her kitchen.

Emma Swan is in her kitchen, leaning up against the island with Henry as he scrunches up his face and spells out *quadruple.*

“Nice, kid,” Emma says, taking a bite out of what smells like garlic bread and grinning like a cat. “Now: can you spell it backwards?”

“*Emma,*” Henry groans, rolling his eyes. But then he smiles deviously. “For chocolate cake?”

“You,” Emma says, pointing at him with her half-eaten garlic bread, “are your mother’s son.”

Henry laughs. “Which one?”
Regina steps forward, almost involuntarily.

“Mom!” Henry says, his eyes widening.

Emma turns and stares at her.

Regina feels oddly embarrassed, like she’s accidentally wandered into someone else’s house. But this is her kitchen and that is her son. And, of course, Emma Swan stands with her elbows on the counter like she owns the place.

She feels their eyes on her and lets a sneer work itself across her face. She’s about to say something cutting when Emma speaks.

“Hey. Sorry to just butt our way in here, but the front door was locked and you didn’t answer, so Henry got the key to the back door from under the—”

“I know where I hide my keys, Miss Swan,” Regina says irritably, mostly for the purposes of saying something. The whole situation is making her increasingly flustered. She is painfully conscious of her rumpled pajamas and bare feet.

“Yeah. Ok,” Emma says, giving her an odd look. “Well, we brought dinner. It’s in the oven.”

Regina doesn’t know what she’s expected to do.

“I set the table,” Henry pipes up helpfully.

Emma seems to notice her inability to move past the doorway. “I’ll dish up if you want to…” She eyes Regina’s clothing significantly. “Or not. We don’t care.”

Regina feels her face heat. She nods shortly and then turns on her heel and walks briskly upstairs.

Her room is dark, streaks of moonlight filtering in from between the half-open drapes. She dresses quickly in a blouse and slacks. The tight fit of the clothing makes her feel more real, somehow, like she’s been floating just outside of her body for the last while, and it’s only the fabric now holding her together. She makes the mistake of looking in the mirror. There are bags under her eyes like bruises; she considers staying upstairs in the quiet darkness of her room until they leave.

But that tastes too much of defeat. So she slips on a pair of pumps and descends the stairs.

The dining room is hung with the quiet of an abruptly-halted conversation when she enters. Henry is sitting in his usual seat, his back to the doorway. Emma sits beside him. She looks up when Regina enters and gives a small, tight smile.

Regina does not respond and instead takes her place opposite Henry.

The pasta on the plate in front of her is slightly crusty, likely from its prolonged time warming in the oven. But it smells of garlic and cheese and her stomach gurgles.

Henry giggles at the noise.

“Well, let’s eat,” Emma says.

The Alfredo is warm and creamy and Regina thinks maybe she could eat half of the pan herself, if she wasn’t concerned about appearances.

“So…do you like it?” Henry asks, looking up at her uncertainly.
“It’s very good, Henry,” she says, truthfully. She thinks she manages a smile.

Henry answers her smile with his own, brighter than she’s seen in a while. In months. She’d forgotten how whole and full and finished it made her feel. She wants to keep it there.

“The broccoli is a nice touch,” she adds, wondering if the words sound as forced and stupid as they seem to her.

Henry grins and shoots a look at Emma. “Told you.”

Emma nods graciously. “Yep, you did.”

“There’s onions in it, too. See?” He holds up a sauce-drenched caramelized onion with his fork. “Because we thought Mary Ma—we thought there wasn’t any garlic. Except there was, but Emma didn’t know where to look because she never cooks—”

“Hey. I cook.”

“Yeah, like, toast.”

“With peanut butter.”

“That’s not cooking. That’s spreading.”

They go on like this for a while, arguing back and forth about various kitchen activities and Emma’s level of competence at each, Henry growing increasingly animated and Emma occasionally forgetting herself and grinning over at Regina as if to include her in some private joke.

She finds herself drawn to the light in Emma’s eyes and the spastic movements of Henry’s hands as he imitates Emma’s apparently overzealous attempt at omelet-making. It creates a warm-sweet pain in her chest that’s something like biting into a tart apple.

She takes a careful sip of water and wonders if she’s still dreaming.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
There’s something wrong with Henry’s mom. Like, capital W wrong.

They’re sitting in the living room after dinner, the fire crackling in the grate. Emma keeps crossing and uncrossing her legs and taking little sips from the coffee in her hands.

His mom is sitting across from them in a grey armchair, staring into her mug.

His mom doesn’t stare.

His mom doesn’t sleep on the couch.

His mom doesn’t wear pajamas in the afternoon—she doesn’t wear pajamas in front of anyone, ever. Not even him.

Henry looks at the stiff way she’s sitting in the chair and the way her hands are almost white from holding the coffee so tightly. He wants to do…something. But she looks so much like someone he’s never met—someone powerful and sad and breakable—that he’s not sure how to be around her. He has this weird, shy feeling like she might not recognize him. Like she might not remember she’s supposed to be his mom.

Emma shuffles forward on the couch, setting her barely-touched coffee on the low table and checking her watch.

“Ok, kid. We’d better get going. School tomorrow.”

She gets up and pulls at her jacket to straighten it, looking like she’s trying to figure out what to say to Henry’s mom, who’d barely moved.

“Can I stay here?” Henry blurts out.

Emma stares at him, surprised. His mom finally raises her eyes from her cup, looking scared and hopeful and scared again.

“Um, I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Emma says finally, sparing a glance for Henry’s mom.

“Please?” Henry looks straight at his mom this time.

And there is so much yes in her eyes that Henry’s sure she’ll let him stay. But then she looks back at her coffee cup.

“I—” A fierce look crosses her face. “Do what you want,” she snaps, standing jerkily and stalking out of the room. Henry can hear her footsteps on the stairs, and then the slam of her bedroom door.

Henry looks at Emma, whose eyes are as wide as his. He gets up from the couch and turns away from her, trying to tamp down the prickling in his nose.

“Hey,” Emma says gently. “What do you say we stop by Granny’s for some chocolate cake on the way home?”
Henry whirls on her. “I’m not leaving!”

Emma frowns. “Henry…she doesn’t…she’s not—”

“Something’s wrong! You know it is! It wasn’t just an accident in the bathroom. She’s— something’s wrong.” He looks at Emma pleadingly. “What’s wrong with her?”

Emma sighs and looks at him sadly. “I don’t know, kid.”

“Please, can I please stay?” He feels desperation building like a pressure in his chest. “Please. I have my homework, and there’s uniform stuff up in my room still, and I can walk by myself to the bus in the morning. And I’ll make my own breakfast and pack my own lunch—”

“Henry!” Emma interrupts, putting her hands on his shoulders. “Yes, ok? Yes, you can stay. But not by yourself.”

Henry hugs her around the waist. “You’re staying with me?” he asks, secretly relieved, though he doesn’t quite understand why.

“You’re right,” she says, her words soft and determined, even as she stands stiffly in his arms. “There’s something wrong. And I don’t want you by yourself with her until we figure it out.”

He looks up at her suspiciously. “So, you don’t trust her.”

Emma sighs. “I trust that she’s not trying to hurt Mary Margaret. Or you. But something weird is going on.”

Henry nods. “She’s scaring me.”

“Oh, kid,” Emma breathes, her voice sounding pained. She tightens her arms around him briefly, then lets go, looking at him with a kind of forced lightness in her eyes. “Do you think you could help me find some blankets your mom wouldn’t kill me for using on the couch?”

“Probably not.”

**

It occurs to Emma later that night, as she’s lying on the living room couch and watching the flickering light of the dying fire dance across the ceiling, that maybe it’s simpler than she and Henry have been making it. That maybe they’re so used to witches and curses and conspiracies that normal explanations don’t occur to them anymore.

When she’d first seen Regina on the bathroom floor, her thoughts had gone to Cora somehow resurrecting herself and worming her way back into Regina’s life; Hook escaping and terrorizing the town; demonic possession; portals-gone-wrong…and to the realization that she’d been living in Storybrooke too long.

The same realization comes to her again tonight. After all, it’s only been four days since Regina’s mother died. (It’s only been four days since Mary Margaret manipulated Regina into shoving a cursed heart back into Cora’s chest.)

And the whole series of events is so twisted in Emma’s head and so tangled in unwanted and unacknowledged memories that she doesn’t think about it. She feels it like a swelling balloon in the back of her mind, but she won’t think about it.

But just because she’s unhealthily repressive about guilt and grief doesn’t mean other people are.
Not that punching mirrors and breaking microwaves and sleeping in the middle of the day is healthy, just... maybe more normal. Regina might be more normal. Emma smirks ironically to herself.

She falls asleep with the comfort of these thoughts pulled around her.

She wakes up several hours later with words on her lips. The dream leaves her like a warm body leaving her bed; she feels heat-sapped and empty, and like she wants to reach out a hand to somebody who isn’t there.

And he isn’t.

Emma gets up and walks to the window. The street outside is quiet, the pavement glowing orange in the light of the streetlamps. The sky is translucent and streaked with dark, fingerlike clouds. The sun will rise in an hour, probably. Maybe two.

She wishes he’d died before she met him again. And she doesn’t even feel guilty for wishing it.


She’d loved him.

She tries to stop the thought before it can take root, but it fills every crack in her mind, hums across every raw nerve.

She’d loved him, and it only makes her hate him more.

She stands there until she feels her legs start to go numb and then sinks onto the soft white carpet under the window. The sun rises and Emma watches from Regina’s living room floor, drawing the memories across her mind until her nerves shriek like violin strings.

**

Regina stands in the doorway to Henry’s room and watches him sleep, her eyes caught in the rise-and-fall rhythm of his chest.

She remembers him as a baby, weeks old, sleeping in the little white bassinet next to her dressing table. She had slept maybe five hours in two days and her thoughts were starting to go ragged at the edges. But she couldn’t pry herself away, couldn’t make herself get up from the stool she’d drawn up next to him. He still seemed so much like a dream, and she was afraid to sleep and wake up in a world where she was alone again. So she’d just watched him breathe, trying to memorize every little second he was there with her, trying to write him into her skin so she could keep these little pieces when he left. (The matter of his leaving had always been a when. She’d seen too much to taunt herself with ifs).

She feels the same way now, leaning against the doorframe of the little blue room, unable to go in, unwilling to leave.

He shouldn’t be here. The rational part of her had tried to tell him so when he’d asked to stay. The rational part wants to wake him up now and tell him to leave with Emma, wants him to stay away from her until she can figure out what to do about the potion. She needs him out of her reach until she knows she won’t hurt him. Physically.

But the irrational part—the part of her that’s almost always won out—reminds her how precious it
is that he’s chosen to be here tonight. With her. And she knows it’s selfish and reckless, but she won’t give that up willingly.

She takes a deep breath and watches the blue lantern spinning on the table next to Henry’s bed, the big white swan painting itself on the window, the bookshelf, the walls. Its light washes over her body in the doorway, shapeless and dimmed by the distance.

Everything inside her feels unmoored and boundless. And she knows the potion will likely wear off with time, knows that whatever damage had been done to her magic was likely even reversible with the right counter. Knows the memories, the tugging in her chest, the bursts of uncontrolled magic, are likely just an effect of the damage done.

But logic has never been her strong suit in the face of emotion. And perhaps it is only the aftershock of what had happened in the kitchen that morning, but she can’t shake the feeling that she’s done something irrevocable.

Chapter End Notes

A shorty this time, but more to come later in the week. Thanks for reading!
We're Not Doing This (Again)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Henry wakes up thinking he’s still dreaming.

But the blue sheets and swirling bird lantern and the thin autumn sun coming through the window are all real.

He grins.

He takes a shower and notices that his mom had kept a bottle of his green apple shampoo sitting on the edge of the tub. He’s still smiling about that as he pulls on his old school sweater (the sleeves are a little short, but it works) and skips down the stairs and into the dark kitchen.

“Emma?” he calls out, ducking his head into the dining room. Empty.

He’s about to go check the living room couch when he sees a piece of paper set out on the kitchen island. He flicks on the lights and reads:

Henry—

Got a call out this morning. Meet you at Granny’s to walk to the bus if done in time.

PB sandwich in fridge for lunch. Don’t forget your homework. Good luck on spelling :)

Emma

He checks the refrigerator and sees a sandwich sitting on top of the egg carton. He thinks maybe he should tell her sometime that he prefers ham and cheese, but something about the not-quite neatly-made peanut butter sandwiches makes him want to hug her and tell her she’s perfect. He sniggers when he sees she’s used two slices from the fancy brioche his mom keeps just for her coffee.

He fixes himself a bowl of cereal and sits at his place at the table. He’s mostly finished eating and halfway through the first chapter of *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* (an “I’m glad I’m your grandmother, even if it’s kind of weird” gift from Mary Margaret) when he hears movement on the stairs.

His mother comes into the dining room, dressed in the same crisp blouse and slacks from last night. She looks better today—her hair is brushed and her skin is less yellow-ish. She seems surprised to see him.

“Hi, Mom,” he says casually, meeting her eyes and then ducking his head and pretending to read again. He’s learned that sometimes his mom is more comfortable saying things when he’s not looking. And he really wants her to say something.

“Hello, Henry,” she says, after a moment. “Did you sleep well?”

He kind of wanted more than that, but he looks up from the book and nods enthusiastically. “Yep. Much better than the couch.”

He knows as soon as he’s said it that he should have kept his mouth shut.
His mother’s face sours. “They’re making you sleep on the couch?” she asks, disdainfully.

Henry shrugs, trying to keep the conversation light, which is hard to do when his mom is staring daggers at him. “Everyone’s back now. So there aren’t enough beds. And I’m the smallest, so I fit best on the couch.”

Regina laughs, but it’s a cold, short sound. “Well, it seems even you can’t persuade Miss Swan to get over her crippling fear of commitment,” she says, her voice full of dark amusement. She has a strangely satisfied look on her face.

It’s the satisfaction, more than anything, that makes Henry’s chest hurt. He pushes his chair back and stands in one jerky motion. “That’s not true.”

His mother seems to realize what it is she’s said, and her eyes have that broken glass scared-sorry look in them. But Henry doesn’t care. He grabs his cereal bowl and tucks his book under one arm and stalks off to the kitchen.

_I hate her. I hate her._

Henry takes Emma’s peanut butter sandwich from the refrigerator and stuffs it into his backpack. He notices Emma’s note to him still sitting on the island, and after a moment of thought he takes that too, folding it carefully and tucking it in the pocket of his uniform pants.

He slings his backpack over his shoulder—the force of it knocking his breath out for a second—and walks the long way around to the front door, avoiding the dining room.

She doesn’t call after him, and he doesn’t look back. The door slams behind him.

He’s halfway to Granny’s when he realizes he’s forgotten his coat. He thinks he might get lucky and Emma won’t notice. Or maybe she’ll still be out on call.

But he’s not that lucky, apparently. Because when he turns the last corner, he sees her standing, arms folded, against the trellis at the entrance to Granny’s courtyard.

And the first thing she says is, “Henry—where’s your coat?”

And he really doesn’t want to answer that question.

He shrugs. “I forgot.” He shuffles his feet in the pile of dead leaves on the sidewalk and tries to look casual.

Emma eyes him incredulously. “Did you see your mom at all this morning?”

Henry shrugs again, trying to decide on the best answer. He knows Emma knows Regina would never let him out of the house without a coat. Normally.

“She was in the bathroom,” he says finally.

Emma looks as if she still doesn’t quite believe him, but she lets it go. “Alright, kid. I think I’ve got something you can borrow for the day.”

She leads him over to where the bug is parked and pulls a slightly-crumpled blue leather jacket out of the back seat.

“Did you get my note?” she asks as she takes his backpack and helps him into the jacket. It’s a little big, but it doesn’t look too ridiculous with the sleeves rolled up.
“Yep,” he says, smiling slightly up at her as she zips the coat for him. He slips his backpack on again and they walk together down the street.

“Sandwich?”

“Yep, all good,” he nods. “What was the call this morning?” he adds, before she can ask him anything else.

Emma sighs. “Another weird one. Marco—Geppetto, whatever—couldn’t get out of his house.”

Henry looks up at her, his nose wrinkling. “Like, the door was locked?”

Emma shakes her head. “No, like his house was so covered in moss that the door wouldn’t open.”

“Ok. Yeah. That’s weird.”

“Mmmhmm,” Emma agrees, looking like she’s trying not to think too much about it.

“So—how did you get him out?”

“David got out his sword and chopped through the moss.”

Henry grins. “So now you can’t tell him there’s no reason to bring his sword on patrol.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “Well, he gets to spend the rest of the day using it to shave moss off Geppetto’s windows, so if he still feels nostalgic about the whole thing by tomorrow, I won’t stop him.”

“Good. I think it’s like…his security blanket.”

Emma snorts.

Henry is quiet for a few steps, thinking about what Emma had said last night about the tree.

“Emma?” he says, serious now.

“Hm?”

“Does Marco think my mom did it? Like Mr. French did?”

Emma stops walking. “Does he…No. He wasn’t really in a thinking mood this morning.”

“But someone did it, right?”

“Yeah, kid. Moss doesn’t just up and decide to grow a beard on someone’s house overnight.”

Henry giggles. “So, who are you going to investigate?”

Emma shrugs, walking again. “I don’t know.” She throws her hands up. “Like, who even thinks about doing something like that? It makes no sense. It doesn’t even hurt anyone. It’s just…stupid.”

“Like a prank?”

Emma’s eyes catch his. “Yeah. Exactly like that,” she says appreciatively. “Good thinking, kid.”

Henry glows. “And it’s probably the same person who did the tree, right?”
“I hope so. I’d like to think this town is only weird enough for one magical-botanist prankster.”

“You should hurry up and stop them, before they, like, grow poison ivy up someone’s toilet.”

Emma laughs. “Any suggestions, Deputy Mills?”

“Well, it’s someone with magic. Obviously.”

“Oh, obviously.” Emma smirks.

Henry ignores her. “And it’s definitely not the Blue Fairy, and it’s not Regina, probably—” He notices Emma notice him say Regina. He hadn’t meant to. “—but, who else is there?” he finishes.

“Me,” Emma offers, unhelpfully.

“Yeah, but you didn’t do it.”

They’re quiet until they reach the bus stop.

“Henry…” Emma says, eyeing him with concern as they come to stand by the signpost. “Did something happen with your mom this morning?”

“Nope.”

He doesn’t look her in the eyes, because he’s sure she’ll know he’s lying.

**

Emma spends most of the morning filling out the incident report for Marco’s case. It takes her three tries to get the Reason for Call section filled out before she realizes that trying to come up with a reasonable-sounding Reason is pretty pointless and instead just writes: Overgrown moss blocking exits. Resident unable to leave house.

Because it’s Storybrooke. So what the hell.

Measures Taken: Deputy used sword to chop down moss.

What the hell.

At least it’s keeping her distracted from...him. And broken glass. And Henry’s face this morning (and last night, and the whole of last year, really). And stupid, stubborn women who can’t accept help when something is obviously wrong.

She stops for lunch at noon, and by then a number of off limits, don’t even think about it subjects are starting to buzz around in her mind without the distraction of paperwork.

Mainly Neal and Gold and Cora and a two-ended death candle.

And the fact that Mary Margaret is not a sorceress (that she knows of), but still somehow managed to curse someone’s heart.

She calls Belle from the back corner booth in Granny’s while waiting for her cheeseburger.

“Hello?” Belle answers, her voice sounding tight and tired.

Emma remembers that Belle had also lost someone in the pawnshop that day.
“Hey, it’s Emma,” she says. “I’m working a case and I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me.”

“This isn’t about…Rumple, is it?” Belle asks warily.

“No. It’s about magic, actually.”

“Magic?”

“Yeah. You’ve been reading Gold’s books. Do you know if people without magic can still use magic?”

“Well…if you mean can they use magical objects, then, yes. As long as the object doesn’t require an input of energy from the user.”

_Great. So that widens the suspect pool to…everyone._

“Why are you asking?” Belle continues.

“Can’t say. But, hey—have you noticed anything missing from Gold’s stuff?” Emma’s not sure who would be stupid enough to steal something from Gold—even a dead Gold—but it seems like a good place to start. (And where else would someone get a…whatever-it-was they were using to terrorize the town with magical greenery?)

“No,” Belle says. “But it’s not exactly organized in here. There could be something missing. I—I wouldn’t know.” Her voice breaks, and Emma can hear her taking a deep breath before continuing on more steadily. “I’m guessing that if I asked what this was about, you’d say ‘can’t say’ again, right?”

“Right.”

“Ok. I’ll look.”

Emma hears the exhaustion in Belle’s voice. “Do you want some help?” she asks.

“Sure,” Belle sighs. “But, not today, if that’s alright. I’m…I’m having dinner with my dad.”

“Oh. Sure,” Emma says, caught a little off guard. As far as she knew, Belle hadn’t talked to her father since he’d tried to kidnap her. “Well. Great. That’s great.”

“Yeah,” Belle says, sounding mostly convincing.

“So, tomorrow?”

“Yes. Tomorrow. Should I call you?”

“Sounds good,” Emma replies, nodding her thanks at Ruby as she sets a cheeseburger on the table.

“Ok. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Emma hangs up the phone and takes a bite of the cheeseburger. It’s everything anyone could want on a cool autumn day—salty molten cheese and juicy meat and sharp pickles on a toasted buttered bun. Mary Margaret says tea is like a hug in a cup; Emma had never really been a tea person but she thinks she knows what Mary Margaret means. And something about eating a cheeseburger at
Granny’s in October feels like coming home—or as close to home as Emma’s ever gotten.

She remembers that first morning in Storybrooke, when Henry’d bought her the hot chocolate with cinnamon. He’d been such a…wild card then, a little brown-haired imp who shoved himself into her life without her permission. And she’d been an unknown entity then as well, even to herself. She never sat down long enough to try and understand her own thoughts…mostly because she’d been afraid she’d hate the person thinking them.

But then along came Henry, telling her who she was, what she was capable of. Saving people. The Savior. Henry, who opened doors for her again and again and again, even when she shut them, even when she pushed him out. Henry, who made a home for her here, even before she knew she wanted one. Henry, who was just there. Always.

[The little sneak.]

She thinks of Henry now, sleeping on a couch in an apartment too small for the people stuffed into it. She thinks of him smiling at peanut butter sandwiches when she knows they’re not enough. She thinks of him standing between her and an angry mob, trying to explain that the Evil Queen they were trying to kill was his mom, trying to make that one word hold everything about Regina.

She thinks of him running away in the dark, of glass on the floor, of him saying Regina that morning, of him leaving the house without a coat, of him in the car looking at her and wondering how he could love them.

She thinks of the now-rare smile on his face at dinner last night and realizes it might have been the first time in over a year that he had been in one place without feeling pulled toward another.

Henry had given her a home in this town. And now she was part of the reason he no longer had one himself.

“Damn.”

She finishes her burger and pays at the counter, hardly hearing a word Granny’s saying to her.

They are not doing this to him.

She goes back to the station for long enough to set the call line to forward to her cell, retrieves the bug from where it’s still parked outside Granny’s, and drives over to Mifflin Street.


Her resolve weakens when Regina answers the door, prim and pressed and cold, like nothing in this world was worth her time.

“We need to talk,” Emma says, the gravel in her voice unintentional.

“Do we?” Regina says breezily. “I can’t imagine why.”

Emma tightens her fists. Closes her eyes. Takes a slow breath through her nose. “Just let me in, ok? You can tell me to piss off later, but we are doing this. Now.”

Regina raises an eyebrow. “Really, Miss Swan—”

“No! This is not one of your town council meetings. You don’t just get to overrule me,” Emma says, shaking her head aggressively. “I’m trying to have a real conversation with you, Regina. I get that those aren’t really your thing, but this is about our son, so you probably at least want to
Regina sneers. “I am not listening to a word about my son from the woman who’s made him sleep on a couch for the last three months like some unwanted vagabond.”

The words reawaken everything that had come crashing in around Emma at the diner, and she sees red.

“Oh, so you want to play that game?” she growls, pushing her way into the house. “You want to talk about the fact that your son left your house this morning without a coat? In 30-degree weather. You want to talk about the fact that he’s wearing my jacket to school today because I’m the one who actually managed to look at him for more than two seconds this morning? You want to talk about the fact that he called you Regina today because of something he’s too afraid to tell me about?”

She’s vaguely aware that she’s begun yelling, and that Regina is backing away from her with a wide hurt in her eyes. She’s vaguely aware that she’s tearing almost-visible wounds into the woman in front of her, but she doesn’t care.

“You want to talk about the fact that he knows you didn’t want him in this house last night and he probably thinks it’s because of something he did?” Emma screeches. “You want to talk about the fact that he sat in the car with me yesterday and told me he doesn’t know what it means about him that he loves you? He thinks he’s a bad person because he loves you!”

“Miss Swan—” Regina’s face is pale, pleading.

“And I don’t care about all this other, random, fairy tale magical shit that keeps happening. I don’t care about whatever the hell you did to make yourself like this. I don’t care who you are, who I am, who we’re supposed to be in this—story! Because this is real. He is still real and none of it is his fault and I am not—” Emma shrieks, “—letting him become his father! I am not letting him grow up to be me! Or you! We are not doing that to him! Do you understand me?”

“Emma—”

“DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?”

Regina doesn’t answer.

As the red clears from her eyes, Emma realizes that Regina is struggling to remain standing, body pressed tightly against the wall in an effort to stay upright. Her eyes are wide with fear and then, abruptly, blank.

“Regina?” Emma says tentatively, still out of breath from screaming.

No answer.

Emma watches bemusedly as Regina steps away from the wall and stalks, cat-like, into the living room. Emma stumbles after her and finds her standing stagger-stepped in front of the couch as if bracing herself for something, a predatory glint in her eyes.

Shit shit shit. Shit. What the hell is happening?

“No!” Emma yells, involuntarily, as Regina’s hand suddenly thrusts forward. But no magic comes out.

Instead, Regina closes her fist and yanks, as if pulling a chunk out of the air in front of her.
She looks down at her hand and grins, the expression coldly triumphant.

Then, as suddenly as it came, the rigidness in Regina’s body vanishes. Her eyes widen as the darkness leaves them, overcome by a bright flash of pain that startles Emma in its intensity.

Regina lets out a gasp like someone’s punched her in the chest, swaying on her feet. Unthinking, Emma lunges forward to catch her before she can crack her head on the coffee table, lowering both of them to sit on the floor in front of the couch.

Regina is deathly still. Emma looks at her face, closer than it’s ever been, and realizes that it’s because she’s holding her breath, eyes wide and shining with pain, biting her lip to keep quiet.

“Hey,” Emma says softly, not recognizing her own voice. “Breathe.”

And Regina does, a great shuddering gasp. And then she’s sobbing like someone’s cutting her open with a hot knife—loud and keening and desperate. The noise makes Emma jump. Regina turns jerkily away and covers her face with one hand.

Emma doesn’t know what to do. Has no fucking clue what she should do—except not leave. She knows, somewhere in the most basic and human part of her, that she cannot leave.

Regina’s crying. Regina never cried. Emma had wondered, at times, whether she could cry.

And Emma feels embarrassed for her, mostly because she thinks that if Regina could choose anyone in the universe to witness this, she would be the last person on that list. Except maybe Snow White.

Oddly, it’s that thought more than anything else that makes her reach up a hand to Regina’s shoulder—and when she’s shrugged sharply off, it’s what makes her reach out again and grip on harder.

And to Emma’s surprise, Regina turns back toward her and curls so her head is just barely resting on Emma’s shoulder.

Emma freezes. Then slowly, slowly she brings her arms around Regina, expecting every moment to be thrown across the room.

But Regina just leans into her, pressing her warm weight against Emma’s side. Emma can feel the clammy dampness of Regina’s skin against her hands, can smell coffee on her breath as she buries her face in Emma’s scarf.

Emma remembers the afternoon she’d seen her second grade teacher coming out of a stall in the bathroom, remembers realizing you’re a person, too. You’re real.

Something elemental shifts inside her then, as Regina’s ribs swell against her own. Something weighty and expansive, like the feeling she gets when Henry looks in her eyes and trusts. It’s a thing that makes her want to jump in front of bullets. She tightens her grip.

They sit there for elastic minutes; Emma watches the shadows draw across the wall, over painted vases of dried flowers and framed pictures of Henry on a tire swing, Henry blowing out candles on a cake, Henry with a missing front tooth.

Eventually, the heaving sobs reduce to silent tears and Emma feels brave enough to speak.

“What happened?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.
But there is no answer.

Emma shifts them so she can see Regina’s face.

Regina’s eyes are closed. She takes a long, hiccupping breath, the lines around her mouth relaxing.

“Regina?”

*She’s asleep, Emma realizes, her eyes widening in disbelief. What the hell…?*

She thinks about her options—and her health, should Regina wake up in this position—and moves to try and lift Regina onto the couch, one arm behind her shoulders, the other sliding under her knees—

*Oh, there is no way. Emma groans and sinks back onto the floor.*

She sighs and resigns herself to option two.

“Regina?” she says, putting her hands on Regina’s shoulders, hoping like hell she gets through this without taking a fireball to the chest.

“Rrrrrmmmmh.”

Good enough.

“Regina, can you get up for just a second?”

“Nno,” Regina responds, the sound garbled.

“Regina, you’ve gotta help me a little here,” Emma grunts, grabbing Regina’s upper arms and pulling her off the ground.

Somehow, Regina manages to get her legs under her long enough for Emma to sit her on the couch. As soon as Emma releases her grip, she lies down and curls in on herself, eyes still closed, navy blue pumps still on her feet.

“Ok, so let me just point out that none of this is my fault,” Emma says to no one in particular, eyeing the grey smudges Regina’s shoes are leaving on the white couch cushions.

Though it would kind of set the world back on its axis if Regina woke up and accused Emma of incompetence.

*What the hell is today? Just…what the hell?*

Emma spots the blanket she’s used last night folded neatly on the end table and, after some hesitation, she shakes it out and drapes it gingerly around Regina. She watches her sleep for a moment, eyes caught in the peaceful lines of Regina’s face and by the way the sun traces glowing cobwebs in her dark hair.

*Who are you? Emma thinks, the question that’s been brushing the edges of her mind for months finally coming into words. I have no idea who you are.*

She sighs and goes to drown her questions in a cup of coffee. Or maybe some liquor. Possibly both.

***
Regina wakes up on a couch for the second time in two days.

She panics a little when she can’t recall how she’d ended up there this time.

And then she remembers and almost wishes for the mindless panic to return.

Emma had seen. Emma had been there when…

Goddamn meddling idiot.

Regina sits up and presses her palms into her eyes. Why can’t she just leave me alone?

Then she remembers what had started the whole incident off: Henry. Emma had come to talk about Henry.

There’s a twinge of guilt there, but she shrugs it off.

They never did get around to talking. And why? Because Miss Swan insisted, as usual, on letting her emotions drive her into an all-out raging frenzy, and nobody could get in a word edgewise.

And, anyway, she had been making Henry sleep on a couch.

The thought makes Regina take stock of her own position once more, and she feels her face heat inexplicably when she notices the blanket draped over her lap. She doesn’t recall putting it there. In fact, she doesn’t recall moving from the floor to the couch at all.

Her stomach growls. Shoving aside any thoughts of Emma (and of Daniel, whose presence hangs over her again in a way it hadn’t since the day at the stables), she tries to remember when she’d last eaten. Nothing this morning, and it must be well past lunchtime by now…

She groans and forces herself to stand, draping the blanket around her shoulders as she walks slowly toward the kitchen.

She stops short in the doorway of the dining room.

This has got to stop happening.

Emma Swan is sitting at the table, legs crossed, face mostly hidden behind a copy of Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, eating what Regina presumes is one of the tortillas she’d made on Tuesday.

The thought she didn’t leave, she’s still here flutters against Regina’s rib cage, at war with the equally consuming mortification at the idea of having to face Emma Swan after what had happened in the living room. And, while Emma’s attention is still caught by the book, Regina makes scripts in her mind with sharp words and superior dismissals of feeling and irritated remarks on Emma’s inappropriate level of comfort in this house.

But then Emma looks up suddenly and what comes out of Regina’s mouth is, “I hope you didn’t put those in the microwave.”

Emma wrinkles her forehead in confusion and then glances at the tortilla. “Um, no? I didn’t?”

Regina flushes, remembering that microwaving anything right now isn’t really an option. “I—just meant they’re better in the toaster oven…”
She rolls her eyes. *Pull yourself together. You’re a queen, not a babbling idiot.*

Emma is looking at her with concern. “Ok…well, I used the actual oven…”

Regina nods stiffly, clutching the blanket across her chest and looking out the window. “That works too,” she hears herself say, wishing she were still asleep. Maybe for the next eternity.

Emma puts the book on the table and uncrosses her legs. “So, I called Mary Margaret and asked her to take Henry home with her after school.”

Regina nods again. “That is probably…for the best,” she says, remembering with some regret what she’d said to Henry that morning. Had he really left the house without a coat? *God.*

“She’s going to bring him by at around six for dinner—if that’s alright?” Emma asks, looking unsure of Regina’s response.

Regina is a little surprised that Emma would want Henry anywhere near her, given the level of contempt Emma had expressed for her that afternoon. If Emma thinks she’s doing Henry a favor, letting him visit for dinner…well, Regina is almost certain Henry wouldn’t see it that way. Still, she says, “Fine.”

Emma fiddles with the table’s edge, and Regina can almost see her trying to organize words on her tongue.

“Miss Swan,” Regina says irritably, snatching up her chance to direct the conversation. “Why are you still here?”

Emma looks up at her, resolute. “We need to talk.”

“And I recall that going so well earlier.”

Emma’s cheeks darken.

Regina feels a prickle of triumph at Emma’s embarrassment; it settles some of her own uneasiness.

“Yeah,” Emma says, shifting in her chair. “Look, I’m sorry about all of that. I wasn’t actually—I wasn’t mad at you. Well, I was, but I was mostly just…pissed. At everything. And it all came out at you.” She pauses, looking uncomfortable. “I’m sorry if I made you…”

The words press warmly at something raw in Regina’s chest, but she scoffs. “Don’t flatter yourself, dear. It didn’t happen because of you.”

Emma nods. “I know,” she says, though she looks relieved at Regina’s confirmation. Then she frowns. “Regina…what was that?”

Regina presses her lips together. She really, *viscerally,* does want to share anything nearly so personal with Emma Swan. She tries to find a way to dismiss her without making it seem like she’s avoiding the question, but—

“It’s the same thing that happened yesterday, isn’t it? With the microwave?” Emma says, eyeing her shrewdly. “And in the bathroom.”

It’s not a question, and Regina finds herself nodding.

“Ok. So…is it magic? Or…?”

“A potion.”
Emma looks blankly at her.

Regina sighs. “I took a potion to get rid of my magic.”


Regina decides on the simplest answer. “I was tired of being manipulated,” she says breezily, picking at a piece of lint on the blanket before meeting Emma’s eyes.

She’s surprised to see a flicker of guilt in them. It passes quickly.

“So…what happened?” Emma asks softly.

“It didn’t work.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “I get that. But…something’s wrong, right? It’s not supposed to make you do…whatever you’re doing.”

“Articulate, Miss Swan.”

Emma ignores her. “So,” she asks again, “What happened?”

Regina pulls a chair from the table and sinks into it, resisting the urge to put her head in her hands. “I don’t know.”

Emma looks incredulous.

Regina feels a prickle of inadequacy creep up her spine. “Magic is different here, Miss Swan,” she snarls. “Or don’t you recall?”

Emma’s eyes widen. She looks at Regina warily. “I wasn’t talking about the magic. I was talking about you. What happened—what’s happening to you?” A curious look crosses her face. “Do you…remember?”

“Of course I remember!” Regina yells. That’s the problem.

Emma glares at her, frustrated. She takes a sharp breath and lets it out slowly. “This is exactly what I’m talking about.”

“What?” Regina bites out, lost.

Emma stands and runs a hand through her hair. “This is what we’re doing to Henry. We’re—Look, I know we’ll never be friends. But this whole…thing…between us has got to stop. We’ve been making him miserable this whole last year, mostly over really stupid stuff. And now he knows there’s something wrong with you and it’s scaring him and I’m just trying to help—”

“So you think barging in here and screaming at me is going to help?” Regina smiles coldly. “I know you have a thing or two to learn about mothering, Miss Swan, but acting the hero when you’ve been nothing more than a bullying tyrant is not going to endear you to my son.”

Regina watches her words crack across Emma’s skin like a whip. She sees a million angry things in her eyes, beginning and ending with look who’s talking.

_I dare you to say it, Swan. I dare you._

But Emma’s face goes forcibly blank. “I said I was sorry and I meant it,” she says firmly.
“Did you?” Regina sneers, finding extreme pleasure in her needling. The awkwardness she’d felt on entering the room is all but forgotten now.

The fire is back in Emma’s eyes. “Look, I know I’m shit at this! I know I’ll never be his mother. I don’t even really know how to try! He’s hurt and confused and—he needs you. He wants both of us, but he needs you. And I want us both to be in his life without it making things hard for him.”

Regina feels something hot burning her from the inside. She decides it’s rage. “If you believed that for one second, why did you take him away?”

“What?”

“You heard me,” Regina says, her voice humming with anger. “Why did you take him to New York? You didn’t even ask me. You just left. With my son!”

“Well you just disappeared!” Emma yells back. “You weren’t even here for me to ask.”

Regina stands up abruptly, the blanket falling from her shoulders. “And whose fault is that?”

They stand there for a moment, breathing heavily, eyes blazing.

Then Emma sits down, her shoulders sagging. “Mine.”

Regina stares down at her in disbelief.

The room falls silent; then Emma looks up suddenly. “Do you want some coffee? I made some coffee. I’ll get you some coffee.”

And with that, she disappears into the kitchen.

Regina has only just managed to settle herself back in her chair when Emma reenters room with a mug in each hand and a plate of tortillas clamped precariously between her wrists.

She sets them awkwardly on the table. Regina watches closely, but despite Emma’s usual clumsiness, not a drop spills.

Emma sits bonelessly, grabs her mug, takes a sip, burns her tongue and pretends she didn’t. Regina rips a careful edge from a tortilla and puts it in her mouth, remembering again how little she’d eaten that day.

Emma eyes meet Regina’s determinedly. “Could you…please just tell me what’s happening? With the potion?”

Regina watches her for a moment, has a silent debate with herself, then grits her teeth and answers. “They’re memories.”

Emma’s brow furrows.

“The potion is making me remember…” Regina pauses, unsure, irritated. “As far as I can tell, it’s making me remember times when I’ve used magic. Except they’re not just memories—it’s almost like a trance. I’m…in them, living the moment again. And then I come out of it, and I’ve done the same magic here. Unintentionally.” Regina sighs resignedly. “And…I don’t seem to be able to access it otherwise.”

Regina nods once.

“Oh. Wow,” Emma says, eyes widening. “So it did work. Sort of. Except…”

Regina fidgets under Emma’s thoughtful gaze. “Except what?” she snaps.

“Except you threw me across the room the other night.”

Yes. Except that.

“That was…unintentional,” she grinds out reluctantly, having no other answer to Emma’s implied question. I don’t know how I could have done it.

Emma studies her for a moment, then shrugs with too heavy an air of casualty to really be casual. “So…the microwave?”

“I broke a mirror,” Regina says, studying her hands.

“And the bathroom?”

“I don’t recall,” Regina bites out.

“You hit your head,” Emma supplies, her voice upturned, helpful.

Regina sighs, continues. “But, given the damage…I suspect I pushed my mother through a Looking Glass. That, and the memories seem to be coming in chronological order.”

She waits for Emma to ask about the memory she’d had this afternoon, the one that had left her in a pile on the living room floor. But Emma just looks thoughtful and clamps her mouth shut.

Regina can see the exact moment when she decides she’s better off keeping her nose out of it. Smart girl.

“So, what?” Emma asks instead. “It’s just going to make you remember every time you’ve ever used magic?”

“Not every time. Just…the significant moments,” Regina finishes vaguely.

“What’s the point of that?” Emma asks, putting down her mug and turning to face Regina straight on. “I mean, wasn’t it supposed to take the magic away? Why—”

Regina glares. “I don’t know why it didn’t work. Don’t you think if I did, I’d have fixed it by now? I’ve gone over it a thousand times—I don’t know!”

Emma studies her. “They’re bad, aren’t they. The memories.”

“Whatever gave you that idea, Miss Swan,” Regina snaps, “the broken glass or the uncontrollable crying?” She’s aiming for a sharp, dismissive tone and thinks she might have achieved roughly half of it.

Emma’s eyes are unusually soft. Regina takes a hasty sip of coffee. Too much sugar.

“I think maybe…” Emma says, looking like she’s about to walk across a burning bridge. “Now, hear me out before you start yelling at me again…I think maybe you should tell Henry.”

“Tell him what?”
“About the potion.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Regina demands, incredulous.

Emma flinches dramatically. “Yelling. Again.”

Regina takes an irritated breath.

“Regina,” Emma begins. “He’s not going to think…well, he’s not going to think anything worse than he does now.”

Regina stares, feeling vaguely ill.

Emma looks apologetic. “He’s confused—”

“So are you.”

“I’ve tried to tell him—I tried to explain to him about people being complicated. That you’ve done things—that I’ve done things—we’re not proud of. That we’re not perfect. That we’re trying to change. For him. That we still love him and he can still love us…But everything’s just really hard right now with…the curse and his dad and Mary Margaret and…Regina, he was there in the bathroom. He saw you last night before dinner. He knows something’s wrong and he’s scared.”

“And you think telling him that his mother has lost control of her highly dangerous magic will somehow make him less scared?” Regina asks bitterly.

“I think,” Emma says, her voice tense, “that Henry is an annoyingly perceptive little kid and he will eventually find out about all of this and hate both of us for not telling him. I think that this whole shitstorm of a year has him thinking that he doesn’t belong anywhere, that he can’t talk to anyone.”

Regina feels herself freeze, utterly unprepared for the turn this conversation has taken.

Emma sighs harshly. “This is what I was trying to say before…All this shit between us—all of us, but especially you and me—is making him miserable. I think any time he talks to me, or anyone else, he’s afraid we’ll say something horrible about you he doesn’t want to believe. And any time he talks to you, he’s afraid you’ll prove us right. I think he’s scared he’s going to lose all of us, mostly because he thinks we’re all plotting to kill each other. And us fighting and keeping secrets when there’s obviously something wrong is just going to make it worse. He needs you. And…I need your help with this.”

Regina eyes her suspiciously. “So now you want me in his life. When it’s convenient for you.”

“Regina, I’m sorry,” Emma says, her face open, insistent. “I know that doesn’t change anything. Just…please believe me when I say I thought I was doing what was best for Henry. It wasn’t. I get that. I just…he’s your kid too, and you should be in his life. Even if he doesn’t know how to want you there right now. You’re his family. And that’s…important.”

Regina is starting to suspect that this conversation is not entirely about Henry’s family. For some reason, it makes her uncomfortable, like she’d accidentally ended up with a pile of Emma’s dirty laundry when she’d been sorting through her own.

“He asks about you,” Emma says after a moment, her voice brittle. “He…doesn’t know who you are. I mean, he knows you’re his mom. But he doesn’t know you. Not anymore. And it confuses him. And there are questions he asks me about you that I can’t answer because I don’t know either.”
Regina watches a robin land on the blotchy little bird feeder Henry’d painted in one of Mary Margaret’s innumerable arts-and-feelings lessons and is overcome by a sudden feeling of exhaustion.

“I just—” Emma says, cutting off.

Regina is surprised to glance over and see tears in Emma’s eyes. She’s even more surprised at herself: there is no flash of triumph at Emma’s pain this time, though she has every reason to feel it, and every reason to want Emma just as emotionally exposed as she herself had been earlier, for leverage’s sake.

“—I just want him to know we love him,” Emma continues, swallowing hard. “I want him to know he has a home, wherever he wants it to be. I want us not to do this to him anymore. To make it complicated—to make this part of his life complicated when literally everything else is complicated, too. I don’t want to keep making him choose. He’s eleven years old. He shouldn’t have to run away in the middle of the night to see his mom.”

*And who was it who put him in that position?* Regina wants to ask. Instead, she finds herself saying, “That’s why he was here that night?”

Emma nods. “Yeah. He overheard us— me and Mary Margaret and David—arguing about how to deal with what you might do after…what Mary Margaret did to you and Cora. He thought we were going to send you through a portal, or something.”

“I see.”

“We’re not. Just so you know.”

“Your forbearance astounds me,” Regina says, drily.

Emma blinks at her. “Was that…a joke?”

“Not particularly.”

“Oh. Ok.”

Emma sniffs, though no tears have fallen.

“Why is this all so fucked up?” she asks suddenly, addressing the far wall over Regina’s shoulder.

“Am I supposed to answer that?” Regina asks, seriously.

“No.” Emma stares at the wall for a long moment, then looks across to meet Regina’s eyes.

“Can I…would you let me help you with the potion?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Henry walks through the front door and feels like he’s walking back in time.

There are lights on in the hall, the dining room table is set, the smell of spice and smoke is floating through the house…and there is music coming from the kitchen.

He thinks he was maybe seven or eight the last time his mom played music while she cooked.

Henry walks closer to the kitchen door and stops when he hears voices, peeking his head into the room. His mom is standing by the sink rinsing out empty cans of black beans. Emma is behind her at the island, leaning over a cutting board with a big knife. The radio plays softly in the corner.

“Well, yeah,” Emma is saying. “I just thought it might be useful to have somebody to…I don’t know. Help research a cure or something?”

“It’s magic, Miss Swan, not the Spanish Influenza,” his mom says, her voice sounding tired. “It will likely pass in time. None of the ingredients were long-acting. The potion works its way out of the body once it’s accomplished its purpose.”

Henry’s ears perk up.

His mom finishes rinsing the cans, then looks over her shoulder at Emma and rolls her eyes. “I said mince, not mangle. If I wanted to eat entire cloves of garlic, I would have told you not to bother with the knife at all.”

Emma shrugs defensively. “I am mincing. I’m just not done yet.” She attacks the garlic again, but Henry sees her pause for a moment and regrip the knife before starting to make cuts more carefully. “And maybe it would be ok if you just waited until it ‘accomplished its purpose.’ Except you don’t even know what its purpose is. Its purpose could be to fuck with you until you die. And then we’re all pretty much screwed.”

“My, aren’t we cynical,” his mom says silkily, eyeing Emma before reaching into the spice cabinet.

Emma puts the knife down and turns to face his mom. “Regina—honestly, it doesn’t matter whether it wears off in ten days or ten years. We still have to do something about it before you break something more important than a microwave. And—it’s totally your choice, obviously—but I still think Henry should know. He really is worried about you. At least tell him it’s a potion and that you’re not, like…dying.”

Henry takes in a sharp breath at that, but forces himself to stay hidden so he can hear more.

His mom takes down a jar of chili powder and leans against the counter, crossing her arms. “I…
see your point,” she says, making a face. “I just…”

Emma moves closer to her. “We could wait to tell him until we have a plan to fix it. So he won’t freak out too much.”

His mom scoffs. “I doubt that would be the case.”

“I don’t,” Emma says softly.

His mom stares at her for a moment, her eyes flickering as if trying to read something written on Emma’s face. Finally, she pushes off the counter and takes the chili powder over to the stove. “We’ll see.”

Then the kitchen is silent except for the man singing on the radio. Henry leans back against the wall, thinking.

His moms are hiding something from him. It’s something to do with a potion. Maybe the potion his mom was making in the bathroom the other night (he knew it). And Emma said it’s what made his mom break the microwave yesterday, so…it’s dangerous. Probably.

But then why is Emma so calm? Why does she think he’ll freak out if he knew?

And how long had Emma known about it? Had she been keeping this from him the whole time? Even when he’d asked her what was wrong? Even when he’d told her he was scared?

He feels something angry in his stomach at that thought. He wants to stomp into the kitchen and yell at both of them, demand they tell him what’s going on with his mom or—

His shoulders slump. No, that wouldn’t work. They’d already decided to keep it a secret from him, and when his mom kept secrets, nothing (not even Henry) could make her tell.

So he’d just have to find out on his own.

Operation…Horcrux.

He presses his lips together in determination, picks up the paper bag of cookies at his feet, and walks into the kitchen.

“Henry!” his mom says, her face lighting up as she catches sight of him in the doorway.

He forces a smile, and his mom’s eyes sing in that way that makes his chest want to crack open.

And he feels a little bad about Operation Horcrux for a moment. But then he remembers he hasn’t quite forgiven her for what she’d said to him about the couch that morning, so he guesses they’ll be even. Maybe.

“Hey kid,” Emma says, smiling at him. She’s gone back to mincing the garlic. The pieces look a little…rough. “Did Mary Margaret drop you off?”

“Yeah,” Henry says, putting the paper bag on the island. “She made cookies.”

Emma’s eyes go big and she snatches up the bag, peering inside. “Chocolate chip?” she asks, though she can probably already see that they are.

“Yep.”

“Poisoned?” his mom asks drily as she stirs a pot on the stove.
“No,” Henry says seriously. “I tested one on the way over when she wasn’t looking.”

His mom turns sharply to look at him, her eyes wide. He thinks he hears Emma snort, but when he glances back at her she’s just coughing into her elbow.

“Still alive then, kid?” she asks finally, her eyes watery.

Henry looks down at himself, then back at her, incredulous. “Yeah.”

_Duh._

Emma clears her throat. “Ok. Well, we’re having beans and rice. So if you want to hop over to the dining room and grab the bowls for us, that would be great. It’s almost done…I think?”

His mom nods, tasting the beans for spice. “Five minutes.”

Henry heads out to the dining room, wrinkling his nose. He’d felt earlier like he was walking back in time. But now it feels like he’s in an entire alternate dimension. One where his moms cook dinner. In the same kitchen. Without killing each other. (And they didn’t even fight, really.)

It was kind of nice.

He takes the bowls back to the kitchen and when he hands them to his mom, his smile isn’t quite so forced.

They sit at the table together, and everything is just as weird as it had been in the kitchen.

“So, how was spelling?” Emma asks, plopping a giant glob of sour cream onto her beans while his mom stares in disbelief from across the table.

“Good,” he says. “I think I only missed one. I forgot the _I_ in ‘specialize.’”

Emma cocks her head. “Which one?”

“The first one.”

“SPEC-alize?”

Henry nods. “Yeah. It was dumb.”

Emma shrugs. “But now you’ll never forget it.”

“I guess.” Henry takes a bite of his beans. “So, uh,” he says, eyeing both of his moms. “What did _you_ do today?”

Their faces both go blank like the Miss Blanchard’s had whenever anyone asked about babies in science class last year. So they’d definitely been doing something Operation Horcrux-ish.

“Oh, um—” Emma begins.

But his mom cuts her off. “Emma came over for coffee.”

Henry stares. “You did?”

“Yep,” Emma says breezily. “I had a free afternoon, so I decided to…stop by.”
Henry narrows his eyes. “So you figured out the thing from this morning? At Marco’s?”


“Then how did you have a free afternoon?”

“I—called someone about it. They’re getting back to me tomorrow,” Emma says with an air of finality.

He’s about to ask who she’d called when his mom cuts in. “Henry, dear, perhaps you should let Miss Swan eat her dinner.”

Her eyes are firm, so Henry reluctantly drops the subject and eats another spoonful of beans, wincing as he bites down on a chunk of garlic.

His mom catches his eye and he swears she’s hiding a smile.

“Tell me about your teacher this year, Henry,” she says, her face open and interested in a way he hasn’t seen in a long time. It makes a happy pressure between his ribs.

He loses himself in her attention for a moment before he answers. “It’s Ms. Powhatan. She’s awesome.”

His mom smiles and it feels like he’s breathing again after a long time underwater.

“And what about her makes her ‘awesome’?” she asks.

So he tells her about how Ms. Powhatan hates the 5th grade reader so instead they read real books like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *Esperanza Rising*; how they used microscopes last week to look at onion cells; how she plays them songs on her guitar when it’s raining and they can’t go out for recess; how she’s having them dress up in character for their history reports so they can get around Principal Triton’s stupid rule about (no) Halloween costumes. He tells her about making a wig from grey yarn and construction paper for his Benjamin Franklin project.

And then Emma asks him to come stand next to her so they can see what he’ll look like with long hair. She grins and drapes her own hair over his head so it falls past his shoulders. He blinks his eyes a couple times and scrunches his face to make wrinkles like Benjamin Franklin had. His mom almost chokes on her water.

And then they’re all laughing, laughing so hard Henry’s stomach hurts, so hard he can see tears streaming down his mom’s cheeks.

Tonight there is no discussion about whether he should stay. He just goes up to his room after they do the dishes and pulls his pajamas from under his pillow. He puts them on and makes a show of getting a glass of milk from the kitchen before starting his reading homework. His mom’s eyes go wide and then soft and he can’t help but throw his arms around her waist.

Later, he’ll remember the feeling, and it will make him even more determined to find out what they’re hiding—to find out why Emma’s so sure he would worry more about his mom if he knew.

***

They’re in the study after dinner, meeting there on some unspoken agreement.

Emma sits in an armchair and watches Regina standing next to the fireplace, arms crossed over her
chest, gaze distant and unblinking. She knows better than to interrupt the silence, so she just waits for the words to come.

But when they do, they’re not what she expected.

“You’re not shit at this.”

Emma blinks. “What?”

Regina turns abruptly to face her, eyes sharp as if Emma had just said something offensive. “You’re not shit at being his mother.”

Then she stalks out of the room.

Emma wrinkles her nose, recalling what she’d said earlier to Regina about not knowing how to be Henry’s mother. And she doesn’t know how, and she really is shit at it in most of the important ways…but Regina’s words still fall warmly on her, despite the cold way they’d been thrown in her face. She realizes what they must have cost Regina to say.

She thinks that’s just how things are with Regina: compliments come wrapped in a grenade.

Emma shakes her head and gets up to go after the other woman, but Regina comes whisking through the doorway before she can take two steps, passing her by and dropping a thick book on the side table.

Emma stares.

“Well,” Regina says impatiently. “Open it.”

“Okay…?” Emma says, opening the book and carefully flipping through the fragile pages. The book is old—probably the oldest thing she’s ever touched—and smells like attics and pine shavings. “What exactly am I looking for here?”

Regina sighs. “The page is marked with a red ribbon.”

Emma finds the ribbon and pulls. The book opens to a page entitled A Potion for the Ridding of Dark Magic. She reads the description, gags through the list of ingredients, and flips the page, expecting more. But the next page is entitled A Potion for the Extermination of Head Lice, so she flips back, reading the description again. And then again.

She looks up at Regina, who is studying the wall opposite.

“Regina?”

“What?”

“It says dark magic.”

Regina looks at Emma, her face full of haughty incredulity. “Don’t tell me you’re surprised to hear the Evil Queen had dark magic.”

“I’m not, but…”

“But what?”

Emma narrows her eyes thoughtfully. “But you can still do magic.”
Regina walks away, throwing up her arms. “Yes, Miss Swan. Thank you for that insightful observation.”

“What if…it worked.”

“I’m sorry,” Regina says. “I don’t speak idiot.” She turns back to Emma, exasperation written on her face. “You just said—”

“Can you stop it with the sass pants routine for two seconds?” Emma snaps, irritated. “Just let me get this thought out, okay?”

Regina’s eyes go wide in challenge.

Emma blushes a little, but continues. “What if it worked? What if it took away your dark magic? But maybe…maybe you still have light magic.”

Regina stares, then shakes her head. “Impossible,” she says, though Emma thinks she catches a flash of hope in her eyes.

“Is it, though? I mean, you’re not just doing magic in the memories. It’s not just the potion making you do it. You threw me into a wall in the bathroom when you were fully awake. So maybe you still have magic…but it’s just not the kind you’re used to using.”

Regina furrows her brow, staring at the floor. Emma can see her sorting through puzzle pieces in her head.

“It…” Regina begins. “…feels odd.”

“What? The magic?”

Regina nods slowly. “It feels…stripped…tangled.” She shrugs irritably, her voice going gruff. “I’m not sure how to explain…”

“No,” Emma says tilting her head to one side. “I think I get it.”

And she pictures a two-toned rope untwisting in halves, the dark half stripped away, the light half left behind, crumpling on the ground in a nest of string.

Regina raises her eyebrows at this, but doesn’t comment.

“You learn to control your magic by connecting it to emotion, right?” Emma says, feeling her thoughts pick up momentum.

“Yes…” The question mark is clear in Regina’s eyes.

“What did you use?”

Regina’s face closes off and for a moment Emma doesn’t know if she’ll answer.

“Anger,” Regina says finally, crossing her arms over her chest and looking away.

“Right. So dark magic.”

Regina huffs out a sigh. “Miss Swan, if you don’t get to the point soon…”

“Ok, so you used anger to control your magic and that made it dark. But what if there’s more than dark magic inside you? What if the potion just took away the dark part—or what if it just stops
you from controlling magic with anger? If you used other things, like happiness or…love…”

Regina shakes her head. “That’s not how it works.”

“How do you know?”

Regina’s eyes go sharp. “I’ve been doing this far longer than you have, Miss Swan. Anger doesn’t make magic dark. Anger lets you access magic that’s already dark. And people don’t have both. It’s one or the other: dark or light.”

Emma scoffs. “We both know that’s not true.”

Regina hums a sound that could be placating or derisive. Emma can’t really tell.

“Have you even tried using something else to control it?”

“No,” Regina snaps.

And Emma wonders if it’s more that she hasn’t tried or that she can’t. The thought makes something ache inside her.

“Ok,” she says. “But what if that’s why you’re having these memories? Maybe your magic is trying to…reorganize itself or something. Like, it needs to channel itself somehow and since you’ve never used light magic—just hear me out—since you’ve never used light magic, it’s making you remember using dark magic just so it has somewhere to go.”

“Miss Swan, that is the most ludicrous thing—”

“But it explains everything, doesn’t it?”

“No, it most certainly does not!” Regina yells, eyes flashing desperately. “And I would appreciate if you would stop spouting these useless theories about something you have absolutely no knowledge of!”

Emma gapes at her, a little taken aback. “I’m just trying to—”

“I’m going to bed,” Regina says flatly, before walking briskly out of the room.

Emma stares after her. Why does every conversation with that woman feel like stepping off a tilt-a-whirl?

I’m just trying to help.

“Ughhh,” Emma groans, raking her fingers through her hair and stalking off to the living room.

She falls asleep on the couch, but tonight she doesn’t even get to the dreaming stage before she’s being shaken awake.

“Emma! Emma! Wake up!”

“Hen—Henry?”

She opens her eyes to see Henry’s panicked face inches from her own.

“Come on!” he says, yanking her arm and dragging her across the room before she can really register that she’s upright.
“Henry, what the hell?” she groans as he pulls her across the entryway to the door of the study. “What—”

She smells it before she sees it: fire.

Regina’s standing in the study with her back to them, dressed in a set of silk pajamas that glow in the light of the fire that’s slowly consuming a tall bookcase. Little bits of paper are beginning to float like snow in the air around her.

Emma realizes that the fire is not only near Regina, but coming from her.

She runs to the fireplace and grabs the fire extinguisher that’s mounted on the wall near a basket of dry logs.

“Regina!” she yells.

Why is it always fire with her? Fire and mirrors…

“Regina!”

Regina doesn’t move—doesn’t even flinch. It’s as if she hasn’t heard Emma.

It’s all taking too long. The fire is small and contained—for now—but a few more of those fireballs and it could spread to the carpet, to the walls, to the liquor bottles on the table by the door.

“Regina!”

So Emma takes a running start and rams her shoulder into Regina’s side, knocking her to the floor. In almost the same motion, she pulls the pin from the neck of the fire extinguisher and sprays a jet of foam at the bookshelf.

The fire dies anticlimactically, a singed copy of Roget’s Thesaurus toppling from the blackened, foam-covered shelves. It lays smoking on the rug, and Emma sprays it for good measure.

Then, panting heavily, she turns to Regina, who’s sitting limply on the floor with her head leaning against the wall.

“Regina?”

Regina’s breathing is shallow, her eyes wild and unfocused.

“Regina?”

—angry flames eat through the side of the miller’s home, grey smoke choking out the sky, lead-paned windows heating, bursting.

Regina can feel the magic singing through her body, steely and sweet and heady, like a pleasant punch to the gut. She smiles, throws her head back, and watches the fire tearing at the thatched roof. Laughter bubbles up in her chest.

“No! No, no, no, no!”

She turns to see the miller running toward her, shoving through dumbstruck bystanders gathered in the shadows of alleys.
“No, no—”

His voice cuts off abruptly as she reaches out a hand and lifts him magically into the air by his throat.

“No, no—”

His voice cuts off abruptly as she reaches out a hand and lifts him magically into the air by his throat.

“Let it be known,” she shouts and feels a thrill in her bones at the fear in the peasants’ eyes. “That this is the fate awaiting anyone who allies himself with the traitor Snow White.”

She turns her attention back to the unfortunate miller still struggling frantically in the grip of her magic.

But she’s surprised to see that, unlike most of her victims, the miller’s gaze is focused not on her, but on the burning house behind her.

The realization stills her long enough that he is able to choke out two words: “No—Sarah!”

She drops him on the ground like he’d scalded her.

He struggles to his feet, gasping for breath even as he stumbles toward the burning building, screaming for his child in a ragged voice.

And it must be his child, because his wife is already dead.

She watches him dive through the flames consuming what’s left of the front door, then turns on her heel and disappears in a cloud of purple smoke—

“Regina! Regina!”

Regina opens her eyes and sees Emma’s face, feels Emma’s hands shaking her shoulders.

Emma. Emma’s here. Emma.

She can’t breathe, she can’t—

The floor rolls under her suddenly and she vomits, soaking herself and the rug. Her throat burns, her nose stings, she can’t—

“Mom!”

Henry? God, Henry…

I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I didn’t—

“Henry, go get her some water, ok?”

“But—”

“Henry, please. Go get her some water and a towel. I’ve got her. She’s going to be okay.”

Regina feels Emma’s hand on her arm, warm and heavy and solid.

“Regina? I need you to breathe, okay? Breathe.”

She tries, she really tries. But Sarah…Henry…

Emma moves closer, sits cross-legged near Regina’s side.
“Here, put your hand on your—” Emma grimaces at Regina’s sick-drenched pajamas. “Actually, don’t. Put your hand here.”

And she takes Regina’s clammy right hand and places it on her own stomach, holding it there gently. Regina can feel the warm cotton of Emma’s shirt and, beneath it, the swell of her ribs as her lungs expand.

“Breathe with me, okay?”

And Emma takes a deep breath, holds it for a moment, and lets it out in a slow stream. And she does it again. And again.

And Regina finds herself falling into the same rhythm, coming down from the cliff’s edge she’d been standing on, floating instead on an ocean wave moving in and out. In and out.

She closes her eyes.

Distantly, she hears Henry’s worried footsteps shuffling back into the room.

“Thanks, kid,” Emma says. Regina can feel the words vibrating in Emma’s bones. “Just set it down on the floor. Good boy.”

“Is she…?”

“She’s going to be just fine, Henry,” Regina can hear the gentle smile in Emma’s voice. “Why don’t you sit down by me and tell her a story? …Come on. It’s okay.”

Henry sits, but remains quiet.

“Tell her about your class garden.”

So Henry does, his voice quiet and shaky at first, but gaining volume and confidence as he continues.

“Ok…Um, so our class has a garden in the courtyard. The class last year started it, so we’re taking care of the vegetables they planted. We take turns pulling the weeds and watering and stuff. And then at the end of the week the garden helpers get to go with Ms. Powhatan to the farmer’s market to sell some of the stuff we grow. It’s my turn in two weeks…the squash is pretty much the only thing left, but we used to have carrots and lettuce and beans and tomatoes. And Paige—she was a garden helper last week—says that there are tons of people who come to our stall trying to buy pumpkins, but they didn’t plant that much of those last year, so we always sell out in like the first five minutes…”

And Regina feels her world contracting, the frayed edges fading out until the only things in it are Henry’s voice and Emma’s hands.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Stay

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings: references to violence against children, mentions of suicidal thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room smells like throw-up and smoke and whatever weird chemical stuff came out of the fire extinguisher.

And Henry's mom is just sitting there with her eyes closed and her hand on Emma’s stomach like it’s the only thing keeping her from floating away.

He has never seen her like this. It makes him want to cry. And the only reason he isn’t crying is because he thinks it will make her scared again.

Emma was right. She was right when she’d said he would freak out if he knew what they were hiding.

He thinks maybe he can even understand why they’d hidden it from him. [He never, never wants to see his mom like this again.]

He’d heard their whole conversation in the study. He’d taken one of his walkie-talkies and taped down the talk button and left it behind a row of books when he’d gone down to get milk earlier. It was a guess, but he’d thought that if his moms were going to have a secret conversation, it would probably be in the study (doors) instead of the living room or dining room (no doors).

He’d been right.

So he’d sat with his blankets pulled over his head and listened to them talk about light magic and dark magic and the potion making his mom remember…whatever it was she was remembering.

And he’d known—just like he’d known when he heard them talking in the kitchen—that this was what had made his mom break the microwave. And the mirror.

And he’d been a little mad at them for keeping it from him. But not as mad as he could have been. Partly because he guessed from listening to them talk that they had almost no idea what was actually going on themselves, so it wasn’t like they were hiding that much from him anyway.

So he’d gone to sleep a little irritated, but not really angry. Whatever was happening was probably just a stupid accident, like Emma had said. He’d maybe ask them about potions in the morning and see if they let anything slip.

But then he’d woken up to the sound of a door being thrown open, and to strange whooshing and crackling noises coming through the walkie-talkie on his pillow.

And he’d gone downstairs to find his mom throwing fireballs at a bookshelf.

And that was definitely something to freak out about.
“But what if that’s why you’re having these memories?” he remembers Emma saying to his mom.
“…it’s making you remember using dark magic just so it has somewhere to go…”

He looks at his mom now and thinks about how dark and tangled her eyes had been when Emma had first knocked her to the ground. And he realizes this is much, much worse than just a stupid accident.

_She was remembering something. She was remembering using dark magic._

But she hadn’t looked evil. Not like she’d looked in his book. Not like he’d imagined…

She’d just looked…scared and lost. Not like the Evil Queen. Not even like his mom. Just like…a person. A person waking up from a nightmare.

He wants to touch her, to hold her hand. But Emma’s already doing that for him.

Emma must sense Henry’s eyes on her, because she looks over at him and gives him a tight smile. And then she looks back at his mom like she’s trying to throw an invisible rope out to her and save her from drowning.

They sit there quietly for a long time.

Then Emma squeezes his mom’s hand. “Regina?”

His mom’s eyes open slowly and they’re still dark, but maybe not as tangled.

Emma smiles a little, her eyes going gentle like they do sometimes when she looks at him. “You want some water?”

Emma picks up the glass Henry’d brought. His mom reaches out a careful hand and brings it to her lips. She winces as she sips once, twice, then hands the glass back to Emma and avoids looking either of them in the eye.

Emma looks down at their hands on her stomach as if trying to decide something. Then she takes his mom’s hand, weaves their fingers together, and rests both of their hands on her knee. His mom’s face twitches, but she still doesn’t look up.

“So, um. You want to go get cleaned up?” Emma says after a moment.

Henry’s mom takes a breath and nods once, sharply.

“Hey, hand me that towel, kid,” Emma says as she takes his mom’s arm and helps her to her feet.

He hands Emma the towel and she helps his mom press it to her soaked pajamas.

They walk slowly out of the room and up the stairs, his mom pulling herself up with white-knuckled hands on the banister, Emma sort of hovering beside her.

They end up in his mom’s room. Henry hasn’t been in there in…a long time. Everything is pretty much the same, except that the picture of him and his mom feeding the ducks isn’t on the nightstand anymore. It makes him sad until he notices the edge of a picture frame sticking out from under one of his mom’s pillows. And then somehow that just makes him sadder.

His mom has turned around in the doorway of the master bathroom. Emma is less than a foot away from her, and his mom is whispering, but he can hear every word she says.

“Take Henry and get out of here.”
“No!” Henry yells, without really meaning to.

Emma looks at him, then back to his mom. “I can’t,” she says, shaking her head.

His mom’s eyes tangle again, her face twisting with something Henry can’t quite name. “Did you somehow miss the fact that I just set the house on fire with our son sleeping upstairs?” she half-shouts, her voice hoarse and painful-sounding.

Emma frowns. “No. But did you somehow miss the fact that you could have killed yourself tonight? If we hadn’t been here…”

His mom’s face goes blank. Then she whirls around, stalks into the bathroom, and slams the door.

Emma stands there looking at the closed door, puffed up like she’s getting ready to yell. Then she turns away, deflating like someone’s stuck a pin in her lungs.

***

Emma sits leaning against the doorframe and listens to the muffled sound of water crashing against porcelain as Regina takes a shower. She listens for other things, too. For mirrors breaking or bodies slipping to the tile floor.

“She was really scared, wasn’t she?” Henry asks quietly. He’s sitting on Regina’s bed in too-small Batman pajamas, feet dangling over the edge.

“Yeah, kid,” Emma replies after a moment. It occurs to her that, from Henry’s perspective, the night had probably been even more traumatic and confusing than it had been for her. “Henry…” she begins, not really sure what to say.

“I heard you,” he says, studying a picture frame he’d pulled from under Regina’s pillows. “In the kitchen.”

Of course he had.

“So I hid a walkie-talkie in the study and…I heard that, too.”

Emma doesn’t know whether to feel indignant at his prying or relieved that he probably isn’t as confused as she’d thought. She settles on indignant, mostly because it seems like a more mom-ish thing to do.

“Henry…those were private conversations,” she says, her voice coming out scratchy and tired as she runs a hand through her matted hair. “And if you really heard us in the kitchen, you should have known we were planning to tell you about it anyway. So what’s with all the Operation Cobra spy stuff?”

“Horcrux,” Henry mumbles, looking a bit ashamed of himself.

“What?”

“Operation Horcrux. That’s what I named it.”

“Henry.”

“I was tired of you guys lying to me!” Henry insists defensively, though Emma’s sure she can see a good amount of guilt in his eyes. “I asked you what was wrong last night and you didn’t—”
“Henry, I didn’t even know what was actually going on until this afternoon.”

“Then why didn’t you just tell me at dinner? Or when we were doing the dishes? My mom wasn’t there—”

“Because it wasn’t up to me to tell you!” Emma says, exasperated. “She’s your mom and she’s important to you. I get that. But it’s her life and it’s her decision what to tell you about it.”

Henry looks suspicious. “You said—in the kitchen, you said you thought I should know.”

“Yes, I did think you should know. And I specifically said that to your mom because I think she should know that you’re worried about her enough to want to know what’s happening.”

Henry studies his feet. “She didn’t think I would be.”

“No, she didn’t,” Emma agrees softly.

“I am,” Henry insists, looking up at her with wide eyes.

“I know that, kid. And I think your mom knows that, too, most of the time. She just doesn’t always believe it.” Emma sighs, blinking away images of New York fire escapes. “Sometimes it’s not easy to see that people still love you when they’re mad at you. And you have every right to be mad at her. She’s done some not-so-great things. But…I can also see how much you love her. How hard you’re trying to understand her. I get to see that, because you’ve been hanging out with me a lot lately. But she doesn’t.”

Henry searches her face, and she hopes she’s managing an encouraging expression.

“So, yeah,” she says, finally. “I thought you should know. But it wasn’t my decision to tell you. It’s hers.”

“She never tells me anything important,” Henry says bitterly.

“Henry…It’s not your job to know everything about everybody.” Emma looks him in the eye. It’s kind of painful to say this to him when there is still a part of her that’s eight-nine-ten years old, waiting for adults to look at her like she meant something. “I know…I know it makes you feel safer if you do. And I know it hurts you when people lie to you. You’re a smart kid and you notice things and it really sucks when people don’t recognize that. But that doesn’t mean we can’t try to protect you from stuff sometimes. And that doesn’t mean we have to tell you everything. Adults have things they don’t want to tell people, just like kids do. It’s not always something bad—it could be something they just don’t like talking about.”

“Like my dad.”

Emma takes a sharp breath. “Yeah. Like your dad.”

She watches Henry process this information.

“Henry…” she begins, not entirely sure that the next thing she’s going to say will be very mom-ish at all. “What if next time you think we’re not telling you something, you just ask why?”

He wrinkles his nose. “But…you probably still wouldn’t tell me.”

“Probably. But would you feel better if you knew why we weren’t telling you? If you knew there was a good reason, would it help you feel safer?”
Henry shrugs.

They sit there in silence for a moment. Then Henry speaks again, hesitantly, eyeing the bathroom door.

“We’re not going to leave, are we?” he asks.

Emma sighs. “I…don’t want to. I think it would be safer for her if there was someone here.”

“But she doesn’t want me here.”

Emma can hear the catch in his voice, though he’d tried valiantly to hide it. She looks at him seriously. “Kid, she doesn’t want you here because she’s afraid she’ll hurt you.”

“She won’t.”

“She doesn’t want to. But, Henry…she could.”

Henry studies the picture in his lap. “That’s why she was so scared?” he asks quietly.

“Part of it, yeah, I think so.”

“I don’t want to leave her alone,” he says, his voice going rough.

Emma shakes her head. “She won’t be alone.” She bends her knees and rests her folded arms on them. “If she doesn’t want us here, I’ll get someone else to come—”

“Who?” Henry asks, looking at her like she’d suggested Mary Margaret drop by with a care package.

“I don’t know. But we’re not leaving her alone again.”

“She hates everyone else.”

“Then I guess she’s stuck with us.”

She vaguely registers the water cutting off in the bathroom and realizes that it might be easier to convince Regina that her son is not in danger from her if said son is safely in bed with several doors between them.

“Come on, kid,” she says, getting up from the floor. “I need your help with something.”

**

Regina steps out of the bathroom, cool air cutting across her skin as the steam from the shower dissipates behind her.

Thoughts of smoke and screams still cloud her eyes, and it takes her a moment to register the fact that the bedroom is empty. They’re gone.

She tells herself she shouldn’t be surprised, that she’d essentially ordered Emma and Henry to leave. She tells herself there is no reason for the bright ache that flashes briefly in the bones over her heart.

_They left. Of course they did, you idiot._

She sits on the bed in fresh pajamas and reaches for the picture frame someone (Henry? Emma?)
had pulled from under her pillow.

It’s a picture of her and Henry feeding the ducks down at the pond. Henry’s maybe five years old, drowning in a new coat that he would outgrow by the following spring, clutching a bag of stale bread they’d been saving after dinner all week. She’d set a timer on the camera, intending to pose with him next to the water. But he’d just hit a duck in the eye with a piece of bread and had gone a little hysterical at the thought that he’d somehow hurt it.

So instead the camera had captured her squatting down on the muddy banks in a grey pea coat, one arm around Henry’s little shoulders, the other pointing out toward the pond, where the duck in question nibbled happily at the overlarge chunk of bread now floating next to it in the water. It’s ok? Yes, baby, he’s just fine.

[Instead, the camera had captured the way he’d looked at her then, when everything in his eyes said love.]

Someone knocks at the door. “Regina?”

She whips around, heart in her throat.

Emma is standing in the doorway, her head peeking cautiously into the room, Henry’s blue sleeping bag tucked under one arm.

It takes Regina a moment to find her voice. “You’re—why are you here?”

Surprise makes her words come out angry. She watches Emma wince at them and waits for her to turn and walk away.

But Emma just steps into the bedroom, a grim look on her face. “I’m sorry, I know you wanted us to go and I get that, but—I can’t just leave you here with all this going on.” She sighs. “I don’t know what to do to help…except just be here and try and keep you from hurting yourself when the memories come. So, uh. I’m going to stay, ok?”

It’s a little like Emma’s reading from the words Regina had once written to herself in the voice of A Mother Who Isn’t Cora—in the voice of Anyone Really—on hollow afternoons, on nights spent alone in dark rooms, on days when the desperate anger had left just enough room for want. It’s…frightening, hearing them spoken like this. By this person. By Emma.

She realizes she’s staring.

“Regina?” Emma says, uncertain. “I could get somebody else, but I didn’t know who you’d want…but if you—”

“No, I—No.”

Regina turns away again, studying at the photo in her lap, the silky wrinkles in her pajamas, the way her toes just brush against the carpet. It isn’t a dream, but it feels like it could be.

Emma shuffles around behind her. “I’m going to sleep in front of the door, so you’d have to go through me to get…anywhere.”

“Henry’s here?”

“Yeah, he…didn’t want to leave, either.”

She tightens her grip on the picture frame and curls slowly back into the pillows, hoping the
stiffness of her back telegraphs just enough fuck off to prevent Emma from commenting. Hiding now would take an energy she doesn’t have.

“Lights off ok?”

“Hm.”

The room goes dark and Emma’s breathing evens out.

Regina doesn’t sleep; her thoughts fade in and out until her mind is a blur of flames and screaming and children’s eyes.

“Emma?” she breathes, sometime far past midnight, testing the name out on her tongue. It feels less weighty in the dark.

Emma snuffles in her sleep, but doesn’t answer.

“I killed a child.”

The words seem too thin to hold their meaning. She turns over. In the dim light she can just see the shape Emma makes, curled up on the floor in Henry’s sleeping bag, hair thrown across her face in a tangled mess.

“I killed a child,” she says again. “I burned her alive, like I nearly did to Henry tonight. And you.”

She doesn’t know what she wants. Anger. Disgust. For Emma to remember once more who Regina really is...for Emma to stop making everything seem possible again.

(She remembers Emma in a grey sweater, face half-lit in the lamplight outside Granny’s. She remembers floating above her body then, saying things that belonged to a different version of herself and believing that something better could grow out of them.)

She wants Emma to wake up and hate her. Hate is old and worn and fits just so in the palm of her hand. She knows how to throw it back.

Anything would be easier than this ruthless hope that bleeds out of her every time Emma stays.

And that is what she really wants: for the hope to die before it can become something that kills her.

She watches the hair in front of Emma’s mouth puff out with each breath.

Why are you here?

Regina falls asleep and dreams of her mother diving towards her through a mirror, dagger in hand. She wakes up and thinks the desperate noise is coming from her own mouth.

But it’s not. It’s Emma.

She lets thoughts of propriety and something like shyness delay her for roughly nine seconds. And then she throws the blankets off and pads over to the door, hesitating for a moment before kneeling gingerly near Emma’s shoulder.

Emma’s matted hair is now sweat-damp, her face lined with pain as her legs tangle in the sleeping bag. She’d never asked for a pillow; her cheek rubs against the carpet.

“No…” she whispers croakily. “No, the baby.”
“Emma,” Regina says, her own voice cracking from sleep. She clears her throat, feeling unreal and out of place. “Emma, wake up.”

“The baby…please…”

“Emma.”

“No!”

“Emma!”

Emma jerks awake, gasping like she’d come to the surface of an ocean. Her eyes dart wildly in the darkness, finally coming to rest on Regina’s face.

Regina watches the ghosts still flitting around in Emma’s eyes and feels something like an odd kinship begin to quietly nudge aside the horrified embarrassment that had slid its way across her skin earlier that night, when Emma’s hand holding hers was the only thing keeping the world from spinning out from under her.

You too.

“You were dreaming,” she whispers.

“Yeah,” Emma says, her voice unsteady as she twists in the sleeping bag and scoots back to sit against the wall. She scrubs a hand across her face. “Sorry.”

“I was already awake,” Regina lies, moving to sit fully on the floor, inches away from Emma’s hidden toes.

Emma wraps her arms around her knees.

“Can you tell me something?” she asks softly, like she doesn’t mean to be heard.

“Probably,” Regina says, eyes caught momentarily on the ripple of muscle in Emma's shoulders.

Emma smiles a little, though the pain is still apparent in the lines of her face. “What were Henry’s first words?”

Regina isn’t expecting the question, but she keeps her voice light. “Wishful thinking first words, or real first words?”

Emma does smile this time. “Both.”

Regina sits back, drawing her knees to her chest as she remembers. “Wishful thinking: ba-ba. It’s what he used to call his bottle.”

Emma hums, closing her eyes.

“Real…No.”

Emma cracks an eye. “No?”

“It was really more like ‘nah,’” Regina smirks. “But he definitely meant ‘no.’”

Emma chuckles a little wetly.
“He went through a phase where he would just say that to everything. ‘Henry, are you sleepy?’ ‘Nnnah!’ ‘Henry, it’s time for a bath.’ ‘Nnnah!’ ‘Henry, do you want some ice cream?’ ‘Nnnah!’”

Emma grins. “Still the same kid, then.”

Regina returns the smile, thinking of two-year-old Henry running through the upstairs hallway, completely naked, screeching at the top of his lungs because she’d told him he couldn’t take his stuffed platypus into the bathtub.

“When was ‘mama’?”

Regina’s first response is to recoil, to draw that precious secret further into herself where no one else can touch it. But she remembers Emma calling for the baby in her dreams, so, slowly, she holds it out like the lifeline it had been. “Somewhere between wishful thinking and real,” she says softly. “He started saying ma-ma-ma before he really meant anything by it.”

“I bet you know the exact date,” Emma says, smiling oddly.

Regina searches Emma’s face for signs of derision, but all she sees is wistfulness—and perhaps what could have been considered affection, had her words been directed at a different person.

“When was ‘mama’?”

Regina searches Emma’s face for signs of derision, but all she sees is wistfulness—and perhaps what could have been considered affection, had her words been directed at a different person.

“May 28,” she says, finally. “Two weeks before his first birthday.”

She looks up and Emma’s eyes are so warm.

“I used to imagine you,” Emma whispers, the moonlight tracing the ends of her hair.

Regina’s breath catches.

“I—I knew I couldn’t be his mother,” Emma continues, her eyes distant and unfocused. “I knew I could never give him the life I wanted for him. But it was still so…I mean, I was just so scared all the time then. I was just a kid. I didn’t—there was no one.” She visibly swallows. “So I used to imagine you: the person who would be his mom. What you were like. What kinds of food you would make for dinner. What color you were painting his room. If he would have any brothers or sisters.”

Regina feels her eyes prickle.

Emma leans back, closes her eyes, pulls her knees closer to her chest. “Thinking like that—thinking about giving that life to both of you…it…probably saved my life. And Henry’s.”

Regina freezes.

Emma just stares at her like she’s never seen her before.

Regina shifts uncomfortably. “Of course, you had a baby…and I cast a curse,” she says, almost carelessly, memorizing the way Emma’s fingers thread together around her knees.

Emma blinks. “Yeah. But then you raised the baby and I broke the curse.” She smiles. “So I guess we’re even.”
Regina looks up into her eyes. “Yes,” she says, more in the spirit of the moment than out of actual agreement, “I suppose we are.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Henry is up early. The house is quiet and dark, and he nearly misses a step going downstairs because he’d forgotten how to count them.

The hallway outside the kitchen still smells like smoke, but it’s a bit better in the kitchen itself. He ducks his head into the pantry and reaches for the box of bran flakes. But then he pauses for a moment, remembering Sunday mornings when he was really little, when his mom would make French toast and fresh orange juice and they’d sit at the table and read comics together until it was far too late in the day to still be wearing pajamas.

He shuts the pantry, pulls the milk and eggs from the refrigerator, and puts a pan on the stove.

He doesn’t quite remember how to make French toast, but he thinks there was something spicy in it, so he dumps some ground cloves in with the milk and eggs and uses a fork to mix it together because he can’t find a whisk. (He drops the fork in the bowl four times, but by the third time back and forth to the sink to rinse it off, he’s kind of beyond caring that the handle is covered in sticky egg and just keeps mixing anyway).

The brioche is on the top shelf of the pantry, so he carries a chair from the dining room to reach it. He cuts the bread into mostly-even slices with a butter knife, drops them in the batter, and then realizes only after he’s dripped a trail of eggy-milk across the kitchen floor that he should have moved the bowl closer to the stove before he tried to put the bread in the pan. Also, some of the spilt batter has soaked through his socks.

He drags the chair over to the stove and stands on it so he can see the pan better and twists the knob to light the burner. It makes a weird clicking noise, and at first the fire is so big he’s sure he’s done something wrong, but then he panics and cranks the knob the other way and it turns down to a more manageable size.

Henry cooks the toast and only burns one slice—the first slice, because he had to go get a plate to put it on when it was done, which involved a lot more climbing and chair-dragging time than he had planned for. But the burnt piece is only a little browner than the others, and he likes things crispier anyway.

He’s trying to carry the plate of French toast, the butter dish, the newspaper, and a jar of maple syrup to the dining room when he hears footsteps behind him.

“Henry?”

He turns around, nearly dropping the butter. “Mom? I—made French toast.”

He watches as his mom takes in the sight of the kitchen: dirty bowl, spilt milk, eggshells on the counter. “I can see that,” she says slowly.

“Um…I’ll clean it?”

His mom shakes her head. “Let’s worry about it later.” A smile grows slowly across her face. “You want some help with that?” she asks, gesturing at the plate of French toast.

“Uh, yeah.” He turns sideways, trying to show her the jar of maple syrup that’s clamped under his sleeve.
arm. “Could you take this?”

“Anything else?” his mom asks, taking the jar.

“Could you get some plates and stuff?”

He hears her clattering around in the cupboards as he goes to put everything on the table. She comes out with three plates, a handful of silverware, and a stack of glasses. He helps her set them out and they take seats at their usual places.

“I didn’t know you knew how to make French toast,” his mom says after a moment. “Did Emma teach you?”

Henry shakes his head. “I sort of…guessed. From when we used to do it.”

His mom nods slowly, her eyes going distant like she’s remembering too.

“Henry, I—” she says, looking at him again, her eyes dark and sad. “I am so sorry for what I said yesterday about the couch. I never should have made you feel like Emma didn’t want you.”

“It’s okay,” Henry says softly, twisting the hem of his school sweater in his hands. He feels a pool of guilt in his stomach stir again, remembering Operation Horcrux.

“No, it’s not,” his mom says, reaching out to put a hand over his.

Henry shrugs. “I forgive you.”

“Henry…”

He sighs sharply. “I listened to you last night, ok?”

“What?”

Henry doesn’t look at his mom’s face, but he can hear the confusion in her voice.

He tells her, in one long, rushed breath, about hearing them in the kitchen and being so sure they wouldn’t tell him anything and hiding the walkie-talkie in the study.

“And I heard what Emma said about the potion making you remember things, and then I came downstairs and you—”

Henry stops then, remembering the choking fear he’d felt seeing his mom throwing fireballs at the bookshelves last night.

“Henry,” his mom says, her voice breaking. “I’m sorry.”

Henry shakes his head. “Why…why did you take a potion that could hurt you like that?”

“Because I wanted to take away my magic.”

“But why?” Henry asks, utterly lost.

His mom leans down to look in his eyes. “Henry, after…after what happened in Mr. Gold’s shop, I was so…so sad. And hurt. And angry. I thought I was going to hurt someone.”

“Mary Margaret?”
His mom nods. “Yes, I thought I might hurt her. But I also knew that if I hurt her it would hurt you.” She presses her lips together in a sad smile, eyes blinking rapidly. “And I didn’t know what else to do. I’ve never been good at controlling my anger, and I knew that if I had my magic, all it would take was for Mary Margaret to show up at my door, and I…would have killed her.”

Henry is torn between shock and understanding, so he just nods. “She made you kill your mom,” he says, holding out a reason for her to grab on to.

“She did,” his mom says smoothly, her face blank enough that Henry knows there is more she could say, but isn’t.

“So you took the potion to stop yourself?”

“Yes. And to give myself a chance to be free of everything magic has made me.”

*The Evil Queen*, Henry thinks. But he has a hard time thinking of that name while looking at his mom just now.

He remembers something he’d heard them talking about in the study. “But Emma said…she said you could still have light magic.”

His mom looks at him with sad eyes. “I don’t think so, Henry.”

Henry shakes his head. “But you *could*. You’re—you’re *good* now. You have to be.”

His mom opens her mouth to speak, to tell him it’s impossible, just like she’d told Emma last night.

He cuts her off before she can say anything, feeling tears in his voice. “No, you *have* to be. You’re my mom. I want you back.” He stands up. “You have to come back,” he says, not sure if she’ll understand what he means. “I miss you.”

His mom blinks up at him, her eyes wet. “Oh, Henry…”

Henry throws himself at her and she pulls him into her lap like she used to when he was four and afraid of the monsters living in his window blinds. He’s bigger now, and doesn’t fit quite as neatly against her, but he wraps his arms around her chest and she rests her chin against his head and it’s just as warm and safe as he remembers.

***

Emma towels off her hair as she walks the short space of hallway between Henry’s bathroom and Regina’s bedroom.

“Hey, can I use your mirror?” she calls out. “The one in Henry’s bathroom is still—well, *broken*, and—Regina?”

The bedroom, where she’d left Regina to get dressed not ten minutes before, is empty. Bed made. Sleeping bag rolled. Bathroom door wide open. Empty.

*Dammit. Leave her alone for five seconds… “I don’t need a babysitter, Miss Swan.” “Don’t be dramatic, Miss Swan.” Yeah, well, if you’re out barbecuing the neighbor’s cat, it’s about to get real dramatic around here, lady.*

*God—*“Regina!”
Henry’s bedroom is also empty. Emma jogs down the hall and stumbles down the stairs, phone in hand, ready to call…someone. But then she sees them.

They’re sitting together at the dining room table, Henry held on Regina’s lap, the pair of them half hidden behind *The Storybrooke Mirror*. She can see the shadow of Henry’s hand through the comics section, the thin paper made translucent by the rising sun in the back window. He’s pointing to something, whispering to Regina, who ducks her head to see, her sun-caught hair brushing against Henry’s cheek. They make faces at each other, sniggering.

Emma finds herself absorbed in the sight, vaguely aware of a strange stirring in her breastbone.

“Emma,” Henry says, catching sight of her. “I made French toast! Want some?”

Emma blinks. “Um, yeah. Sure.”

She makes her way to the table and sits next to them, feeling Regina’s eyes on her.

“I thought you were going to wait upstairs,” Emma comments lightly, studying the butter dish and ignoring the weight in Regina’s gaze. She’d said more than she’d meant to last night, and daylight makes everything she’d shared seem both more and less than it was. She’s afraid to see how the knowledge of it sits in Regina’s eyes.

“I would have,” Regina says after a moment, the carelessness in her voice just barely covering something Emma can’t quantify, “but I heard a burglar in the kitchen.”

Emma raises her eyebrows, spearing a slice of slightly soggy toast and putting it on the plate in front of her.

“It turns out it was just an overzealous chef.”

Henry grins through a mouthful of French toast.

Emma smiles briefly, takes a bite of her own toast, and splutters.

Regina smirks at her over the top of Henry’s head. “Cloves,” she says silkily. “An ingenious substitution, wouldn’t you agree?”

Emma wrinkles her nose, glaring half-heartedly. *A little warning, maybe?*

“Mmmhmm” is all she says.

Regina hands her the jar of maple syrup, her eyes focused back on the paper. “Try this, dear.”

Emma does, and the sweet-spicy combination isn’t half-bad. “Coffee?”

“Hmm.” Regina says, through a sip from her own mug. She swallows. “Yes. In the pot. Watch the batter.”

Emma, already out of her chair and across the room, looks back questioningly.

“On the floor,” Regina says, her face deliberately blank.

Emma wrinkles her nose, then turns back around and walks into the kitchen. “Oh—wow.”

It looks like a raccoon got loose and tracked half the contents of the pantry across the room.

Emma steps carefully over the trail of batter on the floor and pours herself a mug of coffee.
Her phone rings.

“David?”

“Emma. There’s a water main break down on Grimm Avenue. The whole street’s flooded, and there are people stranded in Phil’s Gym. I’ve got Mary Margaret on the call line and the dwarves and I are on our way to the scene, but we’re probably going to need all the help we can get.”

“Ok. Yeah,” Emma says, setting the mug back on the counter and weaving her way back to the dining room. “Do we have time to drop Henry off at the bus—or, wait, is school still on?”

Regina and Henry turn to look at her in interest.

“School?” David asks, his voice muffled. “As far as I know?...Mary Margaret’s nodding at me. So, yes? The break is far enough away that it shouldn’t be a problem for the buses. It’s not in a residential neighborhood or anything.”

“Ok. Well, give me like fifteen minutes and we’ll be there.”

“We? Are you still at…”?

Emma sighs. “Look, David. Can we argue about this some other time? I’ll see you in fifteen.”

She hangs up the phone and shoves it in her pocket.

“What happened?” Henry asks.

“Water main break,” Emma says, picking up her plate and shoving a large bite of toast in her mouth. “Gotta go.”

“But I still have school?” Henry asks, his face falling.

“Yeah, kid,” Emma says, chewing. “Go grab your stuff. We have to get going.”

Henry reluctantly gets off Regina’s lap. “What about Mom?”

Emma swallows her mouthful of toast. “Kid. Stuff. Now,” Emma says, mock-forcefully, before turning to Regina. “Regina, if you want to come, we could probably use your help.”

Regina folds the newspaper carefully and places it on the table in front of her. “I would find that flattering, Miss Swan, if I weren’t aware of your…ulterior motives.”

“I can feel them coming when I’m awake,” Regina says shortly, filling the sink with soapy water and throwing dishes into it haphazardly. “So the refrigerator is likely safe. Though your concern for the food supply is noted.”

Emma stops in her tracks, taken aback by the sudden waspishness in Regina’s voice. “You can feel them…” she repeats, confused. “You can feel the memories coming?”

“I just said that,” Regina snaps, snatching the greasy frying pan from the stove and tossing it with a clang into the sink.
Emma rolls her eyes. “Excuse me for taking a millisecond to catch up. When were you going to tell me?”

“It never came up,” Regina says smoothly, dumping Henry’s mixing bowl into the soapy water on top of the pan. “And, though you seem to think otherwise, you are not entitled to know every minute detail of my life.”

_Not entitled to…?_ “Ok,” Emma says harshly. “Firstly, I don’t think that. And, secondly, don’t you think that telling me you can _feel_ one of those things coming on would help me—I don’t know, _do something about it_?”

“No, I don’t,” Regina says, whipping around with a dishcloth in her hand, spraying soap suds on the floor and across the front of Emma’s shirt. “Considering the last time I tried to tell you I felt something coming, you _ignored me and continued to SCREAM IN MY FACE_!”

Regina’s eyes blaze with anger and something like hurt. Emma stands frozen, backed up against the island, remembering yesterday afternoon when she’d come barging into the house, remembering Regina pressing herself up against the wall, remembering Regina’s voice straining as she tried to get a word in edgewise.

_Damn._

“Regina, I—”

“Mom? Emma?”

Henry’s standing in the doorway, looking at them in confusion. “Don’t we have to go?”

Emma takes a breath. “Yeah, kid. I’ll meet you in the car.”

She turns back to Regina, but Regina has her back to her again, scrubbing at the frying pan with unnecessary force.

“Regina…”

Regina’s back stiffens.

Emma sighs heavily. _Just…stay safe._

She spends the drive to Henry’s bus stop trying to convince him that his mom will be fine while they’re gone. She spends the drive to the water main break trying to convince herself of the same thing.

_Where the hell did all that even come from? We’re always in the middle of these things before I know they’ve started…_

Emma’s never actually seen a water main break in person before, so she’s not sure how bad this one is, relatively speaking. But the street is covered in at least eight inches of water and it takes four trips for the fire truck they’ve commandeered to get everyone out of the gym safely and Emma’s stuck directing increasingly irritable commuters around the disaster zone for most of the morning and by the end of it all, there’s still water bubbling out of a crater in the asphalt and nobody seems to know who’s in charge of fixing it anymore. So: bad. It’s pretty bad.

After the first rush is over, David stays at the scene with some of the dwarves, trying to contain the damage. Emma takes a brief detour to City Hall and grabs a bunch of blueprints before rushing back to the sheriff’s station and calling everyone in the phonebook who might have something to
She’s just gotten off the phone with the sanitation guys, who say they can shut off the water in that section of town, when the call line rings. And then it doesn’t stop ringing for three hours.

—“The boil order is only for drinking water, Mrs. Boot…I don’t know. Well, if you think he’s going to drink the bathwater, I guess you should boil it. Well…sorry. Yeah, a pleasant day to you, too.”—

—“Tiana? I just got off the phone with David and he’s going to send some people over to try and deal with the flooding. For now, just keep the customers out of the basement. And maybe don’t serve any more food.”—

—“I’m sorry—Mrs. Feely, I’m sorry but I really just can’t deal with your cat right now…I understand he’s important to you…I just said—Well if he’s in a tree, at least he’s not about to drown in the street!”—

It’s early afternoon before Emma has five free minutes to scrape the bottoms of her desk drawers for change to use in the vending machine down the hall.

She’s managed to gather $1.35 when the door opens.

“Ok, I’m about to kill—Ruby?”

“Hey, Emma.”

Ruby’s standing in the doorway, looking winded, hair blown in a tangled mess across her cheeks.

“Hey,” Emma gets up from the desk. “What’s up?”

Ruby steps inside, unwinding her scarf from around her neck. “David called. He said you might need help answering the call line while Snow’s at school. I would have come earlier, but we had a huge rush at Granny’s. Apparently half the town’s water is cut off, and everyone had the same back-up plan. Anyway, I brought you a grilled cheese.”

Ruby holds out a paper bag, and Emma lunges forward to grab it.

“Remind me sometime that I pretty much owe you my life,” Emma says, digging into the bag and pulling out the sandwich. Still warm. Yes.

“So, it’s been a disaster around here, huh?” Ruby says, perching herself on the edge of Emma’s desk.

“Yeah,” Emma says through a mouthful of sandwich. “People are going crazy. That whole section of town around Phil’s is still flooded, even after we got the water turned off. So business is shut down and I’ve got people crawling up my ass about when they can open again and I have nothing to tell them except ‘We’re handling it,’ which just makes me sound like a bureaucratic assat. Traffic this afternoon is going to be a bitch. And there was another break on Camelot Circle about an hour ago—up near Ashley’s husband’s old house—so of course Spencer and his McMansion people are talking about suing the town for negligence.” Emma wipes a greasy hand on her jeans. “And I’m supposed to be looking through these blueprints to see where they can dig for repairs without hitting anything else, but I’ve had like two seconds to breathe since this morning.”

Ruby shrugs. “I can take care of the call line if you want to hit the blueprints.”
“You’re the best,” Emma says, crumpling the paper bag and throwing it in the trashcan. “Seriously.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ruby says as she walks out into the main office to sit by the call line phone. “You owe me a drink.”

“You’ll need a drink after dealing with the citizenry today. If Mrs. Feely calls again about her cat, tell her to get her own ladder.”

“She’s ninety-six.”

“Well, they’re already suing us for negligence.”

**

Regina spends the morning scrubbing every surface in the kitchen, studiously ignoring the barely-touched mug of coffee Emma had left on the counter. When she’s gotten the last of the French toast batter out of the grain of the hardwood floors, she starts polishing the silver serving set with a foul-smelling cream she’d bought from a mail-order catalogue in the early 90’s.

*You wanted her to hate you,* Cora’s voice taunts as Regina scrubs a pair of silver salad tongs. *You wanted her to leave. You’ve certainly solved that problem this morning, my dear.*

She scrubs harder.

In the afternoon she makes the mistake of turning on the radio; it’s full of frantic callers reporting road closures and flooding and a second water main break. She pauses in the middle of rinsing a bunch of kale and looks again at the cup of cold coffee on the counter.

“—the boil order is for residents of the 6-block area between Fable St. and 7th Avenue. Again, drinking water only. And a reminder for the folks at home: the sheriff’s station is being overloaded with non-emergency calls on their emergency call line. If you have a question about road closures, water pressure, or any other non-emergency issue, please direct your attention to the Storybrooke Township website. Again, please refer to the town website for non-emergency questions and leave the call-line open for those who need it—”

Regina growls, drying her hands and grabbing the carafe to start a new pot of coffee.

Fifteen minutes later, she’s headed to the sheriff’s station with a fresh thermos of coffee on the passenger’s seat and a pit in her stomach that has everything to do with the memory of Emma’s eyes in the kitchen that morning.

The hallways of the station are deceptively quiet, but the office itself it buzzing with activity. Ruby is sitting at one of the desks, clamping the emergency phone between her ear and shoulder, scribbling something down on a pad of paper. She tears off the note and hands it to a dwarf who nearly knocks Regina over in his haste to get out of the room.

From the doorway, Regina can see Emma behind the glass interior walls, talking to Belle over a desk strewn with what look like blueprints. She wonders idly if Emma had even bothered to keep them in order, or if she’d find them, years later, stuffed haphazardly into a back corner of the City Hall records room.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Emma’s saying. “I totally forgot to call you about this afternoon.”

Belle shrugs, looking around the blueprint-strewn office. “It’s alright. I know you’re really busy. I just came by to ask…” She hesitates. “I was having dinner with my dad last night, and he told me
about what happened in his shop. And I was wondering if that was what you wanted my help with.”

Emma nods. “That was it.”

“I didn’t know if it was supposed to be confidential or…”

“Well, technically, yeah. But no worries. He’s your dad. And it’s not like we ever manage to follow protocol around here for more than an hour straight, anyway.”

“Well, good,” Belle says, crossing her arms and taking a breath. “It’ll be easier to help you look if I actually have some idea of what you’re looking for. I’ll see what I can find in the library about potions or objects that might cause something like that.”

“Ok, great,” Emma says. “Keep me updated? I don’t know how long it will take to get this mess taken care of, but I’ll be by to help in the next few days if I can.”

“Sure,” Belle says. She turns to leave, but then stops and faces Emma again, looking troubled. “My dad said…he said Regina did it.”

Emma sinks down in her office chair, running one hand through tangled hair. “Yeah. I know.”

Regina feels the blood leave her face.

Emma doesn’t—she can’t think…

She’d spent hours trying to identify the things she’d seen in Emma that morning, trying to understand what she had heard in Emma’s words after breakfast that had made her feel so cornered and snappish. Her mind had circled around the answer all day: fear. Fear, as Emma avoided Regina’s eyes at the table. Fear, in her reluctance to leave Regina alone in an empty house. Fear that Regina might destroy something in her absence. Fear, as Regina had screamed at her in the kitchen for not knowing something Emma could not possibly have known.

Fear.

She’d tired to push those thoughts away, tried to convince herself that Emma couldn’t be afraid of her. Emma wasn’t afraid of anything.

Emma had stayed when no one else would have. Emma had sat with her last night on the study floor and held her hand, even after she’d nearly burnt the house down with dark magic.

But then, Regina considers as she backs absentmindedly against the wall, what if it had all been a lie? What if the…familiarity…of these last few days had been born of necessity? A stakeout, a ruse to get close enough to gather evidence for this case she’s working with Belle?

Emma had certainly seen enough to make her case. An evil sorceress with uncontrollable, erratic bursts of magic.

And Regina had just told Emma she could feel them coming. Perhaps Emma had taken that as an admission of some kind of control over it all.

Regina closes her eyes.

She thinks you’ve done something to Belle’s father. Of course she’s afraid of you, you fool.
She throws the thermos of coffee at a filing cabinet and stays just long enough to hear the satisfying *clang* of metal on metal before elbowing her way back through the doors.

*You wanted this,* her mother’s voice sing-songs. *It was inevitable.*

“Regina?”

Hurried footsteps follow her down the hallway. She walks faster.

“Regina?”

She feels a hand at her elbow as they reach the entryway.

“Unhand me, Miss Swan,” she growls, yanking her arm free.

Emma circles around in front of her, tilting her head to look into Regina’s hooded eyes. “What’s going on? Are you ok?”

Something twists in Regina’s gut. A knife, maybe. “Oh, give it up, Swan.”

Emma’s brow wrinkles. “What are you talking about?”

Regina looks away, studying a flyer on the wall calling for Miner’s Day volunteers. “I know what you’re doing.”

“Oh. Great. Would you mind filling me in? Because I’m lost.”

“Stop!” Regina yells, turning back to face Emma. “Just. Stop.”

Emma’s eyes go wide. She frowns. “I would stop if I knew what the hell you were talking about.”

Regina closes her eyes, clamping her fists at her side. “Stop pretending.”

Emma groans. “You are actually—ugh! What? Stop pretending what?”

Regina grabs Emma by the upper arm, sneering in her face. “I know what you think of me. Stop pretending you care.”

Emma’s eyes narrow, studying Regina’s face. She seems to decide something. “I do care,” she says bluntly.

Regina’s grip slackens unconsciously.

Emma pulls her arm back. “And I honestly have no fucking clue what you’re talking about,” she snaps irritably. “So could you please just calm down and explain it to me? Especially the part where you storm in here and throw a thermos full of coffee into my office for no apparent reason. I know we fought this morning, but—”

Regina feels lost, which just tightens the growing knot of frustration in her chest. “You told Belle you knew I was involved with what happened to her father.”

“I—what?”

“I didn’t do it!” Regina yells.

“Regina—What, the tree?” Emma says, clearly bewildered. “I know you didn’t do it. Of course you didn’t.”
Tree? Regina stares. “But, you said—”

Emma looks at her for a moment, then drops down to sit on the wooden bench under the bulletin board, head in her hands. “Belle told me her father thinks you grew a tree through the floor of his shop. I said ‘I know,’ because I had a fifteen-minute conversation about it with him the other night during which I was unable to convince him that you don’t go around growing trees through people’s floors just to piss them off.” Emma looks up at her again. “‘I know’ Moe thinks you did it, just like I know Whale thinks he’ll have a chance with Ruby if he grows a mustache. Just like I know Mary Margaret thinks she did the right thing when she killed your mom.” She sighs. “Of course I don’t think you did it.”

Regina swallows an inexplicable lump in her throat. “Then why did you look at me like that this morning?”

Emma wrinkles her nose. “Like what?”

Regina throws up her hands, looking away. “I was yelling at you in the kitchen,” she says, picking the simplest and most pressing example. “You looked at me like…I scared you.”

Emma shakes her head. “I was…remembering.” She folds her hands and rests them under her chin, staring across the hallway past Regina. “You were saying how I didn’t listen to you yesterday when you tried to tell me a memory was coming. I was remembering the way you looked at me and realizing I should have seen how I was hurting you. I mean, I did, kind of, but I…” She puts her hands down and looks Regina in the eye. “Regina…I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Regina crosses her arms over her chest, studying the street outside through the glass door and feeling oddly flustered. “How could you have?”

They fall into silence for a few moments. Then Emma shifts on the bench.

“So, what was with the coffee?”

Regina’s cheeks darken. “It was…an apology.”

Emma snorts. “Really?”

“I—you didn’t finish your coffee this morning. So I made some to bring to you,” Regina explains, feeling ridiculous.

“And then you threw it on the floor.”

Regina turns around with a ready scowl only to find Emma grinning up at her.

She’s…teasing.

Something warm blossoms in Regina’s chest. She rolls her eyes. “Yes. Well, I’m not sure a bit of spilled coffee will make much of a difference to your disaster of an office. A squirrel could build a nest on your desk and you wouldn’t notice.”

Emma shrugs, standing up. “I’ve been going through some blueprints to try and help them with repairs. It took me forty-five minutes to figure out that they’re organized categorically and not chronologically or alphabetically.”

“I could have told you that.”

“I know,” Emma says, glancing toward the office and then back at Regina. “Hey, do you, um…
do you want to stay and help? I meant what I said this morning. We could use it. I’ve been drowning in paper all day, and Ruby’s just barely keeping up with the calls. We’re thinking about ordering some pizza from Stromboli’s for dinner later—I know that’s not your thing, but we could have a salad or something sent over from Granny’s. And Henry’ll be here in—” she checks her watch “—about an hour, so…”

Emma trails off, looking at Regina with something like guarded hope.

The warmth in Regina’s chest migrates to her cheeks. She tucks her hands into the pockets of her coat and nods once. “Alright.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year!
“...and Esperanza is friends with this boy Miguel who works on their ranch, but then she gets older and she tells him they can’t be friends because they live on opposite sides of the river.”

“The river?”

“It’s not a real river. It just means they live in different worlds and she doesn’t think they can really be friends because their lives are too different. It’s called a metaphor. That’s what I’m writing about in my reading journal.”

Henry shifts on the squeaky mattress, raising the composition notebook he’s been writing in so his mom can see. She’s sitting next to him on the cell cot, wedged between him and the wall, legs stretched out alongside his and crossed neatly at the ankles. A half-empty box of cold pizza is balanced on a three-legged stool next to Henry’s right elbow.

The station is almost dark; beyond the open door of the jail cell, Henry can see Emma sitting in the dim glow of her glass office, talking to someone on the phone while she shuffles through papers on her desk. Ruby left almost an hour ago, going back to Granny’s to help close.

Like it had last night in the kitchen, something about sitting here feels like Henry’s fallen into another world. Ms. Powhatan would probably call it a parallel universe—like what happened to Milo when he drove past the phantom tollbooth. It’s not like anything has really changed. Everything still looks the same: the desks and chairs and computers are all where they’ve always been and the pizza from Stromboli’s tastes as good as it always does.

It’s just everything feels...quiet. Settled. Like there’s nothing pulling them into the next moment and they can just sit and work and read and eat dinner like it’s always been this easy to be together.

Lately—well, not just lately, but for a long time—things have been changing so fast that it’s been hard to remember who he is. Not that he’s forgotten his name or anything, but more that he’s forgotten how to think thoughts like “I like strawberry ice cream” and “I wish there were more Harry Potter books,” because suddenly there was a curse and everything was a lie and it was Up To Him to fix things, and then people were dying and disappearing...and he wasn’t just Henry anymore.

So tonight is like a picture from a book where everything had gone differently. Where there wasn’t an Evil Queen or a curse or a dragon living under the library. In this story, he walked back from school and ate pizza and did his homework and his moms smiled at each other and made the whole room feel safe. In this story, maybe they’ll wait for Emma to finish working, or maybe Henry will yawn and his mom will say ‘time for you to get to bed,’ and they’ll pack up their things and get in the car and all drive home together.

***

Emma looks up when Mary Margaret knocks on the glass door.

“Hey,” she says, putting on a tired smile.

Mary Margaret smiles back. “Hey yourself. David says you’ve got things pretty much cleared up?”
Yeah, mostly,” Emma says, clasping her hands over her head and stretching. “There’s still the water damage to deal with, and the drainage stuff to work out—oh, and the McMansion people suing us. But the ‘emergency’ part of the emergency is pretty much over. I just want to finish up some of these incident reports and get the blueprints back to City Hall so I can see the desk again.”

Mary Margaret hums.

“That’s actually why I called you. Could you take Henry home?”

“Of course,” Mary Margaret says, nodding emphatically. She looks over her shoulder and catches sight of the cell cot, where Henry and Regina have fallen asleep. Her brow wrinkles. “Regina?”

Emma steels herself. For what, she doesn’t quite know. “Yeah. She’s been helping out today.”

It is obvious that Mary Margaret has something she wants to say, but she clamps her lips together to stop the words. After a moment, she asks, “Do you want me to take him to the loft, or…?”

“To Regina’s house. I mean, if you don’t mind staying with him until we get back. It’ll probably only be an hour. Maybe two. Regina won’t let me put the blueprints back by myself, so I guess it’s up to her how long that part takes.”

Mary Margaret gives her an odd look. She studies her hands for a moment and then meets Emma’s eyes again with a strained smile. “I don’t mind. I have papers to grade.”

“Great. Okay. Thanks,” Emma says, very aware of the sudden tension in the room. “Just, um—just let me grab him.”

She steps around the desk and walks purposefully toward the open cell, ignoring the itchy feeling on the back of her neck from Mary Margaret’s staring.

Henry is fast asleep and snoring lightly, a notebook held to his chest. Regina is curled next to him, one arm draped over his torso, her peacoat half-draped over the both of them.

The scene makes a light-bright jolt jump in Emma’s collar bone, a feeling she attributes to the fact that she may very well be risking bodily harm by moving Henry away from Regina in their sleep.

But Regina doesn’t move as Emma carefully shifts Henry into her arms. He’s just barely light enough for her to lift. Give it a year.

Mary Margaret follows her out to the parking lot and together they bundle Henry into the backseat of the station wagon.

“Well,” Emma says, rubbing her hands together as she straightens up. “Um. See you later, then. Call us if you need anything.”

Mary Margaret leans against the car door, searching Emma’s face. “Emma…” she begins, her breath clouding the air in front of her. “I…just. I want you to be…” She sighs. “Be careful, ok? With Regina.”

And this, Emma supposes, is what she’d been steeling herself for. She wants to say something snappy, like why, because she’s evil? or are you’re worried she’ll kill your daughter to get back at you for killing her mother? or you don’t even know her—I don’t think anybody does but the truth is that she can’t imagine being anything but careful with Regina. For her own reasons...whatever they are.
So instead she says, “Yeah. Ok. ’Night,” and heads back into the station.

She’s lost in thought as she shuffles down the dark hallway, hands in her pockets, hair falling from her ponytail. She’s tired. She’d been tired for months.

There’s a crash from the direction of her office. Emma runs.

She yanks the door open to find Regina still in the cell, surveying the upturned cot and the mess of schoolbooks and pizza on the floor with eyes that are somehow both angry and blank.

“Regina!” Emma calls, jogging towards her.

There is no indication that Regina’s heard. She flexes her hand, stiffens her back, and seems to gather something from within herself.

Emma lunges forward before she can really consciously understand what’s about to happen. Regina’s arm raises and Emma’s hand darts out to grab it.

The second they touch, a shower of violet and gold sparks shoots out across the room.

**

It’s late afternoon on the last Friday in August. The high window in the laundry room is full of the odd-thin light that comes just before a thunderstorm. She takes a load of clothes out of the dryer, holding one of the thick sweatshirts against her chest to soak in some of the warmth. Something jangles against the metal drum as she clears out the last of the socks. Three quarters and a dime. How many times has she told Henry to empty his pockets before he throws things in the wash? She rolls her eyes, pocketing the money and scooping the laundry basket onto her hip before heading down the hall.

She pauses for a moment outside the last bedroom on the left. It’s empty. Quiet. She pushes the door wider with her elbow.

“Nadia?”

She walks down to the master bedroom. Empty. The bathroom. Empty. Henry’s room. Empty.

She dumps the basket in the hall and runs downstairs.

“Nadia?”


“Nadia! Answer me!”

Nothing.

Feeling her pulse in her ears, she runs back to the kitchen and snatches her cell phone from the counter, knocking a stack of her notes to the floor. Her fingers slip across the phone screen. It takes her three tries to put the passcode in and by then she’s held her breath so long she’s feeling lightheaded.

She presses ‘call.’ She presses the phone to her ear, stalks to the front door, and pulls on the handle. Locked. The phone rings four times before—

“Hey. I’m just finishing up here. Do you want me to run by the school and—”
“Nadia’s missing.”

Front porch. Empty.

“What?”

“Nadia’s missing—”Pantry. Empty. “—I can’t find her. I checked everywhere. She won’t answer me.” Front bathroom. Empty. “I can’t find her!”

A deep breath rattles across the line. “Did you check Henry’s room?”

“Yes.”

Coat closet. Empty.

“What about the pantry? You know she—”

“Dammit Emma! I checked everywhere.” Back door. Unlocked. “She’s not here! I don’t know where she is. I don’t know—”

She steps out onto the back porch. The storm clouds are rolling in over the trees. The wind picks up. “I don’t know where she is.” She gulps in a harsh breath. “I can’t—”

“Ok. Shit. Ok. It’s—I’m getting in the car now. I’ll call Marian and see if maybe, I don’t know… I’ll be right there. Just take a breath and keep looking. Keep looking. Okay?”

Regina nods. “Okay.”

The line goes silent.

Tears pricking her eyes, Regina tucks the phone in her pocket and scans the backyard. Henry’s whiffle ball and bat are still out from his sleepover last weekend. A little blue tricycle, its plastic basket still full from the last rainstorm, is parked near the foot of the porch stairs. The yard is otherwise empty.

Taking another purposeful breath, Regina is about to go back inside when a flash of red catches her eye.

She runs down the stairs into the yard, the wind whipping her hair across her cheeks.

There it is again. Fifteen feet off the ground, in the window of the tree house David and Henry had built the summer Henry was twelve: a glimpse of red fabric and dark hair.

“Nadia?”

The red disappears from the window.

Relief crushes Regina’s heart in her chest. And then a flash of anger burns it away.

“Nadia! ¿Qué haces? You know you’re not supposed to be up there without your brother.”

No answer.

“Nadia!” Regina snaps. “¡Contéstame!”

The red appears again in the window, and then in the doorway as Nadia steps out onto the lopsided little tree house porch. She’s wearing the sweater Granny had knitted for her last
Christmas; her hair is a mess, half-fallen, half-pulled from its French braid. She’s whole. She’s safe.

The anger burns brighter in Regina’s throat.

“Baja. Ahora,” she says firmly, barely able to keep her voice steady.

Nadia shakes her head, her dark eyes daring and defiant.

Regina clenches her fists. “¡Nadia!”

Her shout startles Nadia but the little girl recovers herself quickly, scowling and glaring before stomping over to the trapdoor that leads to the rope ladder. She pulls the door open and then stands at the edge, making no move to climb down.

“My patience is running out with you today,” Regina calls up to her sharply.

Thunder rumbles overhead.

Nadia looks down at her stonily, then clambers to the edge of the trapdoor, lowers herself gingerly through it, and clumsily finds her footing on the ladder.

She doesn’t make it more than a foot down before she stops again.

Regina growls. “Nadia, I—”

Nadia shakes her head sharply. “I can’t!”

Regina takes a stride forward, crossing her arms over her chest. “What do you mean you can’t? You just—”

Nadia looks at her, eyes wide, fists clenched tightly around the ropes on either side of her. “Tengo miedo.”

Guilt twists in Regina’s gut as she reads the fear in Nadia’s face for the first time. Her anger turns inward.

You promised. You promised this wouldn’t happen.

A gust of wind rocks the ladder.

“¡Mami!” Nadia yells, gripping the ladder tighter and ducking her head between her arms.

“Está bien,” Regina says breathlessly, tamping down the shock of adrenaline now coursing through her body. She closes her eyes. Pushes thoughts of other girls and trees and mothers from her mind. “Nadi, I’m going to use magic to get you down. ¿Bueno?”

Nadia nods.

Taking a shaky breath, Regina reaches out with her magic and lifts her daughter from the ladder.

“You can let go, cariño.”

With one last wide-eyed look, Nadia releases her hands. For a second, she hangs suspended in the air and Regina thinks for one frightened, fleeting moment that it had happened—it had happened despite everything she’d promised herself.
But then Nadia’s bony little body is in her arms and Regina can smell dead leaves and pine in her messy hair and this is nothing, nothing like Cora.

“Lo siento, Mami,” Nadia whispers into Regina’s shirt, her breath warm against her shoulder.

Regina squeezes her tighter, fingers tangling in the remnants of Nadia’s braid. “Yo también lo siento, Nadi. No sabía…lo siento.”

“Está bien.”

They stand there for a minute, the rain starting to fall gently around them.

The back door bangs open.

“Regina? I—” Emma pauses in her flight down the porch steps. “Nadia?”

Regina meets Emma’s eyes, blinking away tears she hadn’t known she’d been holding in. “She was in the tree house.”

“The tree house?” Emma says, the panic leaving her face as she takes in the sight of them. “But—”

Nadia lifts her face off of Regina’s shoulder and looks cautiously at Emma.

Emma stares at her for a moment, then lurches forward and hugs them both, pulling back to inspect Nadia’s face, her arms, her hands.

“I’m okay, Mama,” Nadia says, wrinkling her nose at the attention.

Emma gives her a weak smile. “You really had us worried, puppy. What were you doing up there? You know you’re not supposed to be up there without Henry.”

Nadia ducks her head, her cheeks darkening. “I was hiding from pirates.”

Emma glances up at Regina in bewilderment. Regina bites the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing, which would really send the wrong message at this juncture.

“Hiding from pirates?” Emma asks.

Nadia looks up again. “Yes,” she says stubbornly, as if daring them to tell her it was a silly thing to be doing on a Friday afternoon. “And then I couldn’t climb back down.”

“Well…don’t do that again, okay?” Emma says, bemusement still clear in her voice. “You wait for Henry to come home. Even if there are pirates.”

“I know, Mama.”

“You don’t just run off like that. We need to know where you are. We need to know that you’re safe.”

“I know.”

“Pinky-swear?” Emma says solemnly, sticking out her little finger.

Nadia sighs the sigh of the long-suffering. “That’s for babies, Mama.”

“You’re my baby,” Emma teases.
Rolling her eyes, Nadia links her pinky with Emma’s, struggling to hide a smile when Emma swings their hands in circles—twice to the left, twice to the right—to seal the promise.

They release their hands and Emma pulls Nadia’s upper body into a hug. “I love you,” Emma she says, her voice unsteady. “If you scare us like that again, I’m making you eat beans-beans-the-musical-fruit for dinner for a whole month.”

Nadia giggles and buries her face in Emma’s hair. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Emma repeats, the tension visibly draining from her shoulders as she pulls away.

Regina readjusts Nadia on her hip, catching Emma’s eye over their daughter’s head.

“Hey,” Emma whispers, her eyes bright and warm, one hand coming to rest on Regina’s forearm.

“Hey,” Regina says, nose stinging, a smile breaking across her face.

Safe, she thinks. She’s safe.

Emma’s smiling back. Pirates? she mouths, eyebrows raised.

‘Beans?’ Regina mouths back, feeling a bubble of fondness bloom in her rib cage at Emma’s answering what-can-you-do grin.

Everything feels lighter.

“Can we go inside now?” Nadia asks, resting her head on Regina’s shoulder once more. “It’s raining. Rain makes my sweater smell like sheep.”

Regina can’t help it. She laughs.

“—Regina, can you hear me? Come on. Wake up.”

Regina opens her eyes, the images in her head dissolving until there’s nothing left but a warm aftertaste.

She looks up into Emma’s worried face, the ends of Emma’s blonde hair tickling her cheek.

“Hey,” Emma says, her lips pressing together into a thin smile. “You okay?”

“Hey,” Regina whispers as she pushes herself up on her elbows and into a sitting position, putting some distance between herself and Emma. The lingering warmth in her thoughts distracts her; looking at Emma now feels like finding something she’d lost and for some reason this idea makes her both nauseous and content. She shakes it off.

“Was it a memory?”

“What?” Regina asks absently, surveying the room around her. The cell is wrecked—the cot flipped on its side, pizza crusts and pencils littering the floor. She puts her hand in a pile of fabric. Emma’s jacket. It had been rolled up under her head. She lets her fingers trace the edges of a red leather sleeve.

“Was it a memory?” Emma repeats, shifting from her knees to sit cross-legged on the tile floor. “It looked like…well it looked like you were about to do magic, but then I grabbed your hand and we sort of made…sparks?”
Regina looks blankly at her, still struggling to make her brain catch up with reality.

Emma wrinkles her nose. “Do you remember anything?”

Regina closes her eyes, trying to reach for the warm place in her mind. But there is nothing there. “No,” she shakes her head. “Nothing.”

“Well…that could be good, right?” Emma says, her voice hopeful. “Maybe the potion is wearing off.”

“Hmm.”

They just sit there and breathe for a minute. Regina’s eyes catch on Henry’s book, spilled onto the cell floor along with most of the contents of his backpack. On the cover is a painting of a dark-haired girl in a golden dress, eyes closed, floating in the air above a green field. *Esperanza Rising.*

“Where’s Henry?”

“Mary Margaret took him home—”

Regina’s head snaps up.

“Your house,” Emma adds hastily. “She’s staying with him until we get back.”

Regina sighs, “I don’t know if that makes it better or worse.”

Emma stands up slowly, groaning as she stretches out her neck. “If it helps, I think she’s probably half-scared you’re going to come home and murder her, so…”

Regina snorts in spite of herself. “That was an oddly hostile comment to make about your mother,” she says, bracing herself on the wall as she moves to stand as well.

Emma shrugs, turning toward the cell door before Regina can read her face.

Regina lets her eyes follow Emma as she walks across the dark office to her desk. There’s very little in the sharp planes of Emma’s back of that all-or-nothing bluster that blew through town in Emma’s first weeks here. There’s a stillness to her now that rings of suffocation.

It feels a little like watching something die. (Like a starving fire).

Regina takes a breath, opens her mouth to say something—What? What could she possibly say against everything?

But then Emma turns around with her grey eyes and her heavy shoulders and says “You ready to get out of here?”

And Regina just nods.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
On Saturday morning, Henry sits cross-legged on the living room couch with a mostly-empty glass of milk in one hand and a book in the other.

He’d had kind of a weird night last night. He guesses he fell asleep at the station, because he doesn’t remember anything about coming home—though he has vague memories of Mary Margaret’s car and the weird sugar-tea smell of the backseat cushions. And then he’d woken up in his own bed at 5:30 am and hadn’t been able to go back to sleep.

So now he’s sitting in the white-bright living room with *Esperanza Rising* propped open on his knee, trying to figure out if he wants to go on to the next chapter. He’s only supposed to read through chapter 4 for Monday, but Esperanza and her mom are trying to escape to America to get away from her creepy uncle and everything is getting really intense…

…But if he reads more now, it won’t be a surprise next week and he’ll have to pretend all through his reading journals that he doesn’t know what’s going to happen.

Sighing, Henry puts the book down. And then he shoves it behind one of the pillows on the couch so he won’t be tempted.

He gets up to go put his milk glass away in the kitchen, but the sight of the sunlight leaking out from under the closed study door stops him in his tracks halfway across the hall.

He remembers mornings when he was really little, eating granola bars in an armchair by the study fireplace while his mom sat behind her desk and moved papers from one stack to another. He loved the sound of the paper rustling and the soft-warm grownup feeling of being not-quite-awake and the way his mom would look up at him every so often and smile with the sun in her eyes.

And sometimes, when he would get bored coloring, she would say, ‘I think some tea would be nice, don’t you?’ and he would run across to the little plastic kitchen in the living room and make her some tea in the red Iron Man cup and she would sip it and hum and tell him ‘my favorite—how about…some French fries?’ And as he was running back with a plate of Lingoln Log fries, she’d yell “Oh, and a hamburger!” and then “With pickles!” and then “And tomatoes!” and “A chocolate shake!” and “With sprinkles!” and he would run back and forth across the hall, shrieking with laughter, never quite making it back to the study door before she’d call out another something for him to bring her.

They never close that door.

Setting his teeth, he crosses the hall and opens it.

The room is pale and still. Henry can see the blackened shelves where his mom had stood that night and the empty fire extinguisher still on the floor by the couch where Emma had thrown it.
And he then he tries not to think about that night anymore.

Taking a deep breath, he pads across to the burnt bookshelf. At the smell of stale smoke, he closes his eyes again, tight. Don’t think about it, don’t think about it, don’t…

He shakes his head to clear it. On closer inspection, he thinks maybe some of the books nearer the edges of the burned place could be saved. He puts his milk glass down on the floor and slowly, carefully, starts pulling things from the shelves, dusting off the ash and putting them into piles for later.

He’s just getting into a rhythm when his fingers brush against something hidden near the back of a shelf just above his eye-level. He catches the edge and pulls it toward him, unprepared for the sudden weight of it as it slides off into his hands.

He fumbles and just barely manages to catch it before it hits the ground.

It’s an old shoebox, the lid now half-off and clamped awkwardly between his left wrist and his right hand. The contents of the box shuffle softly as Henry shifts to sit on the rug and slides the lid the rest of the way off.

At first, he doesn’t know what he’s looking at. They look like baby VCR tapes, like tiny versions of the ones that fit into the old TV at the sheriff’s station.


They’re…videos?

Henry stands up suddenly, remembering the times his mom had followed him around with that big black camera. Examining the bookshelf for a moment, he puts his right foot on the second shelf from the bottom and pulls himself up by his hands so he’s standing on it, giving himself a better view of the shelf where he’d found the box. And…yes! There.

He grabs at the video camera hidden at the back of the shelf, pulling it and the power cord down with him. The little pronged thing at the end of the cord hits him on the shoulder on the way down, but he’s too excited to really notice.

He finds an outlet and plugs the camera in. It takes a minute, but the little viewing screen lights up. His celebratory whoop is halfway out of his mouth before he remembers his mom (moms?) upstairs sleeping. He presses his lips together, grinning.

He leans back and pulls the box of tapes toward him across the rug. After shuffling through them for a moment, he picks one labeled Summer 2005. He puts it in the camera, closes the cartridge, holds his breath, and presses Play.

“—look at me, Henry. Look at Mommy.”

The little boy turns around from where he’s sitting, digging with a small plastic shovel at the base of an apple tree. “I found a worm!”

The camera moves closer, catches the woman’s feet and legs as she sits next to the boy on the grass. “You did? Let me see?”

“It’s squiggling.” The boy says, his nose crinkling as he holds out his hand for his mother to see. “Is it going to eat my finger?”
“No, baby. He’s just trying to find the dirt. That’s where he lives.”

“And he makes the tree grow?” the boy says, tilting his head back so he can see the branches above them.

“Yes, he helps the tree grow.”

“And then does he get to eat the apples?” the boy asks as he tilts the worm gently back into the dirt. He wipes his hand on his striped shirt and inspects it for traces of slime.

His mother laughs. “I hope not.”

The boy looks at her. “Do worms like apples?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

The boy sighs regretfully. “I think we might have to share.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” the boy says heavily. “If we like apples and worms like apples, then we have to share.”

“I see.”

The boy turns back to the camera. “I don’t like sharing.”

“Me either.”

There’s a moment of static.

“What day is it, Henry?”

“My birthday!” the little boy says, bouncing on his knees in dinosaur pajamas.

“And how old are you today?”

“Three.”

“You were three. Today you’re going to be four.”

“Four.” The little boy’s brow crinkles. “But I like three.”

“I like three too. But you’re going to like four. Four is fun. It’s like an adventure. You’ve never been four before.”

“How many is four?” the boy asks, pushing his messy hair out of his eyes.

“You know four. 1…2…3…?”

“Four,” the boy answers, sighing irritably. “I know counting. But how many is four?”

“Four is…” the camera shuffles as the boy’s mother reaches for a bucket of Legos. The image focuses on her hands as she lines four blocks up on the little blue bedside table. “Four is this many,” she says.

“Wow,” the boy says, leaning on his elbows to get a closer look. He peers up at the camera. “How many are you?”
His mother laughs behind the camera. She takes the bucket of Legos and plops it on the bed next to the boy, the blocks inside clattering together. “I’m this many.”

The boy studies the bucket carefully. “I’m small, right?”

The camera shifts as the boy’s mother sits on the bed next to him. “Yes, right now you’re small. But someday you’ll be bigger.” A hand comes to rest on the bucket between them. “Someday you’ll be this many.”

“Is it fun?”

“To be big?”

The boy nods.

“It can be fun.”

“Will you still be there? When I’m big?”

There is a silence. The boy yawns, still staring up at his mother.

“Yes, Henry. I’ll always be there.”

Henry pushes the pause button, freezing the frame on the wide, trusting eyes of his younger self.

There’s something about it that makes his lungs squeeze.

She loved him. She always loved him. She might have lied about everything else. But never, never about that.

He’s not sure how he could have forgotten.

He wants to run upstairs and tell her he loves her, too—that he never really stopped and maybe that’s exactly why everything was so hard.

But then he thinks maybe she’s forgotten too what it was like on those days when his entire world was her and this house.

He looks at the shoebox of tapes and has an idea.

**

Emma groans as she walks down the stairs, running a hand through the rat’s nest that is her hair after another night on the floor. At least she’d had a pillow last night.

Hearing rustling coming from the study, she heads into the room.

“How are you awake and alive this early on a Saturday?”

Henry jumps, shoving a box of something behind a nearby potted plant.

“Um. Hi. I was just…cleaning,” he says, eyeing Emma shiftily and gesturing at the piles of half-charred books on the rug.

“Sure, ok,” Emma says, deciding to let his obvious squirming slide for the moment. Hopefully he was taking that walkie-talkie out of wherever he’d hidden it two nights ago. “Listen, I’m going to run over to Mary Margaret’s for some new clothes and a shower. You need anything from the
loft?”

Henry shakes his head. “Are you coming back?”

“Yeah. I’ll help you get this place straightened out,” Emma says, leaning against the doorframe. “Your mom’s in the shower. She should be down in a bit.”

“Ok. See ya,” Henry says, casting another glance at whatever-it-was behind the ficus.

“Bye, kid. Keep yourself out of trouble.”

Emma drives on autopilot, gripping the steering wheel with cold fingers and letting the radio crackle with static. She finds her pre-caffeinated thoughts drifting to last night: breaking into the records room after hours with a surly, keyless Regina; bickering over the disarray of the shelves; the smell of Regina’s perfume on her jacket; driving back to the house as Regina’s eyes droop closed, head resting against a window lit sulfur yellow from the streetlamps.

And then she’s there outside Mary Margaret’s building with no recollection of having driven there.

Shrugging, she gets out of the car and clomps up the stairs, contemplating stealing a cup of coffee from Mary Margaret’s kitchen before heading back to Regina’s.

She’s turning the key in the lock when she hears raised voices inside.

“You didn’t see her last night, David! It was like—it was like we were strangers.”

“Mary Margaret—”

“I was mad at her. Why won’t she listen to her mother? I was just trying to tell her to be careful, and she looked at me like I was some strange woman who had no business being there. How could she look at her mother that way?”

“Snow—”

“But that’s just it. We are strangers, David! I’m not her mother—I’ve never…We’ve never been a family.”

There are footsteps. Emma can’t tell whether they’re headed for the door, but it wouldn’t have mattered if they were because she’s frozen in place.

“I don’t know her, David,” Mary Margaret says, her voice sounding muffled and teary. “I don’t know my own daughter.”

Emma’s already pulling out onto the street before she makes the conscious decision to leave.

She stumbles up the steps of the house on Mifflin Street less than five minutes later, mind still somewhere miles above her body.

“Weren’t you going to take a shower?” Henry asks as she passes unseeing by him.

The buzzing in her ears is getting louder. Her feet carry her to the little bathroom off the kitchen. She shuts the door behind her, and the sound somehow jars her back to the moment.

She grips the sink, fighting the tightness in her chest.

*You’re twenty-nine years old. You don’t need a mother. You don’t need anybody. You’ve never*
needed—

She chokes, gasps for breath. And then the tears start and come and come and come.

She slides down the wall onto the cool grey tile and it feels a little like getting pulled under by an ocean current.

Vaguely, she registers the knock at the door. Shrinking in on herself, she wipes at her cheeks and tucks her face against her shoulder.

“Miss Swan? Henry said—”

The door opens a crack.

“Miss Swan? Are you hurt? What happened?”

And suddenly Regina’s by her side, the door closing again behind her.

“Emma?” she asks again, her voice urgent. “Look at me. Emma.”

“I’m fine,” Emma whispers into her shoulder, her voice cracking.

She feels more than sees Regina settle onto the floor beside her, the damp mint-sage scent of her freshly-washed hair drifting in waves around them.

The gentle press of Regina’s shoulder against hers calms some of the drowning, tumbling feeling in Emma’s head. For a few long minutes she just breathes and traces the fissures in the marble tiles with her finger like lines on a road map.

“It’s stupid, I—just, I…don’t—” Emma shakes her head, sniffling. “Anyway, it’s true. I just…”

Regina is quiet.

Emma shrugs, aiming for a nonchalance that escapes her. “She said she doesn’t know me. She’s not really my mother. We aren’t really a family.”

“She told you this?” Regina asks, her voice sudden and concussive in the small space.

Emma gives a shaky sigh. She feels like her ribs might snap. “No. I—I went to take a shower because I don’t have any more spare clothes in my car and the only soap in Henry’s bathroom makes my hair smell like middle school chapstick and I drove over there and—and I didn’t even get in the door…I just stood there and listened to her and…I just—I can’t—”

The tide pulls her under again and she struggles to breathe through the tears, digging the palms of her hands so hard into her eyes that it hurts.

The press of Regina’s shoulder against her grows stronger and Emma leans into it, gasping.

“And I don’t—even—know—why—I care—so much. It’s true. We don’t know each other. She was never really my …I didn’t even think I wanted—” Emma sucks in a ragged breath. “It just—it feels like—again. It feels like of course. I don’t—I don’t even know what I’m saying.”

“I’m sorry,” Regina whispers hoarsely after a moment.

Emma nods jerkily, wiping her nose with her hand. “S’okay.”

“No,” Regina says, the drying ends of her hair flicking against her collarbone as she shakes her
head. “No it’s a lot of things, but it is most definitely not ok. She’s being selfish, as usual, and careless and blind and…Emma, I—” Regina cuts off suddenly.

Emma looks at her for the first time. Her honey-dark eyes are somehow both open and hidden, snapping with a slowly receding anger, and Emma can see herself reflected in them.

The image tugs at the mess of impossible, lonely things in Emma’s thoughts. She turns away. “I don’t know how to do this. Everything’s just…so much, all the time. And…I screw everything up, and I don’t know what I’m doing, and I’m supposed to save everyone, but all I do is watch people die. And she’s—they’re so good. Like, how am I even supposed to—it’s not that I don’t want to be that person for them, but I just—” Emma sighs shakily, blinking back tears. “It’s not me. I mean, I don’t even know who—” She shakes her head. “I have no fucking clue who I’m supposed to be anymore because none of this makes sense. Like, on a basic level, none of this makes sense. And I don’t know how to make it—I don’t know how to be what they want.”

Emma’s breath hitches and she tries to inhale through her nose, to control the expansion of her achy lungs.

She registers movement out of the corner of her eye: Regina’s hand reaching carefully toward her own.

Startled, she pulls away without thinking.

Hurt flickers in Regina’s eyes before her face goes blank and still, every warm thing that had been expanding between them suddenly cold and withdrawn. The air feels empty.

“I apologize—” Regina begins, her voice clipped.

“No, uh—” Emma gives a wet, humorless chuckle. “It’s just…that one’s snotty. Um. Here,” she says, awkwardly thrusting out her other hand, tucking her left forearm under Regina’s right and fumbling to weave their fingers together.

“Oh,” Regina says, staring down at their hands like she’s trying to read something written on their skin.

Something settles in Emma’s chest, unfurling in the aching spaces between her ribs, and she can breathe again. She leans her head back against the wall and listens to the click of the air conditioning system as it whirs to life somewhere in the belly of the house. She feels the warmth of Regina’s hand in hers, the twin pulses in their wrists pressed together, and thinks of clove-spiced French toast and cooking dinner with the radio on and stumbling around in a dark hallway at midnight to avoid waking their sleeping son after a late-night trip to City Hall. She thinks of laughter ringing off the walls at dinner and dented thermoses filled with apology coffee and the way Regina had eaten three slices of Stromboli’s sausage pizza with a paper napkin spread open in her lap. She thinks of the way Regina’s face looked under the string lights at Granny’s, her eyes soft with maybe. She thinks of the unnamed ghosts in Regina’s memories.

“You make sense,” Emma half-whispers, giving the settled feeling a name. “I think…maybe you’re the only thing that makes sense.”

For some reason, the words don’t make her feel scared. (They should, she knows. They will).

She feels Regina draw a sharp breath, her shoulder jarring against Emma’s. Then fingers tighten around hers and the ache in Emma’s chest fades to an almost-pleasant afterglow.

***
Regina feels frozen. She’s sitting on the couch with a book in her hands, but her eyes keep skipping over the words and her brain keeps tripping over its thoughts.

‘You make sense…you make sense…you’re the only thing that makes sense.’

A frantic, angry pressure builds in her bones.

You can’t just things like that and expect...

(What do you expect?)

She grits her teeth, tosses the book aside. Her hands are shaking.

Why are her hands shaking?

Growling, she gets up and strides over to the fireplace and grips the mantle until her knuckles are white.

Ridiculous, she sneers at herself. You’re being absolutely ridiculous.

It’s nothing. It could be nothing.

(It should be nothing).

“Hey.”

She whips around. Emma is standing in the doorway, hair dark and wet from the shower, dressed in faded jeans and one of Regina’s grey cotton shirts.

Regina wonders why it feels as if she’s been waiting years to see her again, and the thought makes her skin seem too small to hold her.

She takes a shaky breath, tucking her hair behind her ear and waiting. (For what? What?)

But Emma just stands there in the doorway in a pair of borrowed socks, looking everywhere but Regina’s face.

Regina wants to ask a hundred questions. (She wants to ask one question.)

She wants to walk over and take Emma by the shoulders and shake her until the mist clears and the answer to everything is there in her eyes. She wants to pull on a thread and unravel the words Emma means her to understand.

She doesn’t understand.

She doesn’t understand.

She needs to understand.

It feels as if she’s walking unguided through a minefield.

This Emma is an unknown quantity. This Emma, with her waiting eyes and her warm hands and the weight of lifelines laced between her shoulder blades.

This Emma, who wants things from people. (From her).

She sets her teeth, trying to curtail the momentum of her thoughts, which are spinning towards
some kind of foregone conclusion she can taste like sour milk in the back of her throat.

She’s spent her life trying to fill the ill-defined and ironbound spaces people make for her. It’s never been enough, even when she’s wanted it to be.

Especially when she’s wanted it to be.

Emma clears her throat.

“I, uh…I used your lotion,” she says finally, her eyes glued to the stand lamp in the corner. “I hope that’s okay. My hands get dry when the weather changes, so…”

“Oh.” Regina blinks, her mind struggling to process the jarring mundanity of the statement. “No, that’s…fine.”

Silence falls, and Regina can feel it stretching between them, waiting to snap like a rubber band.

Emma bites her lip. “Look, I—I’m sorry about earlier. It was stupid. I feel like I’ve cried more in the last five days than I have in the last five years. I—”

“Stop,” Regina interrupts, irritation creeping into her voice, her skin crawling with something electric.

Emma looks at her, searching. Her eyes are still red-rimmed.

Regina sighs, puts a hand to her temple, sinks back onto the couch. “Don’t apologize to me. Just…don’t.”

After a beat, Emma nods, flopping into one of the grey armchairs and closing her eyes.

The grey in her cheeks is almost physically offensive.

Regina picks up the book on the cushion next to her and turns it over and over in her hands.

(She isn’t good at this. She isn’t good enough for this…Why Emma came back here in the first place, instead of seeking out Ruby or Belle or anyone else, baffles her.)

“Where’s Henry?” Emma asks.

“Upstairs,” Regina says, uncrossing her legs and putting the book to the side. “He said he needed to work on his reading journal.”

Emma opens one eye. “But isn’t that the one he’s reading?” she asks, nodding to the book Regina had been holding.

“Yes…” Regina says slowly, tucking the book between the couch cushions. “I think it’s far more likely he’s playing his way through that atrociously violent game you bought him.”

Emma shuts her eyes again and leans back in the chair.

“Mom!”

Emma sits up.

“Yes?” Regina calls over her shoulder.

“I need some help with this—uh, with this math problem!” Henry yells down the stairs.
“Be right there,” Regina shouts, a certain levity returning to her lungs as she attempts to keep a straight face.

“So much for his ‘reading journal,’ huh?” Emma comments, smirking slightly.

“Hmm. You’d better come, too,” Regina says as she gets up from the couch.

Emma’s brow furrows. “Not that I don’t appreciate that we’re being unnaturally civil about this, but I doubt he needs two people to help him with improper fractions…if he’s even actually doing his homework.”

“Just come up,” Regina says blandly as she leaves the room. After a moment, she hears Emma following behind her.

Henry meets them at the top of the stairs, grinning. His hair is staticky, sticking to his cheeks and flying in little cowlicks around the top of his head. He looks months younger and Regina’s heart lurches.

“Come on,” he says, bouncing on the balls of his feet before taking Emma’s hand and leading her down the hall.

“Ok, kid,” Emma says incredulously as they walk after him. “You are officially freaking me out. Since when are you this excited about homewo—oh.”

Henry’s room is unrecognizable. Sheets from the linen closet are draped from the closet doors and the tops of his bookshelves, held in place by carpentry clamps and stacks of books, their tails fastened together at the ceiling fan over his bed. The lights are dimmed; the bird lantern paints bright shadows on the insides of the bed sheet tent.

“Mom and I used to do this when I was little,” Henry says quietly, searching Emma’s face. “It helped with bad dreams and stuff. We thought it could cheer you up.”

Regina watches as Emma steps into the room, hand trailing over the stack of pillows on the end of Henry’s bed. A lantern songbird colors her cheek red.

“We?” she asks, her voice odd, still facing away from them.

“Yeah,” Henry says. “It was my idea, but Mom helped. And she was the lookout while I was finishing.”

Emma makes a small noise of understanding. “So no math then, huh?”

“No, I finished it last night,” Henry answers slowly, his eyes flicking to Regina in concern. He frowns. “Emma? Are you okay? Don’t you like it?”

Regina’s hands go cold, and she tells herself it’s just because Henry had been so excited about the whole project.

But then Emma turns back to the doorway, and Regina can see her face. Her eyes are full of something messy and desperate. Regina’s own eyes sting inexplicably.

“Emma?” Henry asks again, resting his hand on Emma’s arm and tugging her back toward him.

Emma pulls him into a brief, grasping hug. “Henry, no. I love it. I love it. Thank you.”

Henry smiles brightly up at her, and Regina’s cheeks ache.
“You haven’t seen the best part,” he says, scurrying over to the far side of the bed. He ducks down and then reappears after a moment, pulling out a heavy bag of gummy bears.

“Secret stash, huh?” Emma says, moving to sit gingerly on the edge of the bed.

Henry flops onto the mattress, the gummy bears settling in his lap. “It’s our only-for-movies snack.”

Emma glances at Regina. “Movie?”

Regina just presses her lips together in a not-quite-smile.

“Yeah,” Henry says, holding up a DVD case. “Treasure Planet. Have you seen it?”

Emma shakes her head.

“You’re going to love it. It has space pirates.”

Regina smirks a little despite herself at Emma’s eager expression.

“What?” Emma says, looking up at Regina in mock challenge as she takes the cover from Henry. “It’s pirates. In space. With…actual pirate ships?” she continues, peering at the illustrations. “And possibly a dog in a space suit?” She catches Regina’s eye and smiles. “Anyway, it sounds like quality cinema to me.”

“And you love Captain Amelia, Mom,” Henry says, turning to face her as well.

Regina puts her hands up in acquiescence as she walks over to the bed. “I never said I didn’t like it.”

Emma slides over to make room for her beside them.

Regina settles herself on the quilt as Henry fiddles with the portable DVD player at the foot of the bed. After a moment of indecision, she kicks her shoes off and tucks her feet up under her, hyperaware of the informality of the gesture. She senses Emma’s gaze on her and expects embarrassment to come at the scrutiny. But she looks up and Emma’s eyes are gentle and the room is dressed like a happy memory and all she feels is young and warm.

They watch the movie with Henry sat between them. Emma opens the bag of gummy bears during a quiet moment and is nearly elbowed off the bed by their son; she learns about the ‘only during fight scenes’ snacking rule. As the action picks up, Henry forgets about eating altogether and Emma and Regina wordlessly set up a gummy bear economy on the quilt, trading across the bed during breaks in the dialogue (Regina hates the green ones, and Emma, apparently, loves them).

Regina finds her attention drifting from the screen. She takes in the softness of Henry’s cheeks as he laughs and watches as the blues and golds of the film flash in the planes of Emma’s face. The end credits roll and she’s startled to see tears in Emma’s eyes.

Emma smiles self-consciously. “What did I tell you about the crying?” she whispers gruffly, scrubbing at her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

Oblivious, Henry chatters on about his favorite characters and compiles a list of the best cyborg gadgets, the afternoon dissolving pleasantly away; some indeterminable time later, the DVD player is a dead blue and they’re lying on the quilt watching the lantern-lit birds circle above their
heads, and Regina’s eyes fall closed.

--The sky is a brushstroked orange, the evening shadows long and liquid on the cooling sand. Seagulls circle overhead, screeching over the thrumming rhythm of the waves.

“So tell me about this history project,” Regina calls after Henry, who walks a little ways ahead of her along the shoreline.

“We’re making a time capsule for our class,” Henry says, picking his way through a trail of fragmented shells left behind by the rising tide. “Everyone has to put in three things that represent them, so that people in the future could reconstruct who we are.”

He looks up at her, squinting in the sunset. “I know it sounds kind of dumb.” He shrugs. “But it’s like a reverse archaeology project. We’ve been studying about how people—historians and stuff—use artifacts to reconstruct what someone’s life was like. So we’re sort of doing that. And before we bury it, we’ll each get someone else’s bag—we’re supposed to put our things in plastic bags so if the box leaks, it won’t get wet—and we have to write a story about the person who might have owned the things inside. Who they were, what they liked, their personality. Stuff like that. So we’re basically doing archaeology on each other—because we won’t know whose bag we got, so it’s like trying to figure out a person completely from scratch. It’s actually pretty cool.”

Regina smiles. “It certainly sounds like it. Who do you think will find your capsule?”

“I don’t know. I think they might let other classes in five years or something open it and then write their archaeology stories about us. But we’re the first class to do it, so we have to write them on ourselves.”

They walk along in silence for a moment, the sea breeze catching their hair.

“I was thinking,” Henry says, coming to a stop near a wooden sign: Fable Creek Public Beach (No Lifeguard on Duty: Swim at your own risk). “What if you could do a kind of reverse time capsule? Like if you could write letters to yourself from the future. You could warn yourself about things that are going to happen, and maybe change them if you wanted to.”

“I suppose it depends on what you think about fate,” Regina says, crossing her arms. “Some people think you can change it. And other people think that, by trying to change it, you just end up making it happen anyway.”

“Yeah,” Henry says, frowning thoughtfully.

Regina huffs out a breath. “It can be dangerous to mess with time like that. Our memories are so densely connected—erase one thing, change one moment of the past, and you can end up tearing holes your mind.”

“It works the other way, too, right?” Henry asks. “Like with the video?”

Regina raises an eyebrow, impressed. “Yes. Yes it does.”

A boat sounds its horn somewhere across the near-still water. The sky is darker now, thick with purples and grays. Behind them, a pair of headlights wash the beach with white light.

Footsteps crunch on the gravel, and Regina turns around.

Emma is walking towards them, tucking a set of keys into the pocket of her leather jacket, her hair whipping messily around her face.
Then she looks up, and her eyes brighten as she catches sight of them. She smiles, waves.

Regina’s chest clenches pleasantly, traitorously; she turns abruptly away.

Henry watches the exchange with knowing eyes.

Regina feels her cheeks heat.

“It would be okay, you know,” Henry says, quietly, with a touch of that teenage abruptness meant to belie emotion. He searches her face for a moment, his expression gentle, then ducks his head and runs off to meet Emma.

Regina follows him with her eyes until he’s wrapped in Emma’s arms; takes careful breaths with stinging lungs; watches as one of the circling seagulls dives into the waves.

She leans back against the sign, pressing her shoulders into the wood. Her fingers ache with that old desperate pressure, colored now with something she won’t name, and she pulls fire into the palm of her hand. She releases it over the water, its light glinting off the shifting planes of the ocean’s surface until it disappears on the amber horizon.

Regina wakes with Henry’s elbow digging into her ribs, images fading fast from her memory as they had the night before. Frustrated, she grasps at their edges, but they slip through her fingers and she’s left staring at the twilit linens hanging from the ceiling fan.

She blinks. Her hands are warm, she realizes, pulsing and alive. It’s almost as if…

Shifting onto her side, she lays a hand on the quilt, half-expecting a sulfur-yellow glow there on her palm.

But there is nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Henry spends probably too much time on the internet searching how to convert old video tapes into something he can use with the video editing software he’d downloaded last year when he and Grace had to do that dumb project on egrets.

He sits with his legs tucked up under him on the desk chair, spinning back and forth as he reads a blog about old cameras that looks like it was probably written before he was born.

He can hear his moms talking downstairs—not what they’re saying, exactly, but more like the echo of their voices. They sound…not mad. So that’s good.

Emma stayed again last night in his mom’s room. Well, in his room first, when they’d fallen asleep after the movie, but then they’d all woken up with cricks in their necks and made sandwiches with canned tuna and kale and then they’d all gone to bed like normal.

(Like normal, Henry thinks, is a nice thing to say about things like his moms not wanting to kill each other.)

He clicks around a bit more and finds a video where a guy explains that all you really need is a three-pronged converter thing that Audrey probably has in her electronics store. He hopes.

“—what kind of person doesn’t like cinnamon rolls?”

Emma’s voice drifts up the stairs, louder now. It sounds like they’ve moved into the kitchen.

He can’t hear his mom’s answer, but he can imagine her saying something about what kind of [horrible] person does like cinnamon rolls and he sniggers.

He hadn’t ever gotten around to telling her about the airport Cinnabon experience.

But back then he wasn’t telling her much of anything.

With one last glance at the video, he gets up, shoves the camera and its cables into his backpack, and goes downstairs.

His moms are in the kitchen--Emma with his back to him, his mom next to her standing over the top rack of the dishwasher.

“…which I knew at the time,” his mom is saying as she takes clean bowls out of the rack and places them on the counter. Then she looks at Emma and frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Emptying the dishwasher,” Emma says, as she stacks three, four, five, six cups on top of each other. She picks up the tower of cups, clamps the top one under her chin, and gives his mom a challenging look.

His mom frowns even harder. “If you drop those…”

Emma rolls her eyes as she carries the cups over to their cupboard. “You’ll destroy my happiness, blah blah, last thing you do, here have this semi-threatening basket of apples. Yeah, I know.”
Henry watches his mom’s cheeks flush. She stares at Emma’s back, but she doesn’t look angry. More surprised.

Henry’s surprised too—he half expected fireballs by now.

“I was going to say something more along the lines of ‘I’ll take it out of your paycheck,’” his mom says after a moment, kind of snootily, “but I suppose I can take your suggestion into consideration.”

Emma snorts. “My suggestion. Ok.” She puts the last cup away and turns back around, grinning expectantly.

His mom gives her an exasperated look. “I see. You’ve accomplished a simple household task without enacting a major disaster. Brava,” she snarks, but Henry thinks he sees her trying not to smile.

“Ok. Let’s see you try to do better,” Emma says. She leans back against the counter and folds her arms across her chest.

“I’m not engaging with you,” his mom says, turning back to the dishwasher rack and pulling out a wooden spoon and a whisk. She lays them neatly on the counter next to the bowls and glances significantly at Emma, as if to make a point about acting civilized around kitchen utensils.

Henry sniggers.

“You’re just chicken,” Emma says.

“And you’re an idiot.”

“An idiot who could have that dishwasher emptied probably three times faster than you, Madam Mayor.”

“Not everything is a competition, Sherriff.”

“Yeah, it pretty much is.”

And Henry’s not really sure why, because his moms have basically been insulting each other for the last minute, but his cheeks are aching from smiling.

Emma glances up just then and catches sight of him. “Hey, kid. What’s up?”

He steps into the kitchen, his backpack still slung over one shoulder. “I just wanted to tell you I’m going to the library.”

Which he is, so it’s not exactly lying. He saw that the author of Esperanza Rising also wrote some other things and he wants to check them out to fill the gaps between reading assignments. He’s just going there after the electronics store.

“Oh—did you want us to drive you?” Emma asks.

“No, I can walk,” Henry says, as casually as possible. “I’m kind of tired of being inside.”

His mom looks guilty at this and he cringes.

And then Emma and his mom just stare at each other for a long while, like they’re not sure which one of them gets to make the decision.
“I suppose…” his mom says finally, “I suppose that’s fine, Henry. But be home by five.”

“And stick to the main roads,” Emma adds, as if the library isn’t exactly a block and a half away. “No short cuts.”

“I want to see your homework tonight,” his mom says. “So I hope it’s done.”

Henry nods. “It is.”

Emma digs in her pocket and hands him a few crumpled dollar bills. “Here. If you want a hot chocolate from Granny’s.”

His mom looks at her disapprovingly. Emma just looks right back.

Henry is having a hard time not laughing, so he busies himself stuffing the money into the outer pouch of his backpack. It’s like they’re trying to out-mom each other.

A small giggle escapes, despite his efforts.

“What’s funny?”

“Nothing.”

Everything.

They both follow him to the door and watch as he shrugs on his coat. He walks to the gate and waves at them, still grinning. They wave back, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorway.

Kicking at drifted leaves as he goes, he heads in the direction of the library first, just in case their competition makes them do something weird like watch him walk the whole way there from an upstairs window.

**

They’re having a strangely amicable afternoon cleaning the burnt books out of the study.

Which is why Emma is feeling kind of like she’d rather face off with another ogre than mention having to go check in with Belle.

She takes another book from the piles Henry had made yesterday and dusts the soot off. Gulliver’s Travels. Tucking her legs under her on the rug, she licks her lips. “So…”

“Yes?” Regina says, looking down at her a little impatiently from the stepladder she’s using to reach the top shelves.

“So, how are you feeling?”

That’s not exactly what she meant to say, but hey, at least she managed to put words into a sentence. And it’s a relevant question.

Too bad it’s basically what started the whole coffee-throwing incident on Friday. That and Belle…so yeah. Bring on the ogres.

Regina’s cheeks are flushed, and she doesn’t answer for a long moment. “Better,” she says finally, scrubbing at what must be some pretty stubborn soot in the back corner of a shelf.

“Good. That’s…good. You think the potion’s wearing off?” she asks, feeling a little like a broken
record and hoping she sounds nothing like Mary Margaret had when David got the flu last month. *(Are you feeling better now? How about now? What if I make you tea?)* Maybe nagging is genetic. She winces, but plows on. “Nothing’s exploded in almost two days, so…”

“So,” Regina repeats under her breath, an odd look on her face. She sighs. “There’s not exactly a…a reliable way to tell. I…” She clears her throat, looks down at Emma again. “Why? Do you—”

“No, no,” Emma says, instinctually vehement even though she’s not exactly sure what the end of Regina’s question would have been. She shakes her head. “No, I just thought—Henry’s right, you know? We should get out of the house.”

Regina looks suspicious.

Emma sighs.

“I need to go to Belle’s.”

Regina’s face goes carefully blank. “Fine,” she says, scrubbing again at that stubborn soot. “I’ll just—”

Emma groans internally. *Ogres ogres ogres.* “No, it’s—Ok, what I meant was: I need to go to Belle’s…and I want you to come with me. If you want.”

Regina’s head snaps up. “What?”

“I need to go to Belle’s. Last week I asked her to look for some kind of magical object that could be causing all this…weird plant vandalism—don’t ask—and I said I’d come by to help. And I haven’t yet and—Technically I’m off this weekend, but David’s got enough to do with the water main break and…I don’t know…Gold was a slimy bastard, but I guess Belle really loved him. She could probably use a friend right now. And possibly some really stupid small-town crime investigation to distract her.”

Regina snorts. “And you think I should come along for this?”

“Well…maybe not for the friend part. But you might have a better idea of what we’re looking for.”

Regina opens her mouth. To argue, probably.

Emma cuts her off preemptively. “Look, if you really don’t want to go, I can just wait until my shift tomorrow. But I thought you might want to see the sun sometime this year. We’ll be out an hour, tops, ok? And if you start feeling weird, just tell me and we’ll go back to the car.”

Regina studies her for a moment. “Alright.”

Emma blinks. “Alright?”

“Alright,” Regina nods, lips twitching like she’s trying to keep from smiling at some private joke.

They pull up in front of the pawn shop fifteen minutes later, cheeks stinging from the bug’s overzealous—but very much appreciated—heater, a half-hearted argument brewing over the quality of the local talk radio station.

While the engine’s tinking cool, the shop door opens and Ruby walks out onto the sidewalk, smiling toothily at someone inside. She tugs her hat, says something Emma can’t make out, and
then takes off down the sidewalk, the door jingling shut behind her.

“Well, it looks as if Belle’s already had some…friends come by.”

Emma shoots a glance across the car. “What—Oh my god, Regina.”

Regina’s grinning like a cat, wide and unapologetic and a little wicked. It makes Emma’s mouth go dry and her face heat up. “Oh my god,” she says again, and drops her keys on the floor.

If Belle is surprised to see Regina…well, ok, she does show it. But she doesn’t do much more than stare and then step aside to let them in, even as Regina shoots her best glare across the Welcome mat.

Emma remembers that Belle was one of the few people who saw Regina that day in the shop—who watched her watch her mother die.

Maybe she’s one of the only people who would believe Regina’s heart is still in her chest.

Belle disappears behind a stack of books at the front counter, telling them she’s looking for references to an enchanted pair of gardening shears that once belonged to Rapunzel’s parents’ neighbors—apparently the most promising lead so far.

She nods them toward a plate of donuts from Ruby. They’re all blueberry, Belle’s favorite.

Emma grabs one and makes the mistake of catching Regina’s eye as she takes a bite and nearly chokes, which only makes Regina’s smirk worse.

“What was that about?” Belle asks as Regina leaves the room a little jauntily, and without a donut. (Emma’s willing to bet she has a thing about neon-blue pastry).

“Nothing. She’s just—uh—caffeinated.” Emma coughs on a bit of inhaled frosting and then raises the half eaten donut in the air. “Donuts are good.”

Belle gives her a strange look. “Yeah, they are.” Then she smiles. “They made extras by accident, so Ruby brought them over. I don’t know how she expects me to eat twenty-four donuts by myself, though.”

Emma’s not sure how someone could have accidentally made extras of a donut they don’t normally keep in stock except at Easter, but she just nods and smiles and thinks about the way Ruby had started dropping plates in the kitchen when Belle first came to town, and how she would watch her from across the diner when she’d though no one was looking. And then Emma thinks about the fact that Regina had apparently noticed those one-sided staring contests too. And then she tells her brain to shut up.

She and Regina are assigned to a storeroom of trinkets that Gold had decided were too powerful to list for sale. She’d been expecting some pretty nasty stuff—like babies in jars, or cans of eyeballs—but it mostly turns out to be a lot of random useless crap that makes Gold seem less like an evil goblin and more like a guy who’d watched too many reruns of Pawn Stars.

Emma’s sorting through a collection of brass candlesticks that look straight out of an old horror movie when she hears Regina make a scoffing noise behind her.

“What?”

Regina turns, holding an old wicker box filled with…
Oh.

Dreamcatchers.

She can’t remember if she’d told Regina specifically how she’d managed to witness her apparent murder of Archie. She can feel the blood leaving her face.

“Rumpelstiltskin always did have a certain affinity for these,” Regina says, rifling through the dreamcatchers with determined nonchalance. “I was always better with mirrors.”

“Mirrors?” Emma says, lost.

Regina looks at her. “The same effect can be achieved with almost any round, reflective surface,” she says, sounding like she’s reciting from a textbook. “Mirrors. Pools of water. Though I suppose Rumple felt those lacked a certain…aura.”

“Did you guys even have these in the Enchanted Forest?” Emma asks, picking up a dreamcatcher and letting its feathered tails drift in the musty air between them. She feels the Neal-shaped knife in her chest shift painfully and shrugs away memories of a summer spent sleeping in stolen motel rooms.

“Not originally, but there were tradesmen—realm jumpers. Allegedly, anyway. It was common practice among magic users in the Northern Kingdoms—the White Kingdom, and Midas’s—to collect foreign items of power. Generally without any knowledge of how they were wielded in their original context. They were buying and selling myth, the idea of a people…of course, most of the time they were just black-market replicas. And meanwhile, the people starved. Cultures died. At least in our world. But I gather much the same happened here.”

Gingerly, Emma places the dreamcatcher back in the box.

Regina’s still staring down at her hands when Emma’s phone rings.

“Swan.”

“Well. It’s David. Sorry to bother you on your day off…but you’re going to want to get over to the convent.”

**

Regina thinks idly about how different it feels to be out in public with Emma.

(She’s been out in public against Emma many times, facing off as enemies, their mutual animosity charging the air between them, an almost physical current pulling each into the other’s orbit.)

She is used to being the most visible person in a room, to clouds of whispers and veiled stares trailing after her like a cloak. She’d relished it—their awe, their fear. It meant she’d won.

(Never mind that she could never manage to put a name to those old battles she’d been fighting.)

Since coming to Storybrooke, it’s been much of the same, though the confrontations have moved from carefully-worded threats in village squares to stare-downs in the frozen food aisle at Happy’s. And, some days, it doesn’t feel quite so much like victory anymore.

But here, standing in the little courtyard outside the convent, she’s spared less than half a glance. It was as if, simply by virtue of walking up the driveway behind Emma, she’d become just another person in this town.
Of course, it could also be that everyone is far too preoccupied with the dense thicket of brambles rapidly taking over the entire building to pay much attention to a disgraced and powerless formerly-evil queen.

“Sister Loretta is still inside!” Blue shouts frantically, pointing to an upstairs window as it disappears behind a knot of thorns the size of the town clock.

“You have magic, you idiot!” Regina snaps, concerned despite herself.

Blue blinks and pulls her wand out of her sleeve. A bit of waving later and Sister Loretta appears in front of them, scratched and gasping for breath, but otherwise unharmed.

“Were you the last?” Blue asks, looking around the courtyard at the collection of traumatized nuns in various states of disrepair.

“I think so, yes, Reverend Mother,” Sister Loretta says, bowing and then scurrying away into the crowd.

The vines continue to spread, the convent creaking ominously under the pressure. A gargoyle breaks from the side of the building and crashes onto the flagstones below.

“You said you tried to…?” Emma starts.

“Yes, when we first noticed it coming up through the floorboards in the chapel,” Blue says, her eyes over-wide. “We all did. But none of our wands would work against it.”

David is pacing in little circles in front of them. “Regina was with you, right, Emma?”

Regina gives him a sardonic look.

Emma nods.

“So it couldn’t have been her.”

“No,” Emma says firmly.

David sighs. “Ok. So what about…I don’t know. Maleficent. She liked thorns.”

Regina scoffs. “Maleficent was far too superior a sorceress to waste her time on petty vandalism. Anyhow, your daughter already slayed that particular dragon. Don’t you think you would have noticed her walking down Main Street by now? She was never exactly one for subtlety…”

“I—what?” Emma asks. “Hang on. That was Maleficent?”

Regina smirks.

And David just stands there, mouth open, gormless as usual.

“It was neither,” Blue says, watching the progress of the vines with the air of one observing a storm roll across the horizon. “Neither Regina nor Maleficent has done this.”

“Yeah, we just said that.”

“No. This is not the work of a sorceress. There is no trace of magic in the vines.”
“How is that possible?” David asks, stepping toward Blue with a look of consternation on his face.

“I don’t know. I’ve just tried enacting a tracing spell. There is nothing for it to latch on to—these vines are no more magical than any you would encounter on a walk in the woods—”

Regina’s heart freezes in her chest.

It takes her mind one panicked second to catch up to her body, to realize...

“Regina?”

She’d…the curse was connected to her magic…it was tethered to her, drew from her…and she’d….

“Regina?”

Runes and symbols flash behind her eyes, tumbling through complicated lines of arithmancy. She sees the words on the scroll, remembers the pull of a dark tide like a void clawing at her heart…

Vaguely, she feels Emma’s hand on her arm, leading her out of the courtyard and into the autumn sunlight, toward the stupid yellow car.

“Is it a memory?” Emma asks under her breath, harried, concerned. David and Blue are calling after her.

Regina stops. Emma’s grip tightens on her arm, as if preparing to catch her.

The treeline glows gold in the sunset and the air smells of dried cherries and woven baskets and…

“Regina.”

Regina looks at Emma and sees the sparks of brown in the green of her eyes and how they’re beginning to crease at the edges in a way that is somehow both lovely and painful.

She takes a breath, looks away.

“The curse is breaking.”

Emma just stares.

Regina draws every swirling thing inside her together—tall and straight and still. And then she says, “Listen carefully, Miss Swan: the Dark Curse is a complicated piece of magic. There are several component spells, each intertwined with the others, each requiring its own incantation, each demanding its own price.” She pauses, folding her arms over her chest. “When you kissed Henry awake last year, you broke two pieces of the curse: a stasis spell that kept Storybrooke from moving through time and a geas that created and maintained the cursed identities.” She looks at Emma. “The rest of the curse—the generative magic that created this town and the spell that anchors the cursed population in this realm—remained intact. For whatever reason.”

Emma's brow knits in confusion.

Regina continues. “The curse, as I said, is a complicated piece of magic. It requires an immense amount of power and skill to accomplish the initial casting and even afterwards the active spells are anchored by the caster’s magic.” She swallows. “Which, as you are aware, has recently ceased to exist.”
Emma gives her a blank look. “What are you saying?”

“When I took the potion last Tuesday night, I unwittingly removed the anchor, and the curse began to destabilize.” Regina studies her hands. “I imagine the tree sprouted through Moe French’s floor not long afterward.”


“That tree—and these brambles and whatever else you’ve been dealing with, including, I would guess, whatever caused the water-main break—was not magically-generated. Blue’s complete failure to enact a tracing spell would indicate that these disruptions are not even native to the spell that created Storybrooke, which would leave minute traces of magic on every material thing in this town.”

“So…what does that mean?”

“It means that the curse is dematerializing. The original land—whatever it was before Storybrooke’s creation—is breaking through the enchantment. Soon, and I would think sooner rather than later, the curse will unravel completely and the town will cease to exist.”

Emma shakes her head. “What happens to everyone here?”

“If the curse is left to self-destruct…everyone born in the Enchanted Forest will die.”

Emma’s jaw drops. “What? No! No, that’s…that’s everyone but Henry…”

“Yes.”

Emma’s eyes search her face for a moment, looking for something Regina doesn’t understand. Then she turns away, her messy curls whipping in a sudden gust of wind.

Regina feels the calm she’d gathered beginning to break. “I—Emma, I never meant to…I wasn’t thinking. When I took the potion. It sounds—I know it sounds impossible, but I’d forgotten…” She tries to find the words to explain, but they catch in her throat and it’s like she’s standing on her doorstep again, watching Emma walk away on that afternoon after her mother came to town. We know who you are—and who you always will be. “I never meant to do this. Please believe me. I never—”

Emma turns around then, her face fierce and grey and shadowed. “Regina—” she says, and then stops. Closes her eyes.

And Regina thinks, at least—at least she will have little trouble...

“You have to kill me.”

Emma’s eyes fly open again, every faded bit of her lighting up red and angry. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You are the Savior. You were prophesied to break the curse in a final battle between good and evil. Upon my death—”

“No—”

“It’s the only way. You have to break the curse—cleanly—before it unravels, or everyone here will die.”
Emma’s jaw works. She shakes her head jerkily. “No. No way. I’m not killing you. I’m not killing you to break a curse—”

“If it’s your morality that’s stopping you, know that I am freely—”

“Jesus, Regina! My morality?” She stares, disbelieving. “God, you—god.”

She walks away, pauses, and stalks back, her eyes sparking, mouth turned down in a snarl. “This is not—We are finding another way, do you understand me? We are finding another way.”

Chapter End Notes

Real life has essentially been a back-to-back showing of Grad School II: Dawn of the Thesis Paper---given that, updates will likely continue to be scarce for the time being. I wrote the next chapter in tandem with this one, so that may come your way sooner rather than later depending on the time I have to edit. I anticipate about two or three more chapters after that to finish out the story.

As always, thanks for reading!
Henry’s alarm rings at 6 am, but he’s been wide awake and staring at the clock for almost an hour already.

It’s the day of his field trip to the cannery and field trips always give him a swoopy feeling in his stomach that makes it difficult to fall asleep. Even when the field trip is just to watch dead fish being sealed up in tin cans (which might be really cool, actually).

But this morning the usual field trip excitement is almost overshadowed by the glowing in his chest that starts up every time he thinks about the CD case on his desk.

He’d stayed up past midnight last night, loading the old camcorder tapes onto his computer and stitching pieces of them together into a big long video. The computer had made a lot of rumbling and squeaking noises when he copied it to the CD, and the editing program almost died, and by the end of it his eyes were burning and his bones were tired from sitting in one place and he’d eaten almost all of the jar of peanut butter he’d snuck upstairs while his moms were busy working on something in the study.

But he did it.

He grins, throws back the covers, and—with one last happy glance at the CD—walks down the hall to the bathroom.

Then he stops.

His mom’s door is open and her bed is made.

His mom never makes her bed before breakfast, and even she isn’t downstairs this early when she’s not working.

“Mom?”

He tells himself it’s stupid to be scared, he’s just overreacting, but—

“Mom?”

He runs down the stairs. She’s not in the living room—or the dining room—or the kitchen—

“Mom?”

There’s no note or anything, she’s just gone and—

“Henry?”

His mom sticks her head out of the study door, her eyes blinking against the bright sunlight in the entrance hall.

“Mom?” He sighs, relieved. Then he squints at her messy hair, her rumpled clothes. He frowns. “Were you in there all night?”

“Yes, we—we were working on something.”
“The potion? Was Emma helping you again?”

He catches his mom hesitating. “Yes,” she says finally.

“Ok…where is she?”

“She’s sleeping,” his mom says, stepping carefully out of the room and closing the door behind her.

Henry follows her to the kitchen and pours himself a bowl of cereal as quietly as he can while his mom makes coffee. Her hands are shaking as she measures out the grounds and she spills water on the counter when she pours it into the machine and he wants to ask what’s wrong but he’s almost sure she won’t tell him.

He thinks back to last night and tries to remember if something had been wrong then. But he’d been so focused on shoveling his dinner down his throat so he could get to work on the CD that he’d forgotten to notice.

Stupid.

He’d been happy—really happy, and they’d had Chinese and nobody yelled at him for eating so fast he almost choked on his fried rice and he should have noticed.

“Mom…” he starts.

She turns around and smiles a little too small and a little too late and he sees that something is really wrong, so he asks anyway.

“Are you okay?”

His mom blinks like she’s surprised, and then smiles, and this time it’s tired and sad, but real. “I’m fine, Henry. Thank you for asking.”

Henry squints at her. “The potion isn’t hurting you?”

She shakes her head and her mouth makes the shape of No, but her voice gets caught in her throat. He sees tears in her eyes.

He’s about to say something else when the coffee maker buzzes. His mom turns around and fiddles with it.

“You should go get ready,” she says. “You’re going to miss the bus if you don’t hurry.”

So he puts his bowl in the sink and brushes his teeth and puts on his uniform and when he’s back downstairs with his backpack on he almost forgets how he got there.

He walks to the kitchen and sees her standing in front of the sink, tears shiny on her face, and he finally remembers that this day last week was when her mom died.

She doesn’t make any noise when she cries; watching her makes his chest hurt like someone’s sitting on it.

The floor creaks under his feet as he tiptoes across the room and wraps his arms around her from behind. She freezes up for a moment, and then looks down, breathing a big, shaky breath Henry can feel under his cheek.
They stand there like that for a long time, his hands tangled in the tails of her untucked shirt, just breathing.

And then she says, “You’ll be late,” and pats his arm and walks away without looking at him.

Before he leaves, he finds her coat hanging by the door slips the CD into the front pocket. She’s probably going to go to the cemetery today, like she always did for her dad, and he likes the idea that he can kind of come with her that way, even if she doesn’t know. Even if she wants to be alone.

The bus ride to the cannery seems to take much longer than it should. Paige Grace tries to talk to him about what he’ll do with his can of sardines after the trip, but he doesn’t want to talk at all and so he lies and says he likes them on pizza and then looks out the window the rest of the way.

When they get there, Ms. Powhatan checks their names off on a clipboard while a man from the cannery hands them hard hats and earplugs. Then a lady in overalls takes them inside and for a moment Henry is distracted by the bigness of everything: the generators and the conveyor belts and the champing of steel that jars his teeth together, even with the earplugs. He puts his hand out to touch one of the pipes when the lady isn’t looking, and he can feel the thrumming under his fingers almost like a heartbeat.

And then, when the lady is explaining about sustainable fisheries, he gets a weird feeling that suddenly there is a thrumming coming from underneath them—the sounds around them change into something deeper, louder and he feels a lurch in his stomach like he’d missed a step coming down the stairs.

Somebody screams.

The world is tilting; a hand grabs his arm; something slams into his side.

And the ground opens up.

**

Emma wakes up with a crick in her neck and a buzzing under her cheek. Blinking, she picks herself up off the pile of books she’d been using as a pillow and puts her phone to her ear.

“Hello?”

It takes her a moment to make sense of Mary Margaret’s frantic voice. Across from her, Regina looks up from the notepad she’d been scribbling in, her hair as messy as Emma had ever seen it, makeup faded and eyes dulled with sleeplessness. They’d spent most of last night rifling through every spellbook Regina owned, looking for a better answer…any answer.

“Slow down. Please, just…” Emma says into the phone, closing her eyes again. “I literally got nothing you just said and I didn’t really sleep last night, so—”

Then Mary Margaret repeats herself.

And Emma stands up so fast she knocks over a mug of hot coffee someone had placed near her elbow.

She runs to the door, Mary Margaret still hysterical in her ear, vaguely aware of Regina following behind her.

“Emma! What happened?”
Emma slings her coat over her shoulders. “It’s Henry. The docks are collapsing—that whole section of town is just—and he had that field trip today.”

“What field trip?” Regina asks, white-faced, as she yanks her own coat off the hook and runs after Emma down the front steps.

“The cannery. He’s at the cannery.”

Regina says nothing, just yanks open the door of the bug and slides in next to her as Emma revs the engine and tears out of the driveway. It is eerily quiet for a minute and then—

“Look out!” Regina yells, bracing her hand on the dashboard. The road ahead of them bursts open, sending shards of asphalt flying like shrapnel.

Emma jerks the wheel to the left and they swing onto a side street, tires screeching. Overhead, a string of telephone poles topple like dominoes into each other, tangled ropes of wires sparking against the grey sky.

As they approach the water, the streets become flooded with people—bloodied, screaming, tugging at each other’s arms. Red and blue lights flash against windows and the sides of buildings.

Emma’s heart is beating so fast she tastes copper in her mouth.

She pulls the car off the road and doesn’t bother to turn off the ignition—just jumps out and runs toward the water, jostling against the crowds. She feels Regina at her side, close behind but never touching.

The ground rumbles under their feet as they round the last corner.

Then she sees it: the cannery, corrugated steel ripped open like a paper bag, half a city block crumbling into the ocean. A school bus tipped on its side. Smoke clogging the air.

The crowds are even denser here, and more frantic. She sees someone she thinks she recognizes—

“Have you seen Henry?” she shouts, her voice barely audible over the sirens and the screaming and the groaning of metal. “Where’s Henry?”

_Not again. Please, not again._

Paige Grace just shakes her head, tears streaming down her grimy face as she’s pulled away by a dock worker.

At this, Regina’s face grows sharper and she turns away from Emma, elbowing through the crowd towards the remains of the cannery. Emma hurries behind.


They duck around the empty school bus and dodge a group of firefighters wrestling with the coils of a hose.

The entrance to the cannery has collapsed inward, but there’s a split in one of the walls just large enough to step through and, without a backward glance, Regina does, shattered glass crunching under her heels.

Inside, the stench of gasoline and fish is almost overwhelming. Emma tucks her scarf over her nose and tries to adjust to the darkness. Squinting, she can make out the stories-high wreckage of
Their voices echo eerily in the space, the sounds of chaos outside almost drowned by the emptiness here.

_Not again, not again, not again._

“Henry, it’s us! It’s me and your mom!”

“Henry, answer us!”

There is no answer, and Emma can’t—

“Emma?”

The voice is accompanied by a flashlight beam to the face. A shape—too tall for Henry—steps out from behind a damaged generator.

“David?”

“Emma, are you alright? I—”

“Henry—have you seen Henry anywhere?”

“It’s okay—”

“Where is he?” Regina cuts in, her voice vicious and breaking. Emma grabs her elbow where it’s digging into her side.

“It’s okay,” David says again, breathless. “He’s okay. I saw him almost as soon as I got here—he’s in my truck.”

Relief chokes in Emma’s throat as David herds them outside again. They take off running toward the truck, parked two blocks away outside the drug store. People are spilling out onto the street, panicked, pale-faced. Emma catches words like _cave-in_ and _earthquake_ and has to look twice when she sees what looks like a grove of trees taking over the Rabbit Hole with a rumble like thunder.

Henry, for once, seems to have stayed where he was told. He spots them from a half-block away and tumbles out of the cab of David’s truck, running toward them across the buckled asphalt—wet and bruised and crying, but whole.

As he crosses the road, the ground quakes again. There’s a sound like marbles on glass—Emma looks up to see a streetlight tearing itself out of the sidewalk.

“Henry—move!”

She throws herself at him, shoving him out of the way just as the light crashes into the ground.

There are a few seconds in which her body seems made of pain, and then everything goes dark.

**
“Emma!”

Regina drops to her knees next to Emma, lying a few feet from where the pole had hit her on its way down. She pulls at a leather-clad shoulder and Emma’s body turns over, her head lolling against the asphalt.

You stupid, reckless—

There. Her pulse is there, visibly jumping against the skin of her throat.

Henry scrambles over the felled pole separating them, reaching for Emma with bloodied palms. “Is she—”

An ominous rumble sounds from somewhere underground.

“Mom!” Henry shouts, just before the drug store windows burst outwards as if by percussive force, showering the street in glass.

Regina feels a body collide with hers, arms coming around her and Henry, forming a shield and bending them over Emma as glass shards clatter around them.

David.

She shrugs his arms off and pushes Henry into his chest, glass falling from the creases in their coats. “Take him.”

Storybrooke is destroying itself, but across the town line…across the town line a child born in the land without magic would be safe.

“Regina—”

Blinking a trickle of blood out of her eyes, she pins David with a glare. “So help me, Charming, if you care at all about saving the one life that can be saved here, you will take him. You will take him. You will get in that truck. And you will drive over the line.”

David’s eyes go wide.

Another rumble sounds.

“Now!”

David’s jaw firms and he tugs Henry to his feet.

“No! Mom!” Henry’s voice breaks as he struggles against David’s hold.

“Henry, when David—when he’s not with you anymore, you take his phone and you call 911. Alright? Tell them you need help. You stay in the car until somebody comes. Don’t—don’t talk to anybody. Don’t go with anybody but a police officer.”

“No!”

“I’m sorry. I am so sorry, Henry,” Regina says, tears starting to stream down her cheeks as a white-faced David steers Henry toward the truck. “I…Henry, I love you. Please remember that.”

Henry shakes his head and gives David a kick in the shins. “No! I’m not leaving you! You can’t—”
A tremor rips through the ground. David picks a screaming Henry up, throws him over his shoulder, and starts running.

Regina chokes on a sob. She watches David pile Henry into the cab and steer the truck down the broken sidewalk and then into an alley, out of sight.

She hopes the roads hold long enough for them to get out…She hopes the unraveling curse doesn’t leave Henry in a driverless car in a ditch somewhere…She hopes David is as much the selfless hero as he’d professed to be…

Emma stirs next to her, groaning in pain. Her leg is stuck at an odd angle, her breaths sharp and rasping. She finds Regina with hazy eyes.

“Henry?”

Regina fights to make her throat work. “Fine. He’s fine. He's...with David.”

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Emma whispers, her voice cracking. She coughs and gasps and spits blood onto the broken glass.

Regina nods, searching Emma’s face.

Sensing her thoughts, Emma’s eyes turn hard, even in their pain. “I won’t do it.”

“I—I know.”

Emma’s breathing grows sharper, her hand clutching at her side. “I can’t. I—can’t—breathe.”

Fighting a steadily-rising panic, Regina grabs at Emma’s free hand. “Emma…I….”

Emma starts coughing again, choking and desperate, and Regina curses the world and closes her eyes and pulls viciously, hopelessly, at the empty space in her chest.

Emma lets out a gasp that’s less death and more surprise.

“What?” Regina asks, opening her eyes again.

Emma just shakes her head, staring at their clasped hands. “Sparks,” she whispers.

Sparks.

That night at the sheriff’s station, when the memories had changed, Emma had said—

Sparks.

“Try. Again,” Emma says, chest heaving, eyes full as she looks up at Regina.

Nodding jerkily, Regina does, squeezing Emma’s hand and pulling hard.

The sick, roiling feeling she’d had just after taking the potion comes roaring back, hitting her with such force it stops her breath. Her bones feel warm, hot. There are stars behind her eyes. The world tilts—

—The front door slams and Regina jumps, striking her pen across the notes she’s been working on for the better part of an hour.

“Mom?”
“Henry?”

She stands, frowning. He’s spending the night at Emma’s. Why…

He bursts into the dim kitchen, sopping wet and—

“Is that blood?” she demands.

“We hit a dog,” Henry says, his face screwed up in worry. “It was raining, and we didn’t see her, and she ran out into the street. Mom, she’s bleeding everywhere—”

He looks back over his shoulder for Emma, who comes staggering into the room with a large black bundle in her arms.

Startled into action, Regina clears the table of her notes and tells Henry to get her bag from the closet.

“Lay her here,” she says to Emma, who deposits the dog on the table and then steps back, pale and panting, a streak of red across her cheekbone.

Regina frowns, washing her hands in the kitchen sink. “Sit down before you fall down.”

Emma does as she’s told, collapsing onto a stool in the corner and pressing her bloodied palms together.

Henry comes running back into the room with the kit.

“Go wash up,” Regina calls, “and then come back here and help me.”

Under the circle of light from the hanging lamp, Regina inspects the damage. The dog is in poor shape—chest heaving, bloody foam forming at her mouth. She’s been wrapped clumsily in Emma’s long coat, and when Regina gently shifts it off, she can see a shard of opalescent bone sticking out of her left foreleg. The dog whines, flashing the whites of her eyes.

“Shit,” Emma breathes.

Regina carefully touches her fingers to the dog’s temple and spells her to sleep.

“She can’t feel it anymore,” she says, glancing up now at Emma, who nods blankly and walks out of the room.

Regina returns her attention to the dog’s leg. It’s a nasty break, but a clean one, and she sets the bone with a flick of her wrist.

Henry comes back with wet hands. She hooks her stethoscope in his ears, lets him listen to the dulled sound of the dog’s chest cavity, and tells him about blunt-force trauma and broken ribs. She explains about the energy limitations of healing magic and how they’ll have to wait and see if her lung heals, even after they deal with the rib and Vanish the blood and air keeping her from breathing properly.

When Henry is busy wrapping a bandage over a splint on the dog’s foreleg, stethoscope still hanging around his neck, Regina slips out into the dark living room.

“Emma?”

The room is silent. Regina huffs out a breath and is about to turn back when she notices the far
window open, and a shape on the fire escape just visible in the twilight.

Grabbing a blanket from the back of the couch, she walks over.

“If I rip this jacket climbing out here, you’re paying for it,” she says quietly—as quietly as she can while trying to maneuver her body out a third-story window.

Emma shrugs. “Consider it an early Christmas present.”

“It’s hardly a present if you’re replacing something I damaged for your sake,” Regina retorts, lowering herself carefully to sit next to Emma. The just-damp metal bites through the fabric of her slacks. “Emma Swan, it’s freezing out here.”

“Yeah. It’s this thing called the Pacific Northwest,” Emma says, teeth chattering.

Rolling her eyes, Regina shoves the blanket at her.

Emma blinks down at it. Then she unfolds it and wordlessly drapes it over both of their shoulders. Regina tries not to breathe.

“Thanks,” Emma says, staring down into the street below. The sulfur yellow of the streetlamps catches in her hair, in the drizzling rain dancing around her face.

“She’ll be fine,” Regina says after a moment. “Henry’s sitting with her.”

Emma looks at her. “I didn’t see her.”

“I know.”

“We were just going out to get pizza. I forgot to do the grocery shopping yesterday and Henry hates eggs, which is basically all I had, so we ordered a pizza.”

She stops for a moment, biting her lip.

“And Henry was just—he was doing that thing where he won’t shut up about something and I just sort of tuned him out because—just because it was a shitty day, you know, and I was just tired and…I don’t know, it’s like nothing is happening and then suddenly it’s too much and I just can’t be there anymore…”

“Oh…”

“I could have killed him, Regina! A foot more to the right and I could have killed my twelve-year-old kid because I couldn’t deal with spending one more second sitting in my own skin. Doesn’t it ever—don’t you ever…” She sniffs, shaking her head. “I’m just…I’m sorry. Maybe…”

Regina snaps her head up. “If you even think about saying he’s better off without you…”

“I wasn’t going to say that.”

“Oh?” Regina asks, challenge in her voice.

Emma shrugs, the blanket shifting around them. “Maybe he wouldn’t be better off without me, but…he’d probably be better off with someone better than me. Better at this.”

Regina swallows around a lump in her throat. “Better at what?” she asks, afraid of the answer and angry at herself for it.
“Being here,” Emma breathes. “Staying.”

“Wanting to stay?”

Emma looks over at her. “No,” she says, eyelashes rain-damp, breath puffing out in the cold. “I think I’ve got that one down now.”

Regina shivers.

They sit quietly for long minutes, Regina’s hands growing numb.

The window behind them creaks.

She turns to see Henry peering at them strangely from under the sash. “What are you guys doing?” he asks, wrinkling his nose.

“Enjoying the weather,” Regina says blandly.

Henry makes an incredulous face. “Oookayy… well, I think I found what breed she is,” he says, sticking Regina’s phone out the window to show them a picture of a much cleaner dog than the one lying on the kitchen table, captioned with Doberman Pinscher.

Emma takes the phone and looks at it.

“Is she still asleep?” Regina asks.


Regina smiles. “I’ll be in in a moment. Why don’t you go and clean up?”

Henry nods and disappears back into the apartment.

Emma is quiet. Glancing over, Regina can see her staring down at the phone’s lock screen, a picture of the three of them taken at Henry’s fifth grade graduation.

“It’s a good one,” Emma says, running her finger over Henry’s screen self.

“Yes, it is.”

The traffic drifts below like the sound of the ocean in a seashell. Someone laughs on the street corner, bright and deep and distant.

Carefully, Regina stands, shifting the blanket off of her shoulders. She reaches a hand down to Emma.

“Are you ready?”

Emma blinks up at her. “Yeah.” She smiles, slowly, quietly, as if remembering how.

Regina takes her hand and—

—opens her eyes and finds herself blinking up at a grey sky. A familiar buzzing feeling tells her she’s just come back from a memory, but this time…

This time she remembers.

Images flash through her mind like slides in an old projector.
She remembers a house built under an old beech tree; a messy-haired girl with Nadine’s name and Emma’s quiet; a walk on the beach with Henry; *Fable Creek Public Beach (No Lifeguard on Duty: Swim at your own risk)*; a bloodied dog on a kitchen table; Henry’s face in the lamplight as she guides his hands over matted fur; Emma lit up in the dark, desperate for a home she already has…

She launches herself upright, aware again of her hand clasped in Emma’s. There’s a strange heat in the pocket of her coat.

Emma watches her with wide eyes. “Regina?” she chokes out.

Regina stares down at her hands, tingling and electric. Hardly daring to breathe, she pulls at the new warmth in her chest—

And bright orange flames spring to life in her palm.

Her heart races.

She was right. Emma was right.

*Light magic.*

Something like joy flashes through her, an almost violent rush of bright feeling that makes her throat ache.

(*Sunset on the beach; a little girl in a red sweater; a stethoscope around Henry’s neck.*)

She breathes out a laugh, her eyes stinging.

*Light magic.*

Another rumble echoes through the street.

“*Regina?*”

Regina startles into motion. Her thoughts suddenly whirling with desperate possibilities, Regina shifts Emma’s jacket and reaches out with her magic, dulling the pain, feeling for the broken place, setting the bone, re-expanding the lung.

Emma breathes again, deep and unlabored. “How did you—?”

Regina doesn’t answer. She calls the curse scroll into her hand and unfurls it.

The writing is fading, but there’s just enough…

She forms a pen with thin air and starts writing.

(*Standing in the rain under a treehouse; Henry and a time capsule; Emma’s eyes at night.*)

“*Regina!*” Emma shouts, pushing herself up on her elbows. She’s looking beyond them down the street, where the asphalt is beginning to cave in on itself with a noise like the roar of an avalanche.

Regina finishes the writing and tucks the pen in her pocket, feeling oddly calm. “I used the momentum of the disintegrating spells to rewrite the remaining pieces of the curse. I’m going to move the town.”

(*Fable Creek. The house under the beech tree.*)
Emma breathes. “What?”

Regina shakes her head. “I can’t—There isn’t much time. If I did it right, the patched spells should transport the town to a new location, rebuilding Storybrooke and restabilizing the magic. The new curse will be tied to the magic of the land, and not to mine…so even if something happens to me, it shouldn’t destabilize again.”

“What do you mean, ‘if something happens’?” Emma demands, eyes flashing as if she already knows the answer.

“I’m not coming with you.”

“No.”

Regina stands.

“No,” Emma scrambles to a sitting position, her face contorting in pain as she moves her leg.

“It’s the only way.”

“Well—then find us again!” Emma grinds out, eyes watering from the dust, tears making muddy paths down her cheeks.

“Emma, I won’t remember you.”

Emma freezes. “That’s the price?”

There’s an elegant, unforgiving kind of symmetry in magic and its cost. She can’t be sure, of course, but it seems right…it seems fitting…

“Home,” she says. “Memories of home…in exchange for a new one for all of you.”

(Afternoon light coming through an upstairs window; Henry at the kitchen table; Emma walking toward them across the sand.)

“Regina, listen to me. You don’t have to—”

Another rumble sends Regina tumbling to the ground.

For a space of seconds, everything is white and still, save for the distant ringing in her ears. She tastes metal on her tongue, blinks open dry eyes.

The roaring gets louder, closer, and for a moment she thinks--

Perhaps there is no hope—perhaps the world she’d created ends here, like this, taking 1500 souls with it.

Perhaps she really has destroyed everything, after all.

(A small body held against her chest;

Emma, hopeful, reaching for her hand;

Henry’s voice over the roar of the ocean:

“It would be okay, you know.”
And perhaps not.

She doesn’t understand what it means—what it means that she has these fading pictures from a
different life floating through her mind. There is an alarming naiveté in taking them as proof of
some kind of existence beyond this.

She does it anyway.

Regina pushes herself up on scraped palms and looks at Emma, cheeks grey with dust from the
rubble, eyes wide and pained and alive. She can feel the ground pulsing under her hands and
imagines for a moment that it’s Emma’s heartbeat echoing in her fingertips, like in Henry’s book,
like a thread connecting them through the earth.

She sets her jaw. “If this works…you’ll live.”

She stands on shaking legs and closes her eyes. The scroll warms with magic in her fist.

“Regina! Regina, no!”

The world falls away.

Chapter End Notes

Back from thesis hell with a cliffhanger (sorry).
I have a bit more time on my hands now, so I am hoping the next update comes more quickly.

Thanks for reading!
Henry wakes up suddenly, eyes flying open in the dark.

He looks around him, trying to catch his breath as he blinks back images of twisted steel and crumpled asphalt. The inside of his nose still smells like fish and motor oil, somehow.

He’s in his room…well, the room that is his here, in this strange town that seems cut together like a collage—part new, part old.

It’s been two months.

Two months ago, he’d woken up in a hospital.

*Sharp white light streams through half-open blinds.*

*Henry blinks.*

*His head hurts—his skull pounds with each heartbeat. It feels like someone poured ice into his brain.*

*His eyes sting with tears; he presses his lips together to keep from barfing.*

*Moving his head a little, the room swimming with the motion, he sees someone asleep in the chair next to him.*

*Emma.*

*Suddenly, everything comes back. The weird earthquake at the cannery, Emma pushing him out of the way of that pole, his mom telling David to take him across the town line…the tree crashing down onto the truck as they drove away.*

*His breath starts coming in little gasps, like his lungs think he’s just sprinted a mile. It makes his head hurt even worse.*

*He spots David asleep in a bed across the room, Mary Margaret napping with her head resting on her hand.*

*But where’s—*

*“Mom?” he asks, his voice croaky.*

*Emma starts awake, looking around frantically before her eyes settle on Henry’s face. Her knee is wrapped in a brace and propped up on another chair; her mouth gets tight with pain when she turns toward him.*

*“Where’s Mom?” Henry demands, feeling like the world is slipping out from under him.*

*Emma tries to say something, but no sound comes out.*
His chest gets tighter, tighter, his head pounding along with his heart.

“Regina saved us all,” Mary Margaret’s voice whispers from across the room.

And she tells him about how his mom cast a new curse and made this town. How she traded her memories to rewrite the old magic.

How she’s gone and is probably never coming back.

“You should be very proud, Henry,” Mary Margaret says, sniffling. “Your mother is a hero.”

They take a bus across a strange town that looks like something out of a dream, or maybe a horror movie. Half-familiar buildings jump out of the fog as the bus trundles along rearranged streets, everything shaped new and different. It makes Henry scared for reasons he doesn’t understand. They pass a sign that says Fable Creek City Hall and his whole body feels like it’s floating. He grabs the edge of the bus seat until his hands hurt.

They get off on a dark street corner. The air is damp and cold against Henry’s skin.

Emma leads them up to a flat-roofed house, wobbling a little as her crutches crunch against the gravel pathway. She says she woke up just lying in one of the bedrooms upstairs. There’s a room for him, too, almost like his old one, so she guesses it’s theirs now.

She hops up the porch steps. Henry follows her, bumping elbows as he trips over a welcome mat. He can see Emma’s face in the dark glass of the front door as she curses at the sticky lock. It opens, finally, when she rams it with her shoulder.

The inside of the house is dark and echoey and smells like pine wood and plastic wrap. Emma flicks on a light.

There’s too much space—the whole floor seems like just one big room, a kitchen and a living room and a dining room all spread out under a high ceiling with no walls between them. Towards the back of the house there’s a staircase, but has clear sides and floating steps and just it seems to drop out of nowhere. There’s more glass than walls here and everywhere he looks Henry can see their reflections.

His chest starts feeling tight again. He folds himself into an armchair in the too-big living room and shuts his eyes. His head hurts.

“Oh… Henry…” Emma says, her voice tired and scratchy.

He tucks his head between his knees and holds his breath to keep from crying. He listens to the click-clack sound of Emma’s crutches on the hardwood floors and hears her plop onto the couch across from him. He falls asleep waiting to wake up from a nightmare.

Henry shakes the memories out of his head and pulls the covers tighter around himself.

His heart is still beating pretty fast. He thinks about maybe going down to get some hot chocolate—but then a noise in the hallway makes him freeze.

Emma appears in the doorway. At first, he thinks he must have screamed or something in his sleep, and that Emma might have come in to check on him. But she doesn’t come into the room,
just stands there with the bright light of the hallway behind her.

He realizes she must think he’s still asleep.

Emma runs her hand over her face and slides down to sit against the open door, her face still hidden behind her fingers.

It’s quiet for a minute, and then—

“I can’t do this,” Emma whispers.

Henry tries to stay very still in the bed.

But Emma doesn’t say anything else, just breathes really deeply for a while. Then she gets up, closes the door, and leaves.

Henry’s stomach ties itself in knots.

He thinks about when she’d first came to Storybrooke— about I never asked for this! and about I'm not a mother. He thinks about how much worse it must be now.

He thinks about sometimes at dinner when she smiles a terrible, empty smile at him over frozen pizza and asks him how his day was like she’s reading lines from a script. Like she doesn’t already know he spent the whole day in the same echoey house she did, trying to forget the same things she is.

[They never talk about her anymore.]
entryway. She gives Henry a small nod before inviting herself into the living room, leaving Emma to follow on her crutches.

They sit across from each other—Ms. Wells in an armchair and Emma on the couch—and Ms. Wells just sort of stares at Emma for a while.

“While it is true that this meeting’s purpose is primarily diplomatic, there are some individuals who—rightfully so—are more than concerned about your presence here,” Ms. Wells says, coolly. “So, if you don’t mind providing the requested explanation, Sherriff Swan…”

“Right. Yeah. Sure,” Emma says, a strained look on her face.

So Emma starts telling Ms. Wells about Storybrooke and the magic falling apart and how they had to move and then there’s a moment of confusion…because apparently they had sprouted up next to a small city of refugees from the Enchanted Forest.

“Wait, you’re from—”

“Third generation,” Ms. Wells says, her eyes less sharp now and more curious. “In my case.”

“So, um, another curse, or…” Emma asks.

“Portal, actually.”

“A whole city came through a portal?”

“Not exactly. Ever heard of the Mondovian Wars?” Ms. Wells asks, crossing her legs and leaning forward.

Emma blinks. “Uh…No?”

“Suffice to say the Mondovian king was a bully and a coward who commanded an army of unscrupulous thugs. They took pleasure in destroying helpless populations in service of their corrupt ideals.” Ms. Wells presses her lips together. “The portal first opened about 200 years ago, roughly a decade into the wars. A group of villagers from the Wool Kingdom used a magic bean to escape the Mondovian soldiers. They came through here, in a cave under the cliffs, and set up a small town on the water.”

“Porta…?”

“Portico Bay. Eventually, yes. But the portal didn’t close properly. Something to do with ley lines. From time to time, it opens again and new people come through, usually refugees from one conflict or another. It seems to appear in times of need to people least likely to receive aid. We have people from all over the Enchanted Forest coming through, from every historical period imaginable—escaping from the Ogre Wars, famine, floods, fires, the Great Curse. So, as you might imagine, we’re used to newcomers. But a whole town is something else entirely,” Ms. Wells says, leaning back again.

They’re quiet for a moment. Then Emma sighs. “Yeah. Okay. So. What now?”

“Well, this is definitely not an ideal situation,” Ms. Wells says. “But you’re here and we have to figure out what to do about it.”

So that’s what the meetings were for. But Henry doesn’t understand why Emma keeps letting
them happen in their living room—why she keeps letting people yell at her about things that aren’t her fault. Everyone just seems angry at everything, and Emma especially.

Henry wishes he could be angry. He just feels…empty. He’s starting to forget what day it is, or even whether this morning had been this morning or if that was really two days ago and his brain had somehow been asleep the whole time between now and then.

Today, everyone seems to be yelling louder than usual. Ms. Wells and some of the other council people from Portico Bay are there to talk about making a joint council between their city and Fable Creek, which for some reason is a big deal.

“We have some common interests—” Ms. Wells is saying, her voice echoing up the stairs.

“Common interests my ass!” shouts Leroy.

“—and I believe we each have resources that can benefit the other,” Ms. Wells continues, as if Leroy didn’t exist.

“I don’t know what your game is here—” Spencer says, stepping angrily in front of Ms. Wells.

“Can it, Spencer,” Granny says, glaring across the room at him.

The yelling quiets down for a while after that. Henry’s arm is falling asleep from being folded back under his head, and the rest of him is kind of cold. The chill from the storm seems to have crepted inside the house.

Slowly, he picks himself up off the floor and heads to the laundry room. The dryer is on, rumbling warmly in the blue-lit room. He fishes a pair of mismatched socks from the laundry basket and sits to put them on with his back against the warm metal of the dryer door.

The rain pounds against a small window set high in the far wall. Henry’s thoughts wander. The smell of laundry detergent and dryer lint and warm towels brings up a fuzzy memory…sitting on the washer in the Storybrooke house, giggling uncontrollably as his mom’s sock puppet hands asked him how his day was going.

Stop stop stop, he thinks, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking the memory out of his head.

The dryer buzzes behind him, and then the laundry room gets quiet in a way that makes Henry’s ears hurt.

Suddenly, there are footsteps on the stairs.

“Emma! We need to talk—”

It was Mary Margaret’s voice, whisper-yelling, coming closer.

Henry scoots around to the side of the dryer, tucking his feet back so they won’t be visible from the doorway.

“No! We do not—maybe you do, ok, because…I don’t know. But I don’t. I don’t want to talk.”

“Emma…”

“Would you just listen to me? I. Don’t. Want. To. Talk! So just—please.”

Henry holds his breath.
"…Emma. You know I…"

"Yeah."

"It’s just…we have this future now. Here."

"Yeah."

"And I think she would have wanted—"

"You know what? I changed my mind. Dinner sounds great. See you tomorrow night. And you can tell everyone the meeting’s over."

"Oh! Well—great! Um…I was going to make a casserole. Does Henry like—?"

"I have no idea."

"But he’s your—"

"Casserole’s great. He’ll love it."

Emma’s footsteps move away. Her door slams moments later.

Henry can hear Mary Margaret sigh out in the hall.

The drive over to Mary Margaret and David’s apartment is quiet.

Emma had spent the entire afternoon up in her room, music blaring, occasional thumping noises making Henry think maybe she was throwing things.

At 5:15 she came out, hair still wet from the shower, wearing a pair of skinny jeans that once made Mary Margaret say, “Are you sure you don’t want to put on something more…substantial?” back when he and Emma used to live with her in Storybrooke.

She spotted Henry sitting at the top of the stairs and had seemed almost startled to see him there, looking away almost as soon as she met his eyes.

“Hey, kid. Uh. Time to go. Get in the car.”

Henry had stood. “It’s 5:15,” he said.

“I know.”

“Mary Margaret wanted us to be there at five.”

“I know,” Emma said, shrugging. Her eyes were red. She moved past him and trudged down the stairs. “It’s fine.”

Henry, who really didn’t care one way or the other, wasn’t sure what made him keep talking. “But she said—”

Emma turned back around at the bottom of the staircase. “I know, Henry.” She closed her eyes. “I know. Just get in the car.”

So now they’re driving in silence, Emma sitting tensely like her muscles ache, like she’s waiting
for something terrible to come jumping out of the clouds of fog lit up by the headlights.

Mary Margaret smiles when she opens the door to her new apartment—brick-walled, like the loft had been, and already covered in quilts and bookshelves and watercolor paintings of birds. She eyes Emma’s wet hair and opens her mouth like she’s going to say something, but then doesn’t.

David takes their coats and hugs Emma and ruffles Henry’s hair and then Mary Margaret says “Soooo…”

Three more people appear in the hallway.

Emma breaks the silence first. “You, uh. Didn’t tell me this was a dinner party thing.”

“Oh, no, it’s not,” Mary Margaret says, soothingly. “We just thought…maybe you could use some friends! You’ve been so busy with everything…and Henry would probably like to get out of the house once in a while…”

Henry can see Emma’s hands clench behind her back.

“This is Councilwoman Chambers, from Portico Bay City Council,” Mary Margaret continues, nodding at the adult in the group. “I’m sure you’ve met in passing. She was at the last meeting and we got to talking and…well, here we are! And these are her two grandkids, Jace and Amauri. They’re about Henry’s age!”

Councilwoman Chambers, an older woman with dark skin and large glasses, steps forward to shake Emma’s hand. She has very pretty eyes, and smiles like she might feel a bit sorry that she was a surprise to Emma.

“Very pleased to officially meet you, young lady,” she says. “Tamara always speaks very highly of you.”

“Thanks,” Emma says, kind of breathlessly. She turns to Mary Margaret. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Mary Margaret smiles a little too widely. “Sure. Of course.” She glances at David. “Why don’t you take Angela back to the kitchen and open up that wine. Henry? Your comics and things ended up in the back room—if you go all the way down the hallway to the left you’ll find it. Maybe Jace and Amauri would like to see them?”

Henry hates when adults do that awkward thing where they expect you to be best friends with kids you just met just because you’re the same age. He knows it’s just to get them all out of the way.

But Emma looks even tenser than she did in the car and Henry knows she’s about to yell at Mary Margaret, and he really doesn’t want to be there for that anyway.

So he waves to the kids and tries not to watch as Mary Margaret leaves with Emma into a side room.

“Um. Hi. I’m Henry,” he says when they’ve closed the door behind them.

“I’m Jace,” says one of the kids, a girl in a thick red sweater. “That’s Amauri—” she points to the taller boy next to her. “We’re not twins.”

“…Ok,” Henry says.
“Everybody thinks that, but I’m ten and he’s twelve.”

“We don’t have to look at your comics,” Amauri says. He’s wearing a sweatshirt with Portico Bay Potioneers printed across the front and seems to agree with Henry on the whole this-is-awkward-we-just-met thing.

Which is what suddenly makes it less awkward for Henry. “No, it’s fine. I mean, if you want to.”

Jace just shrugs. “DC or Marvel?”

“Marvel. My mom was…um…” Henry’s voice cuts off there and he feels his cheeks heat as the two kids just look at him silently.

They probably know. Everyone knows.

“Um. Let’s go.”

He leads them down the back hallway and, sure enough, the last door on the left opens into a stuffy little room Mary Margaret seems to be using to store all the random stuff that got thrown around by The Move. There are boxes everywhere, stacked on a quilt-covered bed and across a small desk and piled all over the floor.

“Cool,” Jace says, pulling something large and brown out of a box near the door.

It’s Emma’s sheriff jacket, the one with the fur around the neck.

“Can I?” Jace asks, looking at Henry.

Henry shrugs. Emma hardly wears it, anyway.

Jace slips it on, giggling. It reaches her knees.

“Your mom’s the Caster, isn’t she?” Amauri says quietly, not looking up from the stack of dusty cookbooks he’s sorting through.

Henry stares. “What?”

“Yeah, she cast the spell that brought you all here,” Jace says, fixing the collar on Emma’s jacket. The beads in her hair click together. “Everyone’s saying it’s some of the most powerful freeform magic ever done.”

Henry doesn’t know what to say, so he just pretends to straighten the quilt on the bed.

He supposes it’s better than the Evil Queen.

They rifle through the boxes quietly, finding everything from Mary Margaret’s collection of snow globes to a broken toaster than Henry thinks Emma might have destroyed in her first month in Storybrooke…

Everything then seems so far away, like maybe Henry dreamed the whole thing, like it never happened at all—like any moment he’ll wake up in back in Storybrooke with his face pressed into the pages of the old book Ms. Blanchard had given him at lunch, before he’d run away to Boston, before he’d recognized his mom’s face in the paintings of the Evil Queen, before he’d known the name Emma Swan.

He thinks, maybe, maybe things were better off then. If he’d never read that book. If he’d never found Emma and made her come to Storybrooke and break the curse. Maybe then she wouldn’t
be so sad and angry all the time. Maybe then she wouldn’t be stuck being his mom when she’d never wanted to be in the first place.

If he’d never brought Emma to Storybrooke, maybe his dad and Cora and Mr. Gold wouldn’t have died.

Maybe his mom wouldn’t have had to sacrifice herself to save them from a half-broken curse.

“Henry?”

Henry feels dizzy all of a sudden, his eyes stinging with tears he tries to blink away.

“Henry?”

“Huh?”

Jace looks at him weird. “I said, can I try something?”

Henry swallows. “Try something?”

“To find the comics,” Jace says slowly, like he thinks maybe Henry is having a hard time hearing.

Henry had forgotten all about the comic books. But he nods, trying to keep his breathing even.

Jace pushes up the sleeves of Emma’s jacket, holds out her hands, and closes her eyes.

A box next to Amauri’s feet glows yellow. He tugs it out from under a box labeled *Essential Oils* and heaves it onto the bed.

Inside are Henry’s comic books, the glow just fading from the paper.

Henry’s eyes go wide. “How did you do that?”

Jace shrugs. “Locator spell.”

They sit on the dusty quilt and pull the comic books out onto their laps, flipping through the pages and passing them between each other.

Henry tries to focus on the stories in front of him. But he can’t stop thinking about the glowing box.

*Locator spell.*

**

Emma’s not sure what wakes her, or if she’d fallen asleep at all.

Her legs are twisted in the sheets, her skin damp with sweat, her chest heaving. It takes her a moment to remember where she is, what’s happened—

She clenches her jaw, swings her legs over the side of the bed, pushes herself to stand, ignoring the twinge in her knee.

In the too-large bathroom, in the blue half-light coming through the foggy window, she changes into leggings and a t-shirt, avoiding her eyes in the mirror.
In the back of the walk-in closet she finds a pair of her running shoes, buried under piles of belongings she hasn’t sorted out.

She walks softly, unevenly, down the long hallway, past the quiet dark of Henry’s room, down the floating staircase, out the door.

The air is thick and damp and cold. Her skin pricks as the fog settles between the hairs on her arms.

There are lights on in the harbor, detached from their buildings in the mist, hanging like lanterns over the dark water.

Emma breathes in the cold, clenching her fists against the pain in her knee, against the thoughts still tumbling over each other in her head.

She wants to scream.

Instead she runs.

Her lungs burn and her knee aches and her ears freeze and everything hurts until it doesn’t—until she’s numb with the cold and the damp and the rhythm of her feet against the pavement.

She doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t care.

“The swelling’s going down,” Dr. Castellano-Silva says, bending Emma’s knee with her hands, the paper on the examination table crinkling. “You sure the pain’s better?”

Emma nods. “Yeah. It’s fine. It’s great.”

Dr. Castellano-Silva gives her a skeptical look. “You sure? Sprains are tricky. It would be normal for there to be—”

“It’s fine,” Emma says, more sharply than she means to. She closes her eyes. “Sorry.”

Dr. Castellano-Silva looks at her again. “Ok. Well. We can move to a smaller brace. Make sure you keep icing in the evenings, and if you have any problems—”

“Yeah, sure,” Emma says, hopping down from the table and pulling her pant leg down. “Ok, thanks, Doc.”

“It’s Marian.”

Emma blinks, pausing halfway through shrugging her jacket on. “What?”

“My name is Marian. ‘Doc’ is what you would call me if you were a middle-aged man in a ’70s sitcom,” Dr. Castellano-Silva says, narrowing her eyes.

Emma frowns.

“And while we’re being informal, I’d just like to say you are a really shit patient. Like, more than the average.”

“I—”

“It’s not like I can’t tell you’re lying to me. Your jaw about snapped in half when I straightened
your leg. You’ve probably been hobbling around without crutches for weeks like an idiot.”

Emma opens her mouth, but nothing comes out.

Dr. Castellano-Silva’s face softens a little. She sighs. “Look, I get it. But you’re not doing anyone any favors pretending you’re—”

“Yeah, okay, thanks,” Emma says gruffly, brushing past the doctor and out the door.

She bites her lip and manages to walk the entire hallway without limping.

Henry is quiet. He looks at her across the kitchen counter with blank eyes and answers in single words if at all and hides in his room for everything except meals. She hears him turn on the shower at night and thinks still alive, then.

She wonders if this is what it was like for her, in those months before and after Henry ran off to Boston.

She gets up, talks to Tamara. Makes a peanut butter sandwich and puts it outside Henry’s door. Lets the entire town into her house, lets them talk over her and then look to her for answers.

[Hides in the pantry when they forget to look. Eats a jar of Nutella.]

[Sleeps. Wakes up. Repeats.]

[The days fall together and she doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t care.]

She opens a linen closet one afternoon and narrowly misses being hit in the head by a pile of falling books.

(The new curse is ragged around the edges, everything shaken up and put back in the wrong places.)

She picks one up off the floor. It’s fallen open to a page marked Tracking Spells.

She grits her teeth, grabs the stack of books, and shuts herself in her room.

[Nothing works. Nothing works.]

School starts again. Henry gets on the bus in the morning with a Thermos of tomato soup (Emma graduates from peanut butter when she catches him throwing his brown paper lunch in the dumpster on the way to the bus stop) and comes home six hours later, silent as ever.

One day, he doesn’t come home at all and Emma tears through Fable Creek Academy, Mary Margaret on her heels.

“He went home with the Chambers kids,” Ms. Powhatan says, startled as Emma throws open the door to her classroom. “Sorry, I thought you knew. He brought in a note…”
She pulls a piece of computer paper from a folder.

Dear Ms. Powhatan,

Henry has my permission to walk home with Jace and Amauri Chambers.

From,

Emma Swan

It’s typed up, the signature at the bottom just a scribble.

“Little sneak,” Emma whispers, a sour taste in her mouth.

“I’m so sorry,” Ms. Powhatan says again. “I just assumed it was—when I’ve had notes before, they’ve always been from…”

“Yeah,” Emma says, handing the note back. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“They walked over here after school and got him at about three. As far as I know, they headed straight home.”

Emma turns on her heel, ignoring Mary Margaret calling after her.

She calls Tamara, who gives her the Chambers’ address. She drives the three blocks to a little grey house built between a pair of oak trees.

“Sheriff Swan,” Dr. Chambers says, her brow crinkling as she opens the door. “How can I help you?”

“Is Henry here?”

Dr. Chambers frowns. “They’re all down by the water. Did Henry forget something?”

“You could say that, yeah” Emma says, kicking the sidewalk with the toe of her boot.

Dr. Chambers frowns in comprehension. She follows Emma to her car without another word.

The sun is setting as they reach the beach. It’s…empty.

Emma is out of the car before she knows what she’s doing.

Blue and red lights flash against the sides of buildings. The smell of fish and gasoline fills her nose.

“Sheriff Swan?”

Emma’s eyes rake over the horizon. Her skin feels unnaturally warm.

Crowds of pale-faced people stumble through the street, blood trickling from shallow cuts.

“It looks like there’s smoke coming up from the woods there. Up by the border.”

The words reach Emma slowly, like there’s water in her ears (in her head).

A cracking noise, sharp pain in her leg, Regina disappearing in a cloud of smoke—
“I don’t think they’ve crossed the line yet. I can still feel them.”

Emma takes off running.

The ground feels almost tilted, like the world’s tipping away from her. She dodges a car in the road, her ears ringing with the blare of its horn.

She breaks through the treeline and tears down the path, tripping twice over fallen logs.

You’re too late, you’re too late, he’s already gone.

They’re gone.

But then the trees thin out into a clearing, and he’s there in front of her, face half-hidden by the smoke of a small fire, clutching an old leather-bound book to his chest.

He whips his head around to look at her. She hadn’t realized she’d been yelling his name.

She bounds across the clearing and puts out the fire with a wave of her hand before grabbing at his shoulders.

She can’t get her voice to work, just stares at his small face and his wide eyes and his sooty cheeks.

She barely registers the movement around her as Dr. Chambers appears behind them, taking her grandchildren by the hand and calling out something to Emma before all three disappear in a cloud of grey smoke.

And then they are alone.

Henry shuffles his feet, brittle leaves crunching under his muddy sneakers.

Emma finds her voice. “What were you thinking?”

Henry’s cheeks flush, but he just sets his jaw and says nothing.

Emma stands, runs a hand through her sweaty hair. “I just—I don’t—you don’t come home. You don’t leave a note. You don’t—Henry, what the hell. You don’t do that! You don’t get to do that! I can’t—”

“I had to try!” Henry says, looking up at her angrily.

“Try what?” Emma asks brokenly. She glances down at the book in his hands. After a small struggle, she takes it from him and reads the page he’s marked.

 Spells of Location

Her eyes sting. “Henry…”

He takes a step back from her, clenching his fists. “I had to, okay! You—you weren’t doing anything! Everybody forgot about her!”

Emma shakes her head, throat thick. “No—Henry, no—”

“Yes they did! Yes they did! She saved everyone but all anyone cares about is the new town! You forgot!”
Emma shakes her head again. Tears spill down her cheeks.

Henry, red-faced and crying now, snatches the book and runs back over to the dying fire, back over to where the town line shimmers like a ghost between the trees.

Emma scrambles after him and grabs his wrist. He squirms in her arms.

“Let go! It was going to work! It was going to work! Jace was helping me—she said—it was going to work! I was going to find her!”

“No, it wasn’t. Henry—”

“How do you know?” he screams, tearing away from her again.

Emma takes a ragged breath, looks up at the darkening sky. “Because…” She smiles painfully down at Henry. “Because I tried. I tried…so hard. I—Henry, I really did.” More tears run down her cheeks. “It doesn’t work. The magic won’t work like that. It doesn’t work over the line. And even if it did, price of the curse—”

“No! It was going to! It has to!”

Emma reaches out for him again. He dodges her. “Henry, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

He shakes his head, backing away. “No!”

“Henry!”

“I don’t believe you!” he yells, breaking into a run—this time towards the town.

Emma chases after him, back down the path, out of the woods, across the street.

Henry runs to the car, yanks open the door, and locks himself in, staring straight ahead as Emma finally reaches him and begins pounding on the window.

“Damn it! Henry! Open the door!”

His eyes narrow, but he doesn’t look at her.

Defeated, Emma slumps against the car and closes her eyes.

Then she pushes herself off again and walks toward the ocean.

She ends up at the edge of the water, her steps slowed by the shifting sand. Dropping to her hands and knees, she breathes in heaves that leave her ribs aching.


A wave swells over her fingertips, the foam leaving bubbles that pop gently on her skin.

She tips her head back to a dull sky and thinks of nothing.

She doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t care.

The sun sets in cool colors, mist settling on her cheeks. Her muscles grow stiff.

The lights come on over the harbor. Somewhere behind her, the clock in city call chimes seven.
In the dark, Emma walks back to the car, unlocks the door with a flick of her wrist, and drives them home.

The sniffling is coming from down the hall.

This time, Emma knows she hadn’t been asleep.

She switches on a lamp and swings herself silently out of bed, the hardwood cold against her feet.

The noises stop as she reaches Henry’s door. She pushes it open a crack.

Henry’s curled up in a ball, the blankets bunched around his knees. His eyes are squeezed shut, but Emma can see the wet streaks on his cheeks as the lantern light glides over them.

Quietly, she steps across the room and, after hesitating a second, sits on the far side of the bed, facing away from Henry.

His breathing is still choppy; the mattress shakes.

Emma closes her eyes, reaches for something to say. She feels hollowed-out and useless.

Without meaning to, she remembers Regina in the study back in Storybrooke—You’re not shit at this.

You’re not shit at being his mother.

She means to laugh, but it comes out as a sob instead.

Henry shifts behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Emma whispers, staring at the bands of moonlight across the floor.

The sniffling starts again. Channeling something she’s not sure she has, Emma twists around and lies down next to her son, the warmth of his small body seeping into her skin.

Henry turns over, dark eyes staring up into her face.

He sighs shakily, his jaw setting as if he’s just decided on something. “You miss her too, don’t you?” he asks, his voice croaky.

Emma’s chest squeezes. She swallows. Finally, she nods, her cheek rubbing against the pillow. “Yeah, kid,” she whispers. “I really do.”

(It kind of feels like breathing again to say it, to let herself think it.)

Henry looks away. “I thought—I thought maybe you didn’t care—maybe you were just mad at...everything...”

Emma’s shoulders tense.

“—but...I was thinking and...” Henry shrugs, his nose scrunching. “You get quiet.”

Emma frowns, confused.

“You get quiet,” Henry explains. “When you care about stuff...Mom gets loud and you get quiet.
And then sometimes the opposite, I guess. But you were quiet this time.”

There’s a sudden, painful warmth in Emma’s heart. Her breath catches.

Henry looks up at her again. “I don’t love her more… just different.” He squirms a little. “I thought you might think… I don’t, um, love you… or something—”

“Henry…”

“—and maybe that’s why you… why it’s hard.”

“What?”

Henry just shakes his head, shrugging. “But I do.” He crinkles his nose. “I do love you.”

Eyes stinging, Emma reaches clumsily around Henry’s back, pulling him close, her chin coming to rest on the top of his head.

“Me too, kid. Okay? Me too,” she whispers fiercely. The words burn a hot path up her throat.

They’re quiet after that. Emma watches the lantern birds swirling over their heads, feels Henry’s breathing even out, his ribs expanding under her arm.

*You’re not shit at this. You’re not shit at being his mother.*

In the morning, the sun rises in a clear sky for the first time in two months and Emma wakes up with the light in her eyes, not remembering having fallen asleep.

**

She wakes up in the backseat of a black Mercedes with the taste of soot on her tongue.

Dark trees stretch overhead. She presses her forehead into the leather seat, struggling to remember anything beyond her name, struggling to understand why her body feels strung out on adrenaline like she’d driven off the road—on a clear night in a perfectly intact vehicle.

Her thoughts fill with flashes of a little boy on a hospital bed, of an earthquake, of someone coughing up blood onto a dust-covered street.

Her mind slides from one image to another without purchase; she feels seasick.

She drives and drives and drives and lets her hair tangle in the wind that rattles through the open windows, breathes in cold air that rubs her throat raw.

She stops at motels and sleeps in rooms that smell of bleach and cigarettes and drinks coffee from paper cups that burn her hands.

At night she leaves the television on to drown out the shouts that echo through the thin walls. She wakes up with white houses and green eyes and small hands ringing in her mind and washes them out with cheap single-use shampoo in mildewed showers.

Once, she sees a little brown-eyed boy at a rest stop outside Des Moines and spends the next half-hour trying to catch her breath.
Once, she dreams about holding a heart in her bare hands and wakes up damp with sweat, the red glow of neon signs soaking in through the curtains, staining the white sheets.

“I was a doctor,” she says to a woman at a bar after two glasses of Merlot and a Long Island Iced Tea on Thanksgiving Day. It’s an answer, but it feels like a question; the words fit wrong in her mind, wrong against the images of blood and ribs and still-beating hearts.

“Was?”

She turns away; listens to the low buzz of music in the speakers; traces the drops of moisture on her glass like rain tracks on windows; thinks about driving and driving until she falls off the edge of the world.

A picture falls out of her wallet as she goes to pay.

“Cute,” the woman says. “How old?”

“Ten,” she says, finding the number on her tongue.

He’ll always be ten, she thinks, without knowing why.


Apples. An apple turnover.

[Poison? Food poisoning?]

But then her thoughts falter again, and it’s gone.

She’s heard of grief doing this to people: curling round and round your mind until everything’s choked out and all you can feel is a cold in your bones that never goes away.

[Everything feels like glass under her skin, and she’s afraid the wrong thought might slice her open. So she tries not to think at all.]


She goes to sleep with his name stuck between her heartbeats.

November turns to December. She passes a sign welcoming her to Idaho. She puts a hand in the pocket of her coat and finds a CD that must have been there the whole time.

Operation Patronus is written across the silvery surface in black marker. Child’s writing.

She pulls off the highway into the next town and checks into the first place she finds—a hotel called The Rosewood. The room smells like cedar and beeswax and there’s a butter mint on her pillow. She draws the curtains closed and shuts off the lights and fiddles with the DVD player until it opens. She takes the CD gingerly from its case and places it on the tray. Pushes it closed.

There’s a moment of stillness, of whirring machines and blank screens.
The television lights up.

Her heart stops. And then it starts again, loud and strong in her ears. Her chest expands, full and deep, for the first time in what feels like years. She feels tears warm on her cheeks.

A little boy appears on the screen, hair wet, dressed in blue pajamas. He smiles.

“Hi Mom,” he says, whispering, looking over his shoulder at a closed door as if hoping not to be caught out of bed.

She has to cover her mouth with her hand to keep from crying out.

“I was cleaning the study…and I found these.” He raises up a shoebox of camcorder tapes. “And I thought maybe...maybe you might want to see some of them again.” He sighs. “Um...so I’m putting them on a CD for you. I got a converter cord from Audrey, when I told you guys I was going to the library. And I’m kind of hoping you won’t ground me because I only didn’t tell you because it was supposed to be a surprise.” He spins a little on his chair. “Anyway, I hope you like it.” He bites his lip and stares straight into the camera. “I love you, Momma.”

She watches, transfixed and breathless and aching, as her baby grows up in front of her—first words and first steps and sticky fingers and face painted for Halloween, tying shoes and making cookies with clumsy hands and standing in front of a classroom door with a spelling bee certificate. He’s two and six and nine and she almost forgets he won’t grow older, almost forgets he won’t step out of the pictures and into her arms when the screen goes dark.

She sleeps with the CD under her pillow and wakes up with beech trees and oceans and kitchen tables and the name Fable Creek in her mind. She doesn’t wash them out.

Fable Creek. Fable Creek. Fable Creek.

She drives to a gas station and buys a map.

Chapter End Notes

Well, real life has been at it again. Sorry for the wait! Unfortunately I think it will probably be a while before the next chapter as well, what with school starting up again next month.

Anyway, thanks as always for reading!
There’s steam coming up from the water, the air so thick the deep end of the pool is just a blur.

“Marco!” Jace shouts. It echoes off the green tile walls, sharp and hollow.

Henry ducks behind the metal bars of the ladder and holds his breath.

“Polo!” Amauri yells, before slipping quickly under the water.

Jace frowns, her eyes squinted closed. “Henry, you didn’t say ‘polo.’ That’s cheating!”

“Polo!” Henry says, stifling a giggle as Amauri pops up next to him.

“Marco!”

“Polo!”

“Marco—ow!” Jace yelps, as she knocks an elbow into the side of the pool.

While she’s distracted, Henry and Amauri take deep breaths and duck below the surface, swimming to the deep end. Henry’s lungs burn, and when he comes up for breath just under the diving board his eyes sting from the chlorine.

Amauri grins at him, blue-green light from the underwater lamps flickering across his face.

Jace is still in the shallow end, thrashing her arms out in front of her as she searches the stairs that lead down into the water.

Then Dr. Chambers’ phone goes off.

Henry watches as she picks it up and talks into it. Her voice is murky and far away, blurred like the sky outside the foggy windows.

After a minute, she turns and calls, “Henry, it’s Emma for you!”

Henry feels a little leap in his heart.

“Pause! Pause!” Jace shouts, opening her eyes.

Henry pulls himself out of the water by his elbows and pads across the filmy concrete to the little white table where Dr. Chambers is sitting. She smiles at him while he pulls his towel from under the pile of snacks they’d gotten from the vending machine in the hotel lobby. A bag of barbeque chips falls onto an empty chair.

He wraps the towel around his shoulders, shivering a little, and dries his hands before taking the phone from Dr. Chambers.

“Hello?” he says.

“Hey, kid.”
Emma’s voice is too loud in his ear, and he has to hold the phone away from his head a little.

“Hi Emma.”

“Hey,” she says again. “So…what have you been up to? Are you having a good time?”

“Yeah. We’re swimming right now. And after we’re going to get pizza and watch movies until the fireworks start.”

“Cool.”

“Yeah.”

Henry’s nose starts to drip. He wipes it with the edge of the towel and sniffs.

He can hear Emma breathing over the phone, like she’d forgotten what to say next.

He thinks about dinners in the big empty house, and how talking to her across the table, across plates of frozen lasagna, is like trying listen to a radio when the signal goes all staticky—how the words feel stretched over a long distance, thin and breakable.

It doesn’t feel that much different from the way they’re talking now, even though this time he really is a long distance away—all the way in Portland.

“We went to the science museum today,” he says, after a moment.

“Yeah?”

“Mmhmm. It was really cool. They had a planetarium.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and a bunch of labs where you could do experiments, and this thing where you shoot water rockets, and me and Jace played connect four with robot arms.”

“That sounds awesome, kid.”

He can hear the smile in her voice. It’s tired, like usual, but it’s there.

“It was,” he says, and means it. “It was really awesome.”

“That’s great, Henry.”

He walks along the windows that look out into the street, weaving in between the empty tables. He can feel the cold of the outside brushing up against his skin, coming in through the glass.

“So, what are you doing tonight?” he asks.

“I’m on duty.”

“You’re not going to watch the fireworks or anything?”

“We’ll see. David’s out on patrol, so I’m in the office.”

“You could see from the window, maybe.”

“Maybe.”
“Or you could go on the roof.”

“Sure. Listen—Henry, don’t worry about me. You’re having fun, right?”

“Right,” Henry says, soft, like his voice doesn’t want to make the word.

“So: that’s good. Don’t worry about me.”

And Henry remembers how she’d been when Dr. Chambers had called to invite him to go to Portland with them for New Year’s.

Great—that sounds great, she’d said, talking into the phone through a smile. He’d love that.

And he’d wanted to go—Jace and Amauri had been talking about it for weeks—but Emma hadn’t even asked him before she said yes.

He’s not sure what that means.

Jace screams from the pool, and Henry turns to see Amauri trying to dunk her.

“Sounds like you have to go,” Emma says.

Henry wants to say no. He wants to say tell me about your day or something like that, something to keep her talking to him. He suddenly has the strangest feeling that she’ll disappear as soon as they hang up the phone.

But as he’s opening his mouth, she says, “Goodnight, kid.”

“Goodnight,” he says, automatically, and then the connection breaks and he’s just listening to air.

He wonders if it will always be like this—like talking across miles and empty tables, trying to reach each other over the space his mom had left.

**

Emma stares out the darkening window into the town square.

The Fable Creek sheriff’s station is on the second floor, and from that height she can see the crowds beginning to gather for the night—people lining up for tickets and popcorn and cotton candy, paper lanterns swinging in the wind, children sitting on shoulders as they watch the band play on the stage they’d set up at one end of the green. There looks to be close to two hundred people there already, even though it’s only eight o’clock, and the fireworks won’t be for another four hours.

Emma sighs and returns to her desk, picking at the meatloaf in the Tupperware Mary Margaret had brought earlier. It’s cold now. She takes the container, walks over to the microwave, and shoves it in, more for something to do than because she’s actually hungry.

The machine whirrs, the glass turntable rattling a little as it spins.

Emma thinks about the piles of paperwork sitting on her desk, about the laundry she’d left in the washer, about how excited Henry had sounded when he’d told her about the science museum—and she thinks maybe she did something right, sending him away from her, from this town, so he
could be happy, even if it was only for three days.

She does not think about how quiet the house is without him, how, when she’d eaten dinner alone the first night, she’d felt for a moment like she could have dreamed him up, like she could close her eyes and be back in Boston in an empty apartment, wishing.

The microwave beeps. The container is hot in her hands. She drops it onto the desk, her fingers burning, and it slips off the edge and onto the floor.

“Shit!”

She reaches down to get it, the hot grease coming off onto her skin.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

She grabs a paper towel from the counter and is doing a haphazard job of scraping meatloaf off the floor when the radio crackles.

“Emma?”

She scrambles to pick it up, wiping her hands hastily on her pants. “David?”

“Hey, listen, there’s been an accident out near the town line. A car ran off the road and hit a tree. Suspected DUI. We’re trying to locate the driver. Witnesses are saying they saw someone walk off in the direction of the town square. Could you go and check it out? I’m going to stay here for a bit and help the guys secure the scene.”

“Yeah. Sure,” Emma says, opening the top drawer of her desk and clipping her gun and badge to her belt. “Description?”

“Not sure.” The radio clicks. “Someone wearing a long coat, I guess, but that could be anybody at this time of year.”

Emma sighs. It’s about to be a long-ass night. “Ok. I’ll let you know.”

She shrugs on her jacket, sets the call line to forward to her cell, and takes one last look around the station before switching off the lights and locking the door behind her.

The cold air stings her nose as she steps outside.

She pauses on the steps of the town hall to put her mittens on and watches the crowds across the street. She spots Tiana and her kids in line for popcorn, and Granny and Ruby in a booth selling hot drinks. The band onstage is in between sets, the mic ringing with feedback as they move amps and folding chairs.

She crosses the road to the square, nodding hello to the people who wave at her. Nick and Ava Tillman run by with cotton candy on paper sticks, nearly crashing into one of the poles holding the string lights overhead.

“Watch it!” she calls after them, but they don’t turn around.

Rolling her eyes, she continues walking the perimeter of the crowd, passing under a maple tree where at least two sets of teenagers are twisted up in each other. They’re not technically doing anything illegal, but Emma still enjoys the startled looks in their eyes when she shines her flashlight in their direction and asks “Hey, what’s kicking?”
Picking up their blankets and what may or may not be Thermoses of coffee, the teenagers scatter, grumbling as they go.

The band starts playing again, the crowd cheering and singing along to the opening bars of *Atlantic City*.

Emma weaves through the loose edges of the crowd, keeping her elbows tucked in to avoid spilling beers, scanning faces to see if there’s anyone out of place.

“Emma!” Ruby calls from behind her booth. “Come get a hot chocolate! It’s on us!”

“Later!” Emma calls back.

Ruby gives her a thumbs-up and goes back to operating the espresso machine, the scream of the steamer somehow rising above the rest of the noise.

“Yeah—come on—sing along!” a band member yells into the microphone.

*Well I got a job and tried to*

*Put my money away*

*But I got debts that no honest man can pay*

Emma reaches the front of the crowd and turns to double back. Somebody knocks into her shoulder.

“Sorry—sorry,” the man grumbles, gripping onto his bag of popcorn as he walks on.

Emma sighs and straightens her jacket.

Then she looks up and sees…someone…standing in the dark at the edge of the green.

It can’t be.

Her heart picking up, she pushes past a group of women singing out of tune.

*Well now everything dies, baby that’s a fact*

*But maybe everything that dies, someday comes back*

“Hey, look where you’re going, lady—”

Emma trips over a tangle of electric cords running into the cotton candy booth and loses sight of the figure as the food line knots around her. She glances around, breathless.

“Excuse me, Sheriff Swan—hey, excuse me—”

*Put your makeup on, fix your hair up pretty*

*And meet me tonight in Atlantic City*

“Excuse me. Are you in line?”

Emma blinks down at the old woman in front of her. “No—sorry.”

She pushes forward again, eyes darting across the square.
There’s a sound of something breaking.

And she looks up…and sees her.

Emma closes her eyes, hard, and opens them again, a strange ringing in her ears.

But Regina is still there, standing under a lamp post across the street, a cardboard box kicked over at her feet, empty glass bottles rolling out into the road.

Regina is still there.

Regina is there, standing in the pool of light under a streetlamp, staring at Emma.

Emma shoves through the crowd, sprints to the edge of the green—and then stands at the side of the road, frozen.

Regina hasn’t moved. She’s still looking at Emma, her eyes wide, little puffs of air clouding in front of her face as she breathes. There’s a trickle of blood oozing from a cut over her eye, and a shard of glass stuck in the folds of her scarf.

It was her. It was her, in the car, Emma thinks, in the very back of her mind, in the very small stretch of thought still devoted to logic.

It’s Regina, standing there.

Behind her, string lights twinkle in the front window of Flora’s dress shop, flicking red—green—gold across the flurries of snow that fly up from the drifts on the sidewalk as the wind blows. Down the street, the doors of the Mad Hatter fly open, laughter spilling out into the night and—

Emma is so afraid.

So, so afraid she’ll wake up. She’ll wake up, again, alone in an empty house and—

“Emma.”

It’s her voice.

Emma runs.

She barely has time to register the shock on Regina’s face before their bodies collide. Emma’s arms wrap around Regina’s shoulders, her mittens gripping at the wool of Regina’s coat.

Emma can feel the stutter of Regina’s breath under her hands, the stiffness of her muscles, the beat of her heart against her own.

She’s real.

It’s all Emma can think.

She’s real. She’s real. She’s real.

She lets herself breathe for a moment—closes her eyes and just breathes. There are tears on her cheeks, burning warm against her skin.

And then—just as Emma’s preparing to make herself to let go, to make herself act calm and rational and unaffected, to face Regina’s indifference, to say something like welcome back or sorry for accosting you in the street—Regina’s arms move, her hands coming up slowly to press
against Emma’s shoulder blades.

Emma laughs, a wet, strangled sound, and shuts her eyes tighter.

When they let go, she looks at Regina—at Regina—at the dark of her eyes and at the tears tracing their way down her jaw, and she has to grip Regina’s elbows to keep from falling.

And she means to say something like it’s good to see you or thanks for saving the town, but what she says is—

“How?” Emma shakes her head, swallows. “How are you here?”

And suddenly it’s important—it’s the most important thing: to understand how this could really be happening. To know for sure—

“Emma,” Regina whispers, her gaze sweeping over Emma’s face, her hands gripping Emma’s elbows in return. “…Where are we?”

It takes Emma a moment to register the words, she’s so distracted by the fact that it’s her voice. It’s Regina. Regina’s here.

She shakes her head, sniffing. “We’re—we’re in the new town.”

Regina looks at her blankly.

“Do you remember?” Emma asks, fear jolting through her. “You—if you’re here you have to remember. Right?”

“The curse was falling apart,” Regina says, a distant look in her eyes. “…I tried to rewrite the magic.”

“You did.” Emma laughs, then, because—“Yeah.” She looks over her shoulder, at the crowd of people, at the band playing, at the lights overhead. “You did it.”

Regina follows her gaze. “I—”

Emma smiles wide, her eyes stinging. “You did it.”

“It worked.” There’s open wonder on Regina’s face. She looks back at Emma. “It worked. You’re—” Her grip tightens on Emma’s arms, as if to make sure she’s really there. Then she shakes her head. “Where’s Henry?”

Emma startles. “Henry! Shit, Henry. He’s fine—he’s in Portland,” she says, wrenching off a mitten, and digging frantically for her phone, feeling surreal and shaky. “He’s in Portland for New Year’s.”

She dials the number and stumbles through a conversation in which Dr. Chambers thankfully only asks the most necessary questions.

“He’s coming,” she says, hanging up the phone and turning back to face Regina. “She says it’ll probably be at least three hours.”

But Regina’s not looking at her. Instead, she’s reaching into her pocket with a strange expression on her face. Slowly, she pulls out something bright and golden.

She stares down at it. “It was him,” she says, softly.
“Who?”

Regina shakes her head. “I must have had this in my pocket that day,” she whispers. “It must have held onto everything for me. And then, when I crossed the town line...it gave it all back. There was this sudden light and I couldn’t...I crashed the car. And I...I remember.” She blinks. “I remember.”

She has a strange look on her face: bewilderment, and something else Emma can’t place. It looks too bright to be pain.

Frowning, Emma steps closer. “Regina, what...?”

Wordlessly, Regina holds out her hand, and Emma can see the glowing thing is a CD, *Operation Patronus* written across it in Henry’s handwriting. But the surface isn’t the usual iridescent silver. Instead, it glows with the same light she’d seen once in Gold’s shop, flickering with shapes and colors that sharpen into images—of Henry’s face, of the house on Mifflin Street, of a yellow bug parked outside Granny’s.

Emma takes in a breath. She looks at Regina. “You said—that day in the shop—you said, ‘any round, reflective surface...’” She reaches for the CD, golden light swimming over her fingers. “It’s...?”

Regina nods, her throat working. “It’s a dreamcatcher.”

And Emma watches Regina, watches the way her whole body seems to fall toward this thing Henry’s given her.

And the thing she feels isn’t sadness...not really.

Her jaw sets. “Come on. We’ll meet them halfway.”

Regina blinks, her eyes liquid in the dark. “What?”

“Henry,” she says, nodding toward the road. “We’re going to go to Henry.”

**

Regina clasps her hands together in her lap.

They’re parked outside a gas station in Longview, waiting.

Waiting.

Her mind stirs with thoughts that feel half hers, liquid and over-bright and painful.

Outside, she watches a man in a knit hat smoke a cigarette under the sheet of harsh white light falling from the awning above the gas pumps.

Even with the doors closed, the air smells of gasoline and smoke.

She bites her lip, watches the road, jumps at every pair of headlights that turn off the highway.

She feels Emma’s eyes on her.
She hasn’t had time to miss her—her mind tells her she’d seen her just yesterday, asleep at the coffee table in Regina’s study, chasing after Henry in the bug, lying on the street as the world fell apart. It’s only been a day.

She hasn’t had time to miss her.

“It’ll be fine,” Emma says, her voice rough from the silence they’ve kept the whole way here.

Regina’s mouth twists. “You don’t know that.”

“Yeah I—”

“You don’t know that,” she snaps. She crosses her arms over her chest, angles her body toward the door. “I nearly killed everyone. Again.”

“Regina…you saved everyone.”

Regina scoffs. “Like that matters, after…everything.”

Emma is silent again.

Regina feels odd and overexposed and half-aware, her skin raw and tight like she’d been asleep in the middle of the afternoon and then startled awake by the sunset.

It’s only been a day.

(It’s been three months. Three months.)

“He missed you. He missed you…so much.”

Regina bites the inside of her cheek.

Emma sighs and reaches for the radio dial.

“…more minutes in our hour of commercial-free listening, so don’t go anywhere. Up next: Simple Minds with Don’t You (Forget About Me)…”

Abruptly, Emma switches the channel.

“…have Jupiter, The Bringer of Jollity, the fourth movement from Gustav Holst’s seven-movement suite The Planets, played by The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra—Sir Charles Mackerras conducting…”

Regina raises her eyebrows, but says nothing.

“Hey. That’s them.” Emma nods toward the far entrance to the gas station, where an old station wagon is pulling up next to the air compressor machine.

Regina’s heart skips, her stomach knotting as she fumbles with the door handle.

She steps out into the frigid night, her heels making hollow sounds against the concrete. She waits, her bones locking together.

The wagon’s headlights shut off.

The back door opens—and it’s Henry. Henry. Henry, tumbling out of the car, coat falling off his
shoulders, running towards her.

She steps forward, once, twice, her heart beating so hard she can taste it.

“Mom!” Henry shrieks.

Regina gasps, and then Henry’s half-falling into her arms, knocking the air out of her lungs.

“Mom!”

Trembling, Regina kneels and takes Henry’s tear-stained face in her hands. “Henry…”

_He’s alive. He’s alive._

Henry holds her gaze for a moment, wide-eyed and breathing hard. Then his face crumples and he throws himself at her, crying.

Regina holds him tight; her eyes shut and she breathes him in, presses her temple to his soft hair.

“You found us,” he says, pulling away after a while so he can see her face. He hiccups. One of his hands winds itself into the collar of her coat. “How did you find us? Mary Margaret said—she said you were never coming back!”

Regina looks at him, looks and looks, and wonders—always wonders—how it is possible to love someone this much.

“It was you,” she says. She fishes in her still-warm pocket and pulls out the CD. It’s glowing, hot against her palm. Blurred images swirl on the bright surface, shifting like refracted light.

“That’s my CD!” Henry says, pulling her hand toward him. He looks at her. “You watched it?” he asks, shyly.

Regina smiles, eyes warm and wet. “I did.”

Henry smiles back, radiant, before crinkling his nose in confusion. “But…how did it help you find us? It was just old videos. Why is it glowing like that?”

“It’s a dreamcatcher,” she whispers, watching the light flicker across his face, her heart breaking open at her boy. Her beautiful boy.

“But I didn’t cast any spells on it,” Henry whispers back, like he thinks this small thing could make everything fall apart.

Regina shakes her head at him. “That kind of magic doesn’t need spells. It’s about—it’s about what you want.” She shakes her head again, swallowing against tears. “What you gave me was enough, Henry,” she says, her voice breaking.

_It was always enough._

Henry is still looking at her like he doesn’t understand.

She cups his chin, runs her thumb over his cheek. “When you gave me the CD, you wanted me to remember. And I did. And even when I didn’t, I remembered you. I always remembered you, all the time, even when I didn’t know what it meant.”

Henry sniffs, tears slipping down his face into Regina’s fingers.
“But—you were in a land without magic.”

“I didn’t need it. You were my magic, Henry,” she says thickly. “You know—I was driving this way the whole time? You were my magic.”

Henry hugs her again, rough and sudden.

It takes her a moment to realize he’s shivering.

“Henry,” she says, pulling him back from her and looking at him properly, taking in his flannel pajamas and bare feet. “You’re freezing.”

Without thinking, she tugs him into her arms and stands. He’s getting too big for her, her baby; his feet dangle past her knees. She doesn’t care, just holds him tight, the cold tip of his nose pressing into her neck, his legs twisting around her waist.

Behind her, Emma is having a conversation with an older woman, and looking over at them with too-bright eyes.

Regina doesn’t say a word, just bundles Henry into the back seat of the bug and climbs in after him. It’s a tight fit, and Henry is all elbows and knees against her, and she closes her eyes and breathes and breathes and breathes.

Oceans of cars stream by the window.

Regina blinks awake, startling for a moment before she remembers.

Henry is bunched up against her side, asleep with his body draped across the bench seat. She smooths a hand over his soft hair.

Slowly, Regina straightens, rubbing at the side of her face where it had been pressed against the glass.

The car is stopped, the driver’s seat empty, and she panics briefly before spotting Emma standing out by the guardrail, her back to them, hair whipping around in the wind, dyed red in the taillights.

After another glance down at Henry, Regina carefully extricates herself from the car, climbing over the folded front seat and out into the cold air.

She walks up next to Emma. They’re parked at an overlook, coin-operated binoculars peering down into the valley that opens up below, the scattered lights like the reflection of stars in a lake.

Emma says nothing, makes no move to acknowledge Regina’s presence.

Her face is set, hard and unreadable.

“Are you alright?”

Emma laughs humorlessly.

Regina steps back, stung.

She’d thought…

But of course, nothing has changed. Of course, the world breaks and weaves back together, and
even then—
“It should have been me,” Emma says, her words almost lost on the wind.

“What?” Regina is angry now.

Emma turns toward her. “It should have been me. It should have been me, out there. And you here, with him.”

Regina clenches her fists. “Go to hell.”

“Regina, I didn’t mean it like—”

“What, you think you’re the only one capable of making that kind of sacrifice? You can’t stand being shown up by the Evil Queen, Savior? Never mind that you’d have no idea how to even begin to work that kind of magic—”

“I know!” Emma yells, her eyes wild and dark and desperate. “I know—you don’t have to tell me. I know I don’t—I know I can’t—”

Regina blinks. “What are you talking about?”

“Everyone around me leaves! It’s like I’m—Everyone around me dies! And I can’t save them! I’m the Savior and I can’t—”

Regina stares.

“You—you rewrote the foundations of the entire town! You saved everyone. You saved me. And I did nothing while you…” Emma blinks back tears, frowning. “And then you disappeared! And I couldn’t…” She sighs, deep and ragged. “It’s down to our eleven-year-old kid that you’re even here.”

Regina steps forward.

Emma shakes her head. “He shouldn’t have to deal with that. I should’ve—” She looks up. “He needs you. He needs you, not me.”

She turns away again, her arms folded across her chest.

And Regina doesn’t know where to begin.

The idea that Emma could even think this way is so fundamentally wrong—

“Don’t be stupid,” she says, which is not a good beginning. But it gets Emma looking at her again.

“You did nothing.’ How can you say—” Regina tilts her head backwards, irritated. She has no idea how to do this. She is terrible at reassurances, terrible at giving credit where it’s due. But it is due. “Emma,” she says, looking across at her. “We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you.”

Emma frowns.

“You’re just like your parents,” Regina scoffs. “Why do you think everything has to come down to swinging swords around and sweeping in with the cavalry at the last moment to save the day?” She rolls her eyes. “You’re the Savior. It’s not what you do. It’s who you are. It’s just you.”

Emma’s breath hitches.
“You were the one who badgered me about light magic. I rewrote the curse, but you were the one who made me believe it was possible.” She throws up her hands. “You were the one who made it possible.

“When you grabbed my hand in the sheriff’s station…You were right. I had light magic, but I had no idea how to access it. Until your magic connected with mine and…showed it a way out, I suppose. You did it again that morning, when everything was falling apart, and I finally—”

She bites her lip and looks away. She shakes her head. “Do you remember what you said to me?”

Emma just looks at her.

“You said, try again.” Regina smiles through sudden tears. “And so I did. I had to—you were spitting blood everywhere because you had just saved our son.”

Emma shakes her head like she’s going to deny it. “But…I couldn’t—”

And it hurts, sometimes, the way Emma and Henry are so alike.

“Emma…” She steps forward and reaches for Emma’s hand, clasping it in hers.

Then she looks Emma in the eyes and reaches.

A bright light surges through the air, white and blinding.

Regina feels it in her heart, in her bones, like a tide in her blood—ageless and breathless and warm. It’s familiar as the heartbeat in her ears, but strung through with something foreign, like two rivers meeting: their magic—hers and Emma’s—working together.

The light fades, and the first thing she sees is Emma, crying.

“You gave me my magic…” Regina whispers.

She thinks of that night, on the floor of her bedroom after Emma’s dream. You had a baby. And I cast a curse. And Emma’s smile in the dark. And then you raised the baby. And I broke the curse.

So I guess we’re even.

“You gave me my magic,” Regina says again. “And I rewrote the spells.” She presses her lips together in a smile, tears stinging her eyes. “You saved Henry. And he brought me home.”

And Emma is looking at her—looking and looking like she doesn’t know how to understand, but desperately wants to.

Regina shrugs. “So I guess we’re even.”

Emma blinks. And then she laughs—laughs and cries and finally smiles, wide and free, the kind of smile that makes her nose crinkle and her shoulders come up around her ears.

And, in all of that, she doesn’t let go of Regina’s hand, not once.

“Mom?”

Regina turns around.

Henry is walking toward them from the car, stepping gingerly over the gravel at the side of the
“Henry! Where are your shoes?” She rushes over to him and puts her hands on his shoulders to still him. She scans the ground for sharp objects.

“I thought I dreamed you,” he says, his eyes searching her face. He has to raise his voice a little to be heard over the traffic.

“I’m here,” she says, swallowing hard.

He grips onto her like he thinks a current will come and drag him away. “Sometimes the dreams feel real like this.”

Regina doesn’t know what to say.

Suddenly there’s a faint popping noise, and Regina looks back to see fireworks bursting over the valley.

“It’s midnight,” Henry says. He makes to walk closer to the overlook, to Emma, who’s been watching them.

“Shoes!” Regina interjects.

Henry looks regretfully back at the car for a moment, as if he’s afraid to let go, even for a moment.


Henry grins and climbs on her back.

“Oof—jeez you weigh a ton.”

“Emma…”

“I’ve got him, Regina,” Emma says with a small smile.

They gather at the edge of the railing, huddled close against the wind. Henry reaches around Emma’s shoulder, grasping at Regina’s sleeve. It takes her a moment to realize he’s reaching for her hand.

Slowly, she holds it out to him. He takes it, gripping hard.

Above them, the sky explodes with color, blue and red bursting against the stars, and then against the backs of Regina’s eyes when she shuts them. The show is far enough away that the noise is quiet—like a car driving over a gravel road.

“You did get to see fireworks, Emma.” Henry says, the words muffled in Emma’s hair. His knee digs into Regina’s side, and Emma’s hand brushes Regina’s coat when she adjusts her grip on him.

“Yeah, kid,” Emma says, like she means something more by it than simple agreement. “I did.”

“I’m not dreaming, right?”

“I hope not. But if you are, I am too.”

“Can we stay here, then?” He yawns. “Can we just make a deal not to wake up?”
Emma breathes deeply. “It’s a deal.”

Regina opens her eyes again. She watches green and gold flash in Emma’s hair, against Henry’s cheeks.

They have their own separate world together, she thinks. They are their own separate people to each other.

She waits to feel that terrible, searing, fear—that Henry could want something from someone who wasn’t her. That she isn’t enough for him.

But instead, she looks down at her hand where it’s intertwined with Henry’s, and at Henry’s other hand, wrapped around Emma’s shoulder. At the way that Emma’s holding him, and Henry’s holding her, and the way that Emma’s holding Henry for her, so he wouldn’t have to leave her for a second.

Is this what it means? Is this what it means that he belongs to both of them?

There are so many strings—tangled bloodlines and prophecies and fate and magic—so many strings that tie them together.

They were meant to be her undoing: this boy and his mother.

“Momma?” Henry says, his voice sleep-drunk.

Regina’s heart beats and beats and beats. “Yes, baby?”

“We’re going to stay with you, okay?”

Her throat works. She can’t speak.

“Regina?” Emma frowns at her, eyes soft with concern. Henry’s watching her too, his cheek pressed into Emma’s shoulder.

Fireworks burst overhead, white this time and brighter than before.

Regina looks between them and they’re so alike, the way they look at her. She doesn’t know how to understand it, but she feels the picture of it burying itself somewhere behind her lungs.

She imagines the strings between them, burning golden like the light from the dreamcatcher, knotting them inescapably together.

And she finds, in this moment, that she doesn’t mind them at all.

She nods, smiling through tears.

“Yes,” she says. "Okay."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again for the incredibly long wait. Thanks for hanging in there!
This is the last proper chapter--only an epilogue to go, which I should hopefully be able to finish in a much timelier fashion...
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!