The heroes have returned from the Underworld with Hook in tow. Things are finally starting to settle into some semblance of normalcy, until a King crosses realms & universes to reunite with his queen. Which the heroes would have bought a round for. If the queen wasn't Emma.
Emma snuck a glance at Killian through the curling steam of her cocoa. “Careful, love. That gaze there might just catch flame and burn a hole through my dashing face. And that, truly, would be the highest of crimes.”

Busted. “I wasn’t—“

“You were.” He said mildly, putting down his book to secure her gaze head-on. She huffed an agitated sigh. “What’s on your mind, darling?”

She fidgeted in their booth, a slow blush swathing her face to her neck. “I can’t help it, alright? It’s like—it’s like Orpheus.”

“The Greek lad?” Of all the relatively obscure troves of knowledge to be found in her world, Emma wasn’t surprised Killian had gravitated toward the realms of myth and miracles. “It’s just—hard to keep myself from making sure you’re…really here.”

It had been a couple of months since the heroes’ rally into the Underworld, their rescue mission to save Hook. And she still couldn’t shake the feeling that if she let him out of her sight, he’d be taken from her again, this time for good. She’d mustered the resolve—somehow—to not look at him on the ferry back, finding courage in the constant grip of their interlocked fingers. Hades never explicitly said there was that particular caveat to allowing Killian’s departure from his kingdom, but it was exactly the type of fuckery she knew he’d delight in.

“Swan.” He said softly, after a beat. Things had been—not tense, but tentative between them, since they got back. Between the Underworld and the dark side, there were a lot of things to be hashed out between them. Add in the confusion of literally becoming halves of a whole, shared heart, and things were—unsteady, despite their best efforts.

“I know it’s silly, okay? I mean, I know you’re here for good. It just seems—too normal, too nice for you to be here reading your Harlequin romances and sipping spiked cocoa on a Sunday afternoon.” She stopped. “We don’t get normal. Or nice.”

“It is not a Harlequin romance, thank you. It is a gripping tale of finding true love in the midst of the sea.” He made a point of returning to his well-worn novel.

She rolled her eyes. “Honestly, I wish I could say you were into pirate smut and leave it at that. But the truth is you’re reading it for the setting and not the scenario, aren’t you?” She shook her head. “Guess I should be grateful I snagged you before you got down on one knee and proposed to the fucking ocean.”

“What’s that about getting down on knees, love?” He quirked an eyebrow, only slightly glancing up from the text. She knew he knew what that did to the blue of his eyes through his lashes. The
bastard.

But she couldn’t help but smirk. It was moments like these that made her believe they could shake their ghosts and head to the light that the house he’d picked out represented.

“Odette?” She was startled by a breathy voice way too close to be casual.

Emma looked up at the tall man leaning over her, so close she felt way too intimate with the intricate pattern of his brocaded vest.

“Not slightly.” She furrowed her brow.

“It worked. It really, really worked.” He said. The reverence he was scouring her features with was really starting to do unsettling things to her spine.

“Oh. I think you’re very, very confused. No offense but, did you happen to hit your head really hard in the last few hours?” She was extremely tempted to lift her hand and ask ‘how many fingers am I holding up?’

“I’ve come so far to find you.” Oh my god, was he tearing up? Emma looked around in panic. His brow crinkled painfully at her silence.

“I thought for sure—no matter the time, space…” He shook his head. “I thought the instant we finally met—you’d recognize your True Love.”

Emma hardly took notice as her mug slipped from her fingers and went crashing to the floor, breaking into burning shrapnel.

When the scorching liquid hit her bare ankles, she recoiled. Her eyes never left his.

“Fuck.”
Immediately, Killian went to Emma’s aid, proffering her a fistful of napkins.

“You alright then, love?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She brushed him off.

“’Love?’” The stranger echoed incredulously. “Who exactly are you?”

“Killian Jones.” His expression was schooled to neutral. “You might know me better as Captain Hook. Most relevantly, you should know me to be Emma’s paramour.”

Emma shot him a mixed look as the man fought to regain composure.

“I knew…I knew things would be—different—here, the sorcerer warned me as much, but I never imagined you could take up with one such as he in any version of reality.”

“Watch yourself, mate.” There was no ghost of Hook’s former ruthless self present, but the quiet warning was more than enough. “Now are you going to insist upon keeping us at a disadvantage, or shall we be enlightened as to who you are and who you mistake Swan to be?”

“Swan?” Emma was jarred by the man’s sudden grin. The expression was so quick and bright and genuine, it got to her. “Now that’s a lovely bit of irony. I’m King Siegfried. Though I’m more renowned as the Hunter of the Wiled Marshlands.” He gauged Emma’s reaction, face falling at her lack of recognition.

“The Wiled Marshlands?” Killian repeated. “I’ve heard of you, then. But I know you to be a prince, barely out of the royal cradle.”

“I’m not even late to this party I haven’t even arrived I don’t even know this party exists.” Emma said.

“It’s a neighbouring land to the Enchanted Forest.” Killian explained with a flickering glance.

“Yes.” The man said eagerly, leaning on the table. “One with a longstanding alliance with the rulers of the Forest—your parents—ah, Emma.” He tripped over the foreign name. “Prince Charming and Snow White.”

“You know my parents?” Emma asked skeptically.

“Quite intimately, yes.”

“They’ve never mentioned you. How do I fit into this, then? I don’t have any real ties to that land. I’ve never spent time there, aside from a few misadventures.”

“Where I’m from, you are inextricable from the realm.”

“I don’t understand. I’m only—there’s only one me. And I’ve always been here.” Emma stressed.

“Yes. Only one you, at once unfortunately, and miraculously for me. Which brings me to my point, though I regret my earlier haste—I’d imagined a much different way of broaching the subject. I’m not from the Wiled Marshlands your—companion—is familiar with. I’ve come from an alternate reality—the reality you were meant to fulfill should the Evil Queen’s
curse not have been devised, should your role as Saviour been foregone.”

“What are you saying?” Killian interjected.

“I’ve crossed over from the world you were meant to be a part of, Emma. The world in which you are my queen.”

Emma looked at the man for several seconds, jaw popped open. Then she huffed out a laugh.

“No. No, you’re kidding. Did Regina put you up to this?” She shook her head. “I’ve been a sport for the existence of magic, the existence of multiple realms, I’ve even done my time as Marty McFly, ok? Do you know how much of a mindfuck time travel is? A big one. But multiple—multiple universes? I’m—I’m out.” Suddenly her voice dropped into silence, an alarmingly distant look on her face. She rose and both men leaned forward, caught in her orbit.

She moved passed the stranger, patting him weakly on the shoulder. “Good one, okay? Tell Regina it was a good one.”

“Swan.” Killian said emphatically as she began to stride away.

“Odette—ah, Emma!” Siegfried called out.

But Emma didn’t hear them, not really, not through the filter of how hyperaware she’d become of the diner, the clatter of dishes, melting pot of voices, low hum of appliances. The bell above the door cut through her as she crossed the threshold.

She didn’t know where she was going, just that she needed to be gone.
She’d wanted to escape to somewhere that felt as wild as her, but somehow she’d ended up on the other side of a cup of cocoa from her parents. She breathed in the heavy scent of steam and cinnamon and chocolate, a triple threat balm to her frayed nerves. At least she’d likely get through this cup without shards of pottery and shocking revelations.

“So is that even remotely possible?” Emma asked finally. “Another world? But like…the same people? An alternate world?”

David and Mary Margaret exchanged a lengthy glance.

“Well…” He began, before dropping off into thoughtful silence.

“I’ve never heard of anything like it.” Her mother shook her head. “Shifting reality to a great degree at great cost, and often great consequence—yes. But whole, fleshed out, co-existing worlds with different paths for the same people?”

“He said he knew you in that other world. ‘Intimately.’”

“Siegfried…of the Wiled Marshlands?” David rolled the words around his tongue, eyes distant. “Back before Regina’s Curse, we knew a Prince Siegfried. He was better known as a hunter, though. He didn’t really…” He trailed off, rolling his shoulders. “Put too much stock into his royal pedigree, or any of the attached duties, I guess. But he was a killer shot. We had him over for a couple royal hunts—you know, catch-and-release unicorn deals, all ceremony.”

“But we never knew him as a king.” Her mother said, brow furrowed. “And he said you’re supposed to be—you were—Odette was his True Love?”

“Yeah that was the gentle lead-in.” Emma rolled her eyes. “’Hi, hello, I jumped worlds for you, hey babe. It’s casual.’ Talk about a pick-up line.” She sighed. “I mean, is there even a chance—? Any clues what my life would have been like if the Curse never happened, the wardrobe—if you never abandoned me, and I grew up in the Enchanted Forest?”

She kicked herself when they glanced down at the word ‘abandoned.’ But the moment passed, quicker every time it was brought up. They were here, now. And death and darkness and magic steeped in both hadn’t separated them yet, despite great effort.

“It just…never happened.” David spread his hands before puffing out a breath. “There were no prophecies for that. I imagine you would have grown up at court. Eventually you would have crossed paths with Siegfried, sure. Royalty tends to overlap. I certainly don’t think we would have—married you off—“

“Of course not!” Mary Margaret exclaimed.
“—though that was—is—the norm. I recall Siegfried’s mother dropping a hint more than once that her son needed to settle down and start focusing on his role as future king. Always pushing him to go to more balls and less bouts in the wood with drink and bow. Not that I would know about any of that.” He said emphatically when Mary Margaret batted at his shoulder. “I was well past my drink and bow days when he was an acquaintance. Hell, I didn’t even have any drink and bow days. My stag days were spent with…sheep.”

“Earlier, you said—a sorcerer sent him here. Do you think—?”

“That’s exactly what I think.” Emma said darkly. She downed the rest of her drink in one fell swoop, then rose from the table to put it in the sink. “Thanks, for everything. I think now’s the time to bite the bullet and visit our friendly neighbourhood practitioner of dark magic.”

“Emma.” Her father cautioned. His eyes were warm and worried, both looks that had taken her a long time to trust. Now she just felt alternately overwhelmed and like a toasted marshmallow. “I don’t like this. Much more likely than not, dark magic is involved. And regardless, this stranger obviously has designs on you. Just…be careful, okay?”

She nodded brusquely.

Her mother joined her by the sink, pulling her into a soft embrace before pressing a kiss into her hair. “We’ll snoop around on our end. I know Ruby spent a good amount of time running in the woods of the Grey Lake.”

“And Robin ventured there with his band of merry men during the year we’d lost before the whole showdown with Zelena. Maybe he crossed paths with the prince, can tell us more about him.” David added.

“Appreciated.” She turned toward the door, tugging on her leather jacket.

“You’ll still make it tonight?” Mary Margaret asked, full of light and hope, and her eagerness for the future put part of Emma’s anxiety to rest.

“Of course. Tall dark strangers and alternate realities be damned. Nothing’s gonna get between me and brinner.”
“No. No, no, no.” Gold said emphatically as soon as Emma stepped into the shop.

“I haven’t even started talking yet!”

“Yes, good, let’s keep it right there, then, dearie. I am having a remarkably rare day of peace with my pregnant wife, and I will not be roped into whatever soap opera drama is going on in the heroes’ circle.”

“If you recall, you owe me.” She lowered her voice in a soft threat, not quite willing to wreck Belle’s day by informing her of the treachery of her husband. Forget Ariel, she was truly the poor unfortunate soul.

“Watch yourself, Swan. And if you recall, that debt—and I very, very graciously humour you in calling it that—was wiped out the moment I guided you to the Underworld and helped you retrieve your lovesick wonder.”

She made a cutting gesture through the air out of frustration. “Whatever. Look. I only want to ask you a couple of questions. No action necessary. No action requested.” She tacked on the last sentence, exasperated by his caustic gaze.

“You have three minutes. No more. Preferably less.”

She leaned on the glass counter and proceeded to give him the Sparknotes version of the scene that went down at Granny’s.

“So?” She prompted when he remained silent. “Is it possible? Did you have anything to do with it?”

“Well, I certainly won’t make claims about what my alternate self has done. He’s not me.” Gold said dryly, as if he was put out by Emma being particularly obtuse. “But if the main thread of difference between our worlds is that the Queen’s curse never came to be, and you grew up in your true realm, his tale could very well hold too much truth for your comfort.”

Emma exhaled sharply. “So you’re saying—what you’re saying is, alternate universes—not realms, but entire universes, are real?”

“Oh course not.” He scoffed. “There is one singular universe. We can’t handle another. But what we do have is layers upon layers of overlapping and juxtaposed realities.”

“So this guy is legit?”

“All I can tell you is it’s entirely plausible.” Gold sighed, patience worn. “Now if you don’t mind, and even if you do, I’ll be back to my day.”

Emma narrowed her eyes at him before turning for the door, boots clacking an unwavering staccato against the floorboards.

“And Emma?”

She frowned, turning back. Gold was not one for considerate afterthoughts.
“If this king has truly alighted from another realm in search of you—on the wings of True Love, no less—he has paid the heaviest of prices. He is not likely to fade gently from your life.”

“I didn’t know you cared.” Emma said sarcastically, placing a hand delicately over her heart.

“I don’t.” Gold said, voice absent of warmth. “I don’t want your drama seeping into this town as it always inevitably does. Handle this and handle this well.” With that, he turned his back on her, going about his business as if they’d never spoken.

Emma’s head was full of everyone’s words as she made her way to the Jolly Roger. She didn’t have time to figure out her own feelings on the matter, stuck in the No Man’s Land between plausibility and truth. Her phone buzzed, a text from Regina letting her know that she’d bring Henry by the Nolan’s apartment just in time for dinner. She refused to use the word ‘brinner’ no matter how much Henry tried to convince her.

Gotcha. She texted back, attention drifting to the rest of the notifications piled in the corner.

“Shit.” She’d missed three calls from Killian.

She didn’t bother calling him back, just double-timed it to the Jolly Roger. She found him in the captain’s quarters, leaning over his desk piled high with scrolls and leather volumes.

“Sorry, I, uh, bailed on you.” She started as he turned around.

He lifted an eyebrow, unimpressed. “I believe there ought to be a stronger term for abandoning your current boyfriend with your timeline-hopping True Love.”

His tone was neutral—bored, almost—but she could see the insecurity and hurt in the tension around his eyes, along his shoulders. She crossed to him, running her hands up his forearms, clasping them behind his neck.

“I left a stranger with my True Love.” She said firmly, securing him with a steady gaze before she dropped her eyes to his lips. She claimed them in a hot flash of a kiss, entirely possessive. The tension held steady for a scary moment, then he hummed into her mouth, deepening the kiss before leaning back with a sigh. His body stayed flush against hers, his hand dropping to her hip.

“Which,” she conceded, a little breathlessly, “was still a thoughtless thing to do. I’m sorry. I panicked. What happened after I left?”

“Despite his initial scathing assessment of my character, your king was quite civil.” Killian said. “He apologized for putting me in a compromising position and asked me if I wouldn’t give him the lay of the land, so to speak.”

“He asked you for tips and tricks about Storybrooke? And you---?”

“Told him who’s who.”

Emma took a step back, looking at him incredulously.

“You just—you just ran with that?”

“Well, it seemed to be better than you, who took the literal route on that one, ay, love?” Amusement quirked his lips. She didn’t quite mind the prod at her expense, so long as it kept him smiling.
She punched him in the arm, though. On principle.

It only widened his grin.

“And no, I did not simply ‘run with it.’ I’m entirely too selfish and opportunistic for that.” He looked her over like she should’ve known better than that, but like he wasn’t too perturbed. “I made him a deal. I traded him. Name by name—for everyone I told him about in this land, he told me the same for his.”

She appraised her pirate, and his smugness melted into tender pride at whatever he saw in her eyes.

“And what did you learn?”

“Unfortunately, not much of use for our current dilemma. It seems in a world without a Saviour, we are all largely unchanged.” His expression darkened suddenly, and she drifted closer in anticipation. “For the worse, it seems. In my case, at least. In all the villains of our company’s cases.”

“You’re still a man on a mission, then?” She asked quietly.

“Aye. Scourge of the seas in many a realm. And Her Majesty is quite the terror herself.”

“I’m sorry.”

He broke out of his reverie, surprised. “For what?”

“That you have to know that somewhere out there, you’re still that man you’ve fought to be free of. That somewhere out there, you are still hurting in the same old ways.”

“Don’t fret, love. It’s my reality—our reality—that I intend to put stock in.”

She nodded soberly before continuing.

“And what did—did he say anything about me?”

“He refused. But he also didn’t ask about you, which was—irritatingly good form.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I can hardly justify clocking the man after my heart when he’s not even not half bad, he’s thoroughly half good, at the very least.” She blushed at him calling her his ‘heart,’ before smiling at the sincere frustration in his voice.

“Which brings me to another matter.” His expression became so serious so quick, Emma tensed. He dug around in his pocket, retrieving a thin blue vial swirling with light silvery liquid.

“What is that?” Emma asked in alarm.

“His case, I suppose.” He elaborated after a beat. “He pressed this into my palm as we departed. He claims they’re copies of memories—his memories, to be precise.”

“What the hell for?” Fear gripped her in a chokehold. She’d thought the precipice of truth and fiction was terrible, but the idea that there were real means of answering the question was far worse.
“Evidence, of his world. More importantly, I expect,” his voice dwindled into a downy whisper, but it wasn’t anything like their pillow talk. It was laced with sadness, a relinquishing of power.

“Of your great love.”
They walked to her parent’s apartment hand in hand. Emma was hyper-aware of the vial in her jacket pocket the entire time. The weight of it in her pocket left her with a prickly feeling of unrest, but Killian had insisted upon her keeping it in her possession.

“If I’m completely honest, I don’t want another second with the damned thing.” He’d said, pressing it in her palm, not meeting her eyes. She knew he meant well enough, but she was really starting to resent the prince for sticking his nose into a universe where he didn’t belong.

The scent of fresh bacon, coffee, and pancake batter greeted them long before they stepped foot into the actual apartment.

“Mom, Hook!” Henry exclaimed, waving an arm covered in flour up to his elbow like an opera glove.

“Lad.” Killian smiled warmly.

“Hey, kid.” Emma walked over and ruffled his hair, taking a step back when he turned to hug her. “I don’t think so—you’ve got more flour on you than in the bowl.” Henry made a face.

“Emma. Guyliner.” Regina nodded in greeting, a warm twist to her lips.

“Hey, Regina.”

“Who’s on pancake duty?”

“That would be me.” David strode down from the upper floor, dropping a kiss onto the top of Emma’s head before squeezing around her and retrieving a bowl of batter on Henry’s other side.

“Is there anything for us to do?” Killian asked.

“Not this time around. Snow’s finished up the bacon already and Regina’s fighting the good fight with the eggs. And the table’s been set. Looks like you get to kick back.”

“You want coffee?” Emma turned to Killian. He was holding back laughter at Regina’s struggle to get a fried egg out onto a plate. It flopped sadly onto the counter and she scowled.

“I can bring an entire realm to its knees but I can’t get a damn egg to obey.”

“The brinner senses your resistance.” Henry muttered, but at a volume entirely meant for her to hear.

“Breakfast is for mornings.”

Emma prodded Killian at last.
“Aye?” He said absently as he looked down at her, the mirth still settled in his eyes.

“Coffee?”

“Please.”

She made a cup for each of them, handing him his usual sailboat mug. He accepted it appreciatively, and Emma basked a moment in the kitchen lighting washing over his features as he took a sip, looking entirely at home in the domestic space.

Eventually they migrated to the table, dropping their plates heavy with breakfast foods down before dropping into their seats.

“So, Emma.” Her father began after conversation drifted through school and work and play. “Did Gold have anything enlightening to say?”

“Gold?” Regina and Killian asked at the same time, meeting each other’s surprised looks before turning to Emma.

“Thanks, Dad.” She muttered.

“I didn’t know it was a secret mission.” He said apologetically, picking up on the fresh tension.

“That’s where you ran off to?” Killian asked with a veiled expression. “You went to find comfort in the Crocodile?”

She bit her lip. She hadn’t told him because she hadn’t thought to, as charged with nervous energy as she’d been. But she wouldn’t have told him anyway. Ever since their time as Dark Ones, and especially after Rumplestiltskin allowing Killian to die for nothing, his fire for the Crocodile’s downfall was reignited and stoked to even greater heights. The hitch, of course, was that he was so mortified and shaken by his dallying in the darkness, that he wouldn’t permit himself to be anywhere near the man.

“I figured he was the best one to ask about the whole multiuniverse…thing.”

“Did I miss something?” Regina asked, lips downturned. “I thought I was on the phone tree for this sort of thing.”

“Of course you are.” Mary Margaret reassured her. “I’m sure Emma meant to fill you in eventually, Emma?”

She felt like she was being scolded for not sharing her crayons or something. “Look. I’m just hoping—I think—I just feel like this’ll blow over. It doesn’t need to be a ‘thing.’”

“Oh no, it’s a ‘thing.’” Hook said, brooking no argument.

“It’s definitely a ‘thing.’” David agreed, and Mary Margaret nodded in solidarity.

She groaned. “Well now it is.” She turned to address Regina, dipping her gaze to include Henry as she played Catch-Up. “Ok so there’s this guy in town—“

“—a prince—“ Her mother interjected.

“A king.” Killian corrected.

Emma narrowed her eyes. “So there’s this guy in town who maybe hopped on over from another
reality where I was his True Love because I don’t know why but he’s here now.” The words increased in speed and decreased in volume until they were a jumbled, quiet rush.

“A monarch came from another universe to...hit on you?” Her son asked, bewildered.

“Reality.” Emma corrected weakly. “Apparently we can’t handle another universe.”

Regina snorted. That was not the reaction Emma had been anticipating.

“Is that all then?” She said. There were actual tears of laughter in her eyes. “After giants and curses and everyone and their mother being an evil queen and fifty flavours of darkness, it’s a relief the only thing rocking the boat in this town is a multiverse booty call.”

“Regina.” Mary Margaret exclaimed, scandalized, as she turned to look at Henry.

“It is not a booty call.” Emma said indignantly. Truth be told, she had zero fucking clue what it was--she would have preferred it wasn’t anything at all--but Regina’s flippancy rubbed her the wrong way.

“Emma.” Mary Margaret transferred her censuring glance to her daughter.

“I mean...it might be a booty call.” Henry said agreeably, shrugging his shoulders.

“Henry!” All three mothers immediately rounded on the boy, who grinned unrepentantly. David and Killian were hardly trying and definitely failing to hide their laughter behind weak scoffs and shielding hands.

“Doesn’t matter what it is.” Emma said, finally recovering. “I’m not gonna have anything to do with him. So there.” She didn’t actually need to stick her tongue out. It was implied.

“Well, good luck.” Regina said, smiling with a wicked edge. “If you find yourself in need of motivating him to leave you be, I have a minor curse or two I’d be happy to pass along.”

Emma shook her head, once again struck by the fact that her life was literally straight out of a magical book and filled with faerie tale characters. The Evil Queen was offering her help with a… booty call. God.

“And on that truly unnerving note.” David said, slapping a hand down on the table. “The Mills-Nolan-Swan-Jones first official brinner is complete.”

They hung around an hour or so longer, idly watching TV while Henry did work at the coffee table. As ten o’clock rolled around, Killian stood, offering a hand to Emma.

“Thank you for the evening.” He said with a sweeping gaze and bemused lilt to his lips. “It’s truly been a revelation. However, I must be off.” He dipped quickly to give Emma a pecked kiss.

“I’m coming with.” She said, refusing to let him stray far from the embrace.

“Oh? My place or ours?”
They ended up meandering to their house. Emma had taken up permanent residence there after the Darkness was stripped clean while Killian divided his time between there and the Jolly Roger. There was an understanding between them, that eventually he would come to stay there permanently, as would Henry. But for now they were taking it slow, shaking off the frost the dagger and the Underworld had left in them.

Killian shirked off his duster coat, placing it on the rack by the door. Emma did the same with her leather jacket. The mundane sight of their jackets paired together on neighbouring hooks brought a happy quirk to the side of her mouth.

“Have you made your decision, then, love?” He asked, carefully unassuming, as he gestured to the front pocket of her jacket.

The memory potion.

Emma sighed. “I don’t know. I don’t owe him anything. But I like the idea of knowing all there is to know about the situation, y’know? I like to know what I’m dealing with.”

Killian considered her a moment, and she felt bare under his searching gaze.

“I think you should do it.” He said at last, in a muted tone. “Get the full scope of the affair.” He seemed to catch himself on the last word, and his eyes widened almost imperceptibly before his brows drew tight.

Emma drew closer, running a palm over his heart.

“He’s a stranger.” She said firmly.

There was little give in him. “True Love’s a powerful thing, darling.”

“Yes.” Her eyes narrowed. She understood his hesitance—it was a constant battle for them both to believe what they had was real, and even worse, that they deserved it. But the doubt in him was beginning to nettle her. Did he really think she would just up and leave him for what was supposedly supposed to be her faerie tale ending?

He should know she didn’t play by that book.

“Which is exactly why we don’t have anything to worry about.” If her fingernails dug into the fabric of his shirt for emphasis, that wasn’t her fault.

“Mmm.” He buzzed, clearly an attempt to placate her without saying anything of substance.

She rolled her eyes, tugging on the sleeve of his maroon button-down. “In the morning. I’m done
with it today. Now are you coming to bed with me?”

The subdued look eased from his face as a characteristic grin overtook his expression, eyes alight with a mischievous fire. “I can’t imagine the day I’d say no to that.”

She rolled her eyes again, but she couldn’t hide the blush dusting her cheeks. “Come on, then.”

They got ready for bed in tandem, Emma washing her face as he brushed his teeth, and vice versa. He slid the toothpaste along the counter to her, proceeding to pull his shirt over his head and strip down to his boxers. Once they were through, she picked their clothes up and tossed them in the hamper, gliding out of the bathroom to pull a shirt out of the middle drawer.

“You keep at it, I won’t have any clothes left, the way you filch them.” Killian said as he joined her by the bed, eyebrow raised at the soft black sweater drifting down to hit her mid-thigh.

“Mm. Oh. Oh no. You’ve found me out.” She said, putting her wrist to her forehead in a dramatic lift.

“Swan.” He warned playfully.

“I mean…you could always…take them back.” She offered, spreading her hands at the falsely innocuous suggestion.

“Swan.” She smiled at the bite in his voice, the way his Adam’s apple worked.

“Or at least you could try.”

He sprung, rolling her beneath him gently so she didn’t feel the full force of his impact. She laughed as he settled his weight on her, but the sound broke into something else as his lips found her neck, hands dragged down the length of her torso before shimmying up the hem of his stolen sweater.

“Are you sure—“ His lips dipped from just below her breasts to her navel. “—this is a fight you’re willing to see through till the end?”

She closed her eyes at the rumble of his voice along her stomach before reaching up to catch his dangling earring, glimmering in the lamplight. She caught it with her teeth, tugging it and pushing at his hips with her hands as she settled him onto his back.

“Are you?” She asked, just this side of breathless.

He gazed up at her hotly. “I think…a parley may be in order.”

“And what do you propose to be the terms of this armistice?” She settled back on his hips, hands twined and resting laxly on his chest as if in serious consideration. His features flickered at the shift of her weight.

“I have faith we can come to an agreement that leaves us mutually satisfied.” Killian’s voice came out low and strained, a victory in itself.

“You were right.” She said, later, as they fell together, curled up against the night.

“I could stand hearing that again.” He quipped, his hand reaching back to grip her own. It was his turn to be little spoon.
She flexed her hip lazily, nudging his. “You were right.” She murmured obligingly. “I think compromise could be an acquired taste, with you.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it compromise—I never did get my sweater back.” It had ended up on the floor.

“Well. It’s only a battle in the war.” She offered, a consoling hand stroking his hair.

His voice softened with approaching sleep.

“We’ll see.”
déjà vu

“You’re going to bore a hole through it, love.” Killian chided.

Emma continued to stare narrowly at the vial, set in the middle of the kitchen table. A graveyard of cheerios was in front of her, hand fisted around her spoon.

“I’d say get it over with.” He breathed out.

“What if this is a trick?”

“You used your spooky lie detector magic on it seven times, Swan. It’s good as gold.”

“Yeah and we’ve had such good luck with Gold since we came to Storybrooke.” She muttered pointedly. “Fine. Fine fine.” She drew the offending thing across the table. “Just.” She paused. “Just stay with me, will you? Regina said these could manifest in a bunch of different ways and… I just, don’t want to be without you. Especially if I need you to bring me back.”

“I wouldn’t have thought of straying.” He said, abandoning his position leaning against the sink to take a seat by her at the table.

She held the glass to the light for one shining silver second. “Bottoms up.” She slammed the potion back like a shot.

The liquid went down smooth and cool, and suddenly everything smelled of pine and wildflowers. She felt the crackling of twigs beneath her feet, the crisp scent of winter air. Her nose felt like an ice chip.

“Emma?”

“Okay, this is wild.” She said. “I feel like…like someone just photoshopped the forest into my senses.”

“Photoshopped?”

She opened her mouth to explain, but Killian wasn’t there to explain to. The sky hung low with pitch and stars, their light illuminating her feet. There was a bow in her hand, a satchel swaying against her thigh.

“D’you see tha’ Siegfried? Tha’ bird’s wearing a crown, there. She’s bloody marked fer ya.” A crass voice came from Emma’s right, and she turned to face its source. He was a young man, she’d hazard very early twenties. Despite the coarseness of his words, he looked extremely well-kempt, with an impeccably tailored vest and a presumably royal crest on his quiver.

Emma was dumbstruck. Ahead of her, there truly was a bird with a crown nestled among the long grass by the lake—a swan, in fact. It looked…larger than life, somehow. Its feathers seemed to glow apart from the moonlight’s soft bath, and the crown perched atop its head glinted as its neck twisted toward them.

Emma was startled to find herself drawing back her bow, ready to pierce the animal through. She was relieved to drop it at the last second.

“Your Majesty?” Another one of the small party spoke, this time in an accent as sharp as the arrow she’d let drop to the floor of the clearing.
“There’s something about that bird.” She murmured, drawn forward as if pulled by an irresistible thread. As she drew closer to the bird, it shook out its wings, rising up to its full height. She was struck at the proximity—the animal really was casting its own light. Her hand reached out, unbidden, and she was taken aback when the bird followed suit, bowing its head into her palm as if bestowing a great blessing.

A fierce light expanded from the contact, enveloping both their forms until the forest disappeared into a whiteness that rivaled a storm-bleached sky. And then it was gone as it came, almost subliminal, and a female figure was bent in the bird’s place. Her chin dug gently into Emma’s palm. The woman lifted her face, a great spill of blonde hair washed silver in the light falling away from it with the action.

“Now imagine how you’d feel if you actually shot me, you prick.”

Emma’s mouth fell open as she looked both down and up at herself.
“—Says the man whose first thought when he saw an obviously enchanted swan was to shoot it.” Emma said.

Except it was Other Emma, not... not the real Emma. Emma realized she must not be herself either—she was just a passenger in Siegfried’s past self, watching with painful clarity and feeling through a magical gauze.

“Odette.” Emma—Siegfried—said, in fond exasperation. The low timbre felt at once incredibly odd and natural coming from Emma’s throat.

“Just saying.” Not Emma—fuck it, Odette—said.

“Look, I understand. The Owl put you through something unimaginable. I just think—down the road—you might regret your haste in calling for his blood.”

“It’s not about petty revenge, Sig.” There was a bite to her voice that went beyond the playful air he was ardently vying to maintain. “It’s about safety. If you grant him amnesty, he’ll be just another volatile loose end at Regina’s disposal to destroy my family.”

“It won’t come to that.” He promised, crossing closer to where Odette sat on the edge of the high stone wall. They appeared to be in the grand breezeway of a castle—presumably that of the Wiled Marshlands. “I’m not a fool, ‘Dette. Rothbart will be thoroughly dealt with. Tried for his crimes—the highest of crimes, that—and he will be imprisoned in such a manner that sunlight is nothing more than a fever dream.”

“It will never be enough.” Odette whispered, looking into a distance full of closeknit, grey trees, a sky made white with rain.

With a burdened sigh, Siegfried draped himself over Odette so that she’d feel his heat and comfort, but not the brunt of his weight. “We will be enough. To protect our families, our kingdoms.” He dropped a hand, seeking her out, and she reached up for him, interlacing their cold fingers. “And our futures.”

“I knew you’d prove to be an idealistic fool.” She said without venom. Her eyes remained chill with weariness, but her lips quirked in a fond smile.

“And you, a stubborn... whatever it is you are. Princess? Mage? Knight? Whatever you’re starring as for the day. You could practically fill all the roles of a kingdom.”

“Not idealistic fool. Vital, indeed.” Odette offered playfully. “And you know the only title I’ll acknowledge outside of courtesy is that of Head of the Royal Guard.”

“Of course. Odette of Misthaven. My knight in shining armour.” His free hand drifted to her waist, and she turned into him, hair spilling into the whipping wind.

Emma had never seen herself look like a force of nature, let alone a force of nature in love. She swiped a thumb across Siegfried’s forehead, a gentle, determined half-moon. Emma felt the pressure of it at arm’s length, through the filter of the potion’s magic.

“What a rare bird.” She murmured before reaching lightly on her tiptoes to kiss Siegfried, hands
anchored in his hair.

The memories came in flashes then, rolling through her like underdeveloped film. Her—Odette—and Siegfried, sitting across from each other in a garden of loosely cultivated wildflowers, them running through the woods, pitching their weapons to the wayside, Odette catching him in a tackle. Odette glancing downward, uncharacteristically bashful as Snow gripped Siegfried’s forearm in solidarity. Her reaching up to wipe blood from his mouth, brows drawn. Her looking down at him, wonderment and disbelief warring in her defensive stance, only to bend and allow him to slip the winged ring onto her finger. “Odette.” A terrible light, absent of beauty, full of a blackness Emma felt acutely even through the hazy fabric of memory.

The light transfixed her, holding her prisoner in a room dimmed in comparison.

“Odette.” She lay crumpled on the ground, armour shattered. Magical shrapnel littered the ground around her, spilled from her chest. A feathered crown lay close to her head. There was blood in a thin stream running from her nose, her mouth, red, red, red, against the ivory of her skin. White as snow.

“I tried.” Her voice was a broken rasp. It would have been gentle if it could have been. “I tried—“

“Shh.” He bent, cradling her as best he could without moving her.

“I’m so sorry, Sig.” She coughed, and a spray of blood littered the hammered metal covering her torso. “I ruined us for darkness.”

“No.” He said emphatically, leaning to brush her hair from her face, curls dyed pale with crimson and sweat. His pulse was quick and consuming, the calm of his voice a strained shield for the tempest brewing. “No, you beat it, darling. You came through, in the end. You were so brave. Be brave a moment longer.”

“I need you to know—“ She raised an arm up to him, to cup his face, her reach clearly weighted with pain. Stilll, she found him.

“Don’t.” He bit out through teeth bared against his own pain. “Don’t look at me like you won’t look again.”

“I love you.” She said simply. Her thumb stroked a trembling arc across his forehead. “My idealistic fool.” She smiled a smile equally spun of snark and silk. Her hand dropped with a graceless sound, energy spent.

He returned the gesture, an infinitely soft arc of his own despite the keening of his muscles, the building shriek in the back of his head.

“My rare bird.”

Her smile softened into the ghost of a curve before her head lolled to the side.
Iron. It was everywhere. In the sharp metallic taste in her mouth, in the phantom of it scraping and scoring against her skin. There was a clanging in her ears. She couldn’t breathe.

“Emma.”

Her eyes opened in a flash, hands scrabbling against her throat. Immediately there was a rush towards her, but she couldn’t discern faces through the television snow at the edges of her vision. On instinct, she roughly batted the hands that reached for her.

“It’s alright, it’s alright. Careful, love.” They came again, and she was drawn gently into someone’s chest.

“Emma.” Another voice, this one low and cautious. “Emma, can you hear us? Give her space. Killian.”

Air came back to her in harsh breaths, and she steadied herself, elbows bent on the arm of the couch she’d been lying on. When her heartbeat had slowed drastically, she turned to face her audience. Regina and Hook gazed back at her as if they’d had the air stolen from their lungs, too.

“I died.” She said, dazed. She ran a hand over her face, skirted a hand gingerly across her chest, pressing with her fingertips as if they might just sink in. She was almost more shocked when her fingers came back clean. She gripped the arm tighter before sinking down into the couch.

“What?” Regina snapped, stepping closer.

“I died. I saw myself die, and then I—then I felt it and I’m here again.” But that didn’t make sense. She’d been in Siegfried’s head—not her other self’s.

“You’re back. You’re safe, now.” Regina put a hand on her shoulder, nails digging in, and the sharp comfort eased her shaking. “Stay with her.” She swept out of the room.

Killian crossed over to her, sinking into the cushions beside her. He pulled the afghan off the back of the couch, pulling it over her shoulders and her onto his lap in an unbroken motion. She burrowed into his warmth, using it to ground herself.

“How did I get here?” She spoke into the hollow of his throat.

“When you took that damned potion—“ He stopped a moment, voice thick. “You were fine, and then you weren’t. It was like you were in an unreachable slumber, and then—你 stopped breathing, Emma.” The fingers that had been working slow, soothing circles in her back dug in, and she imagined he needed some grounding as well. “I called Regina,
and she confirmed adverse effects to be expected be damned, that was not supposed to happen.”

“All of a sudden I was in his head. And I…there were so many memories. I couldn’t hold on to all of them. I met myself, Killian.” She drew back, just enough to look him in the eyes. She drank the sight of him in, the dash across his right cheek, the blue of his eyes, the crows’ feet eking out tiny distributaries from them and the scar from Excalibur peeking out from the collar of his shirt. There’d been flashes of her parents, Regina, a sundry of Storybrooke citizens, fractions of seconds. But she never saw him. She traced his features almost reverently.

“I think I’m the Swan Queen.” She said finally, not pulling back. A scoffing laugh escaped her. “Like the actual Swan Queen.”

“…doesn’t ring a bell, love.”

“The Swan Queen? How predictable.” Regina strode in with a steaming cup, carrying it as if it wouldn’t dare spill. She set the mug on the low table in front of Emma before taking a seat in an adjacent chair.

“You’ve heard of her, then?” Killian asked.

“The Swan Princess, Barbie of Swan Lake, the Bolshoi ballet. Henry had a phase. It was merciless.”

“He wasn’t lying.” Emma took a sip. Black tea. Bergamot. Honeyed, but not enough to really ease the cut of it. “Siegfried. About any of it. He was out hunting when we met. When the other me met.” Her brows drew at the grammatical clusterfuck the whole ordeal entailed. “Odette. I’ll just call her Odette. That’s what my parents would have named me, if not for the whole Dark Curse thing.”

“You’re welcome.” Regina said.

“For what?”

“I saved you from being named ‘Odette.’ Talk about curses.” Regina arched a brow.

Emma couldn’t help the half-smile.

“So is that all, then? Temporary death aside, you don’t feel any different?”

“No. I don’t think so. Just the memories. And those don’t feel…they’re still not my memories. Just like dreams I can’t shake off.”

“Then that’s that. You have your proof.” She looked between Emma and Hook. “I imagine the worst is yet to come. Temporary death included. I’ll leave you to that.”

“Thanks for coming, Regina.” Emma placed a hand over the queen’s.

Regina glanced down with that bittersweet twist to her lips.

“Really.”

“Any time, Emma.” She upturned her palm to give Emma’s hand a squeeze, before leaning in, voice pitched low. “I mean that. I also meant what I said before. We don’t do cut and dry here. Be careful, Emma. For your own sake. And Captain Guyliner’s. Remember that this new prince, whoever he may be to you, he’s what Marian was to me.”
She leaned back, a sympathetic twist to her smile this time around.

Emma nodded, swallowing hard.

Killian spared them a calculating look before turning to Regina.

“Your Majesty.” He said airily, bowing with mock reverence as he led her to the doorway. He placed a hand meaningfully on her shoulder as she passed. Emma averted her eyes at the look of solidarity that passed between them.

Once Regina was gone, Killian strode back into the room, hovering.

“Say it. Ask it. Whatever ‘it’ is.” She said after a grace period of many long seconds.

“I…was very concerned, for a moment there. A lot of moments, actually.” He laughed bitterly.

“I’m sorry. That isn’t it though, is it?”

He turned on her, pinning her in place with a gaze that struck her poetic. A gaze that she could only think of as colder than the sea in the height of winter.

“I am straining to remember all the reasons I shouldn’t go find this king of yours and cut him down for all he’s put you through. He’s hurt you, and for God’s sakes best hope it was unintentional. Apart from that, I am a jealous man, Emma, and a fearful one. Doesn’t leave me with a proclivity to think upon sugar plum faeries and keep to the light.” His voice had begun to roughen and climb after the first sentence but by the last, it was clear and deadly quiet.

Emma bit her lip against the lost girl in her that wanted to shiver. Whatever else she may be, she had promised herself to never be more afraid of him than she was afraid for him. This barely scratched the surface of what they’d overcome.

“Killian.” He’d begun to pace, and that was when she really needed to worry. Mania was the turning point, where their shared nightmares crept back into reality. It was when he became a flurry then a maelstrom. In her, he watched for stillness.

He looked back to her, and for once, her pirate was drowning.

“I need you.” She said simply. She never did have a fluidity with words, or a finesse. But she could say powerful things as well as the rest of them.

His lips parted.

“I need you.”

His strides were almost staggered, taut, without even a pretense of his usual swagger and ease. He scooped her up, pulling her in an embrace that barely left an atom’s space between them. But it was her who cradled him, guiding his forehead to rest on her collarbone.

She called in sick that day.
“So what are you gonna do about King Siegfried?” Henry asked with a pensive lick of his ice cream cone.

“Siegfried?” Anna asked as she dipped to deliver Emma’s sundae off a silver tray. After the initial return to Arendelle, she had decided to rent a flat in Storybrooke and take over her late aunt’s ice cream parlour, take some time to reconnect with Kristoff after the whole Snow Queen-on-top-of-Everything-Else ordeal. “That new guy in town? Ye high? Very dreamy? No? Just me? Very dreamy. Don’t tell Kristoff that. He won’t get jealous, but, he won’t get the reference because he hasn’t watched all twelve seasons of Grey’s Anatomy like the rest of us—also just me? Okay. Anyways. He’s been coming in here every afternoon for a pistachio cone with sprinkles. The rainbow kind. Siegfried, not Kristoff. What about him?”

Emma couldn’t help raising a bemused eyebrow, but she’d long since adjusted to just rolling with the torrent that was conversation with Anna.

“He’s trying to date my mother.” Henry said, sliding her a can you believe it look.

“Oh. Well. That’s not going to work out.” Anna’s brows knit in concern. “Not that you couldn’t make it work, y’know, if that’s what you wanted Emma, but. Yikes.”

“’Yikes’ is right.” Emma agreed, stabbing her spoon into her ice cream.

“Well, good luck. If you find yourself needing a pick-me-up or someone versed in hand-to-hand combat, I’m here for you.” The thing was, Anna was entirely capable of showing up for both parts of the offer. And with that sweet smile, she meant it.

“Thanks, Anna.”

“So?” Henry asked as Anna swept away.

“I don’t know, kid. Honestly. All I know is I’m not a fan of all the ruckus he’s making.”

“’Ruckus?’ You really have been spending more time with Granny.”

“Hey.” She poked a warning spoon in his direction. Then she took mercy on him and spooned herself another bite of banana-and-neopolitan. “So what d’you think?” She asked around the mouthful.

“I think you need to give him a chance.”

She looked at him to continue.

“Obviously just because he’s your True Love in some other reality doesn’t mean you owe him being his True Love in this one. I mean, you don’t owe him anything, point blank. I think you need to talk to him, though. Help him find his happy ending.”

“And what do you figure that is?”

Henry shrugged. “I don’t know. Closure, maybe?”

Emma appraised him over laced fingers. Ever since meeting him--really meeting him--she’d known her boy was something else, but somewhere between Neverland and Camelot he’d really
come into focus.

“Maybe. He’s hardly harmless, though.”

“We can take him.”

She smiled. “I appreciate the vote of confidence. Hopefully it won’t come to that, though.”

“So if you’re the Swan Queen over there—what exactly does that make me?” He shifted gears flawlessly.

She faltered. “Neal wasn’t really in the picture over there, Henry.”

“I wasn’t born, you mean.” She watched for the inevitable fall in his expression, but he just straightened his shoulders and polished off his ice cream cone. “Okay. No offense, but I’m kinda glad this is the reality that’s our reality.”

“Me too, kid.”

Emma dropped Henry off at Regina’s for dinner, pulling him into a tight hug before hopping back into her yellow Bug. She’d known what she’d have to do since they left the parlour.

Given that Siegfried was still too fresh to be in the yellow pages, she was going to have to force a date with destiny.
So I’ve started up university again, and that will likely slow down updates for a bit while I get back into the swing of things! As for this chapter, I thought it was high time for Emma to confront her timeline-hopping True Love. As with most things—it is not exactly what it seems.

He was nursing a basket of onion rings when she finally found him. He looked up in awe when she slid into the booth. The look soon melted into a softness she wasn’t comfortable facing. She’d have preferred chill disdain. Barely tethered wrath. Actual live Furies, maybe. She was better at handling those.

“I tried the forest first.” Emma explained as she picked the last few leaves out of her curls. “Since you’re a hunter and all. Thought you might have taken up with Robin’s band.”

“I apologize for your efforts.” The twist to Siegfried’s lips was severe, and Emma resisted the urge to tell him to lighten up.

“It’s no problem, really. A trip to the forest is never a waste.” That did the trick—his lips kicked up at the corners.

“A sentiment I could back eternally.” He rubbed his nose self-consciously. “I realized I didn’t leave any way for you to contact me, should you so desire. So I’m somewhat ashamed to admit this establishment has become a bit of a haunt of mine.”

“Why didn’t you just leave a message for me or look up my address or something?”

“I’m afraid the answer will bring you more discomfort than closure for a minor curiosity.”

“Try me.”

“I came here hoping…desperately, maybe, that True Love could, would, will transcend all boundaries of time and place. Not instantaneously, of course. I’m not delusional. But I thought—anyways, I didn’t want to intrude upon your reality more than I already have. I thought if there were any forces out there looking to make a constellation of us, they would cross our paths eventually.”

Emma fought the urge to fiddle with her fingers, to play with the zipper of her jacket, to do anything to postpone this conversation.

“Look, you seem like a genuinely nice guy. Great, even. But the truth is, you are a stranger to me. And maybe you’re right—maybe True Love is capable of all that. At this point, I’m inclined to believe it. I hope it is, anyways. But here—here you are a ‘what if.’ Maybe even a ‘should have been.’ But in the reality I ended up in, my reality, I already have a True Love. And there’s nothing that can change that. Certainly not Hell and everything else that’s been thrown at us.”

Siegfried looked away, and even though he was exactly a stranger, Emma could’ve punched herself for being the cause of the expression he failed to hide.
“I see that.” He managed. “And I don’t aim—I don’t expect to interfere with that in any manner. I see you’re happy as is, Emma. And that’s everything. End of story.” He laughed, good humour mixed with strife. “I should have researched my realities more, I suppose. Put too much stock in Rothbart’s scrying.”

“Rothbart?”

“The sorcerer I made a deal with to get here.”

“You didn’t—I assumed you made a deal with Rumplestiltskin.” The name ‘Rothbart’ didn’t mean anything to her.

“The Dark One?” Siegfried scoffed, bewildered. “I would never. Magic comes at too steep a price to make dealings with someone as unpredictable as him.”

“So who’s this Rothbart then? Did he just pop you on over through the power of happy thoughts and sweet dreams?” Emma asked wryly, stuck on his words. He seemed so taken aback by even the suggestion of doing business with Gold’s former self—and what did that say about her family, who seemed stuck on a path that always led back to him and his black magic?

“Of course not. He exacted a price meant to make sure I never stepped foot in the Wiled Marshlands ever again.”

“No.” Emma shook her head, disbelieving. He couldn’t have—no one would give up their kingdom, their homeland, their home for--

“I can’t ever return to those Marshlands or any other. In any reality.” He said heavily. “That was his price.”

“Why would you do that?”

He just looked at her.

“God. God.” She gripped the tabletop for some semblance of steadiness. “Why would he ask that?”

“In hindsight, I think he knew this reality was a losing gamble for me. I was just too desperate to see what he was doing. It’s payback, of course.”

“What did you ever do to him?”

“What we did to him. Odette and I.” He sighed, and there was no melodrama in it, just a bone deep exhaustion. That was harder to deal with. “Rothbart is the mage who cursed your other self into becoming the Swan Princess. He did it as a favour to Regina, when you visited the Marshlands as a royal pleasantry. And when you were restored…”

“I wanted him dead.” She closed her eyes, remembering the both of them in the castle breezeway.

“You drank it.”

She opened her eyes. “I wanted to know what I was dealing with.”

He smiled humourlessly. “Odette wanted to make sure that he couldn’t ever volunteer to be a chess piece in the Evil Queen’s game against your mother. I convinced her to allow me to lock him away in a magical prison in the Grey Lake. By all means I intended to let his days run out into a watery grave. And that was enough, for awhile.”
“What changed?”

“You did.” He worried at the corner of the basket in front of him. “There was always a duality—a potential for great light or darkness in you, Emma. You entrusted me with that once. Your parents had kept it from you for so long, doing all they could to make sure that potential for evil could never take root in you. But they crossed lines in doing so. You found out, and in your pain you decided to do something that would have sealed your fate. You were wounded where you least expected it, and it drove you into a panic, trying to destroy everything else that could hurt you. So you went after Rothbart.”

All Emma could see was Cruella’s eyes getting more distant as she magicked her off the cliff. Gazing at Lily down the barrel of a gun. She swallowed hard. It seemed she was meant to be weak in every lifetime.

“Black Swan, we called her. Something of a Valkyrie. Something about Rothbart’s original curse bled into you, bled into the darkest reaches of your magic. But I don’t want to dwell on that. You saw, in the end, you saved yourself. As always.” He smiled, something brief and bittersweet. “And so we are here. Supposedly all getting our happy endings.”

As he leaned back in the booth and unhappily looked at his abandoned onion rings, Emma applauded herself on not bolting for the door.

“So Rothbart, presumably, gets your kingdom, your land, and your entire reality. And you’re just…stuck here. For good.”

“That seems to be the situation, yes.”

“Well Siegfried. You really, really fucked up famously.”

He grinned, apparently surprising the both of them. “Since taking up residence at Granny’s inn, I’ve become acquainted with MTV. What nonsensical swears this reality has. And call me Hunter, if you will. I found out that is not only a title but also a name in this realm. I think, all things considered, I could use the change of pace.”

“Hunter, then. Alright.” Emma took a deep breath, pressing her palms into the tabletop. “Well. This has certainly been…something. I’m not sure what exactly—what we did, here, but everything is happening…a lot. And I’m going to need time to process it all.”

Hunter nodded soberly. “I appreciate you allowing me audience in the first place, let alone sticking through to the end of the tale.”

“Maybe I’ll see you around. Let me know…if there’s anything I can do to help you figure out your place here, alright?” That was okay to offer, wasn’t it? She was a public servant, after all. And the Saviour. And weirdly specifically tied to him. Then why was guilt settling in her stomach like Sisyphus’ boulder?

God, she needed to stop flipping through Killian’s lore books.

God, Killian. The guilt spiked as she realized she’d barely thought of him since she sat down.

“Emma?” Hunter asked as she stepped from the booth.

“Yes?”

“I just—I know this is an incredible imposition, and you’ve humoured me so much already.”
“What is it?”

“What will you keep something safe for me? I don’t…I think it will get in the way of me moving on.”

“What is it?” She asked again, hackles raising.

Wordlessly, he pulled a chain from under his shirt. Two rings jingled against one another, blindingly silver even in the low light of the diner. He took off the smaller of the rings, and held it out to her.

“Was this--?” She breathed.

“Odette’s.”

It burned a hole in her pocket all the way home. She pressed her palm against Liam’s ring around her neck, cupping it against her heart as if warding off some building evil.

But it was only her and two loops of metal.
Okay so I’m gonna do my best to churn out at least a chapter per week! I just decided to take a sharp turn from what I was originally intending with this story, so uh, I almost apologize for the extra angst ahead C’; I’ll try to counteract it with a good bit of fluff tho.

It took Emma three tries to unlock the door. Her fingers were numb but the rest of her felt unbelievably heavy. She pulled her boots off by the door, dropping them halfheartedly next to each other before stripping off her leather jacket and weakly underhand tossing it in the direction of the hooks. Double caffeine or bed? The correct answer was: it was still only the middle of the day and she really needed to return to work at some point.

But she wasn’t in any condition to ace this test.

“So I hear you sought out our visiting royalty, then.” Killian said, expression carefully neutral as he placed his dishes in the sink before returning to his seat. Her heart skipped a beat.

“I thought you were out sailing with Henry today.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “Change of winds. Now am I going to have to perform coupé after glissade or are you going to stop deflecting?”

“I’m not deflecting.” Her fingers strayed to the ring’s outline in her pocket. She ran a fingertip along it, and some of the tension went out of her shoulders.

“Oh?” He gestured up and down her figure with a lazy motion. “Looks awfully similar, then.”

“Yes, okay? I talked to him.”

“Last I knew you were quite literally running in the other direction. What inspired this sudden change of heart?”

She was still on the threshold of the room, caught between wanting to smooth away the hurt in him and bristling at the accusation in his tone.

“I was trying to do that thing where I don’t skip out on my problems. I thought you were a fan of that lifestyle change.” Ironic, considering how poised she was to skip out on this conversation—postured as if she was only waiting on the starting gun to go off.

“When it doesn’t involve timeline-hopping kings with questionable intent at best and intimate designs on you, yes, I am enamoured with it.” He sighed. “I don’t want to do this, Emma. To be like this.”

“Then don’t.” They both looked taken aback by the bite in her words. She recovered quickly, though. “I get that being in your position right now is hard. It’s exactly how I felt when I found you in the Underworld and found out you’d been joined at the hip with Milah since you reunited there.”
“I never had the shadow of a thought to become lovers again. Not when I thought you and I were well and truly parted until the next life, Swan. Not ever.” His fingers flexed against the woodgrain of the table.

“Maybe so.” She shrugged, deciding she didn’t care about the sharp flicker of pain across his face. “What makes you think I would even consider dropping everything for a stranger?”

“You think this is all about your shiny new romantic plot twist?”

“You said yourself—you’re a jealous man.” She could feel herself hopping, skipping, and jumping over lines they’d drawn—but she couldn’t stop herself from brandishing his words back at him.

“For Gods’ sakes, Emma. Does it burn me through to think of you even entertaining the idea of taking up with another? Thoroughly. But this is also about your safety. More importantly, your safety. Was your short date with death really so easily blotted from your memory?”

There it was again—the marrow-deep ache in her, lingering like an omen that wouldn’t give up until she took notice. But what did she put her faith in? The guilt—or the anger?

“Hunter made a really dumb deal to get here. He gave up literally everything. His whole reality. He can’t go back, ever. That’s what we talked about. That, and what happened to Odette. I went to hear him out. So he wouldn’t be hovering at the edge of our lives.”

“So now he’ll be ever-present. Bloody marvelous.” He threw up his hands in disbelief.

“Maybe show some sympathy for the guy. He was grieving, and he made a stupid decision he can’t undo. Now he’s stuck here, with versions of people he loved that don’t know him, not really—he’s got nothing, okay?”

“Forgive me if I don’t head the queue to offer my shoulder for his tears.”

Emma’s jaw dropped.

She searched his features for the darkness that lay mostly dormant in their shared heart. But it was all him.

“You’re being a real prick, Hook.”

“Excuse me?” His eyes narrowed.

“Urban dictionary it.” She turned to leave before the anger in her peaked and they said more things destined for regretting. It was then that she noticed the soft pain in her hand. She unclenched her fist to find Odette’s ring biting into her palm. How long had she been holding it?

“What is that?”

She couldn’t help the indignant look she answered him with.

“My wedding ring.”
two birds with one stone

Emma had anticipated a sharp flash of pain like lightning across Killian’s face, with the thunder of his anger quick on its heels. She had been prepared to about face and leave him to his fury. She was not ready for the soft devastation that overtook his features, the way his lips parted and his eyes drifted shut as if the sight of Odette’s ring balanced on her palm was a blow to his solar plexus.

She left him there, tender as a bruise, fleeing rather than storming out as she’d intended. She’d wanted to comfort him as soon as that look broke his features, but she couldn’t bear to be around him. Normally whenever they fought she’d go complain to her parents, text August, or magically “Skype” Elsa…but they’d never fought like this before. Not about True Loves and alternate realities and the fact that he didn’t trust her. She knew what he would have said if she’d called him on it.

I trust you, love. It’s him I don’t trust.

But the truth was, the dagger and Excalibur changed everything between them. It had exposed weaknesses in them that they had known only in theory.

Emma ran the heel of her palm over her face, sure she’d rub them both raw by the end of the day. She bent to fix her shoes—she’d been so intent on bailing, she’d put her boots on the wrong feet. She’d practically ran despite the jarring pain every time her footsteps hit the pavement. Now that that was at least righted, she leaned back into the bench, thinking of her next move.

She ended up wandering through the woods—aimlessly, this time—avoiding Robin’s territory. She couldn’t stand to be by the water. She meandered by Augusts’ old place and the Snow Queen’s truck, tapping her fingernails along their metal exteriors and catching herself wishing for a time when the threat on the horizon was brutal and magical. Anything but love. The last time she sought asylum in the woods, it was because she was afraid of what her powers would do to those she loved. Now she was afraid of what her words would do.

She felt ridiculous as she leaned against the back wheel of Ingrid’s truck, a grown woman once again literally running away from her problems. You could take the lost girl out of Neverland, but you couldn’t take the lost girl out of the girl…

She held up Odette’s ring in the light, that unnatural shine reflecting along the forest floor. She held Liam’s ring next to it, forming almost a Venn diagram of jeweled metal. She’d never put it on her fingers, Liam’s ring. It wasn’t for that. Even when the meaning had changed, of course, after she’d met the man who was everything his younger brother described.

“Hang on to that then, yeah?” He’d said before passing on from the Underworld. “You’re a trustworthy sort. Thanks for keeping my brother on his toes. Keep at that, if you would.”

Odette’s ring was finer than Liam’s. It wasn’t actually a full circle—and the whole thing had a curve to it like interlaced swans. Feathers were etched thinly around the barrel of it, and a stone as pure as starlight nested in the centre of it. She wondered about that—why they ran with the whole swan thing. It was a terrible curse after all, one that had almost gotten her other self killed. She wondered what Hunter’s ring looked like.

And if he’d wanted to move on so badly—why hadn’t he given her his ring, too?

Emma fiddled with the thing, turning it this way and that until her precarious movements caused it
to slip almost out of her grasp. In a truly unrepeatable move, she flipped it onto her ring finger before it could be lost in the leaves and dirt. The sight of it there caused her heart to clench. She’d expected it to feel absolutely toxic, but…it felt not wrong at all. It felt warm. She was even more grateful, then, that Hook wasn’t there to see it.

A sudden flash went along her spine, and she dug her hands into the earth, as if channeling its stability. Before her eyes, a light pattern rose along her skin. Suddenly her vision divided—or overlapped or something. There was an overlay of another forest around her, she was burning with the rising sun. She stretched into the light—no, she was pulled into it, a torturous writhing. An invisible force pushed and prodded her bones into new shapes and sizes and she screamed. What is this what is this what is this stop stop stop stop please. As the last bit of night bled into daytime, she settled back to the earth.

The second forest dissipated. The pain did not. She sought out the side of the truck for support and recoiled at the reflection glaring back at her.

There was only forest and a bird.
Emma stared at the reflection in the scratched metal for several more seconds, shifting this way and that. She lifted a wing—her wing—and the span reached much further, she was sure, than an average swan’s. Her feathers splayed in the waning daylight were pure white, layers of delicate curves that made her want to scream.

The ring.

The warmth, the pull she’d felt, a magical lull of safety, the way she’d turned it in her palm like a talisman. It had never been Odette’s wedding ring at all, had it? That bastard had given her the cursed object that had trapped Odette in bird form, the form he’d almost killed her in.

That bastard.

Emma was so furious she wanted to cry. There was no ring to take off. She pecked through the leaves all around her, once, twice, three times. It must have disappeared during her transformation. Liam’s ring dragged through the undergrowth as she scoured. Thank God that hadn’t disappeared, too. She gave up, eventually, settling on the forest floor in defeat. How was she going to wring Hunter’s neck if she didn’t even have opposable thumbs? Well, if Killian didn’t run him through first.

Oh God. Killian.

She’d left him in the worst way, but she had to go to him. Someone needed to know. And whether he wanted to see her right now or not, he deserved to know he was now dating and playing house with a bird. Emma Swan, the Actual Swan. God. She tested her wings lightly, terrified by the idea of flying, but weary of waddling all the way through the woods and town. She could not believe this was an actual situation she was in.

After a few false starts—she was doing it. She was flying.

Apparently magical swanhood came with complimentary autopilot—she barely thought about the dip of her wings and the nuances of the currents she slipped in and out of. She lost track of time. There was something different about the air up there, everything felt purer. Down below, the trees blurred into buildings, light. Soon she was circling the Jolly Roger, where Killian usually retreated to after particularly spectacular arguments. She hated driving him to his beloved ship in anger or pain. She found him leaning above deck, and though his features were blurred by distance, she imagined he was glowering into the depths below.

Her earlier words were circling around her skull once again.

My wedding ring.

Of all the dumb things she’d said when she was in pain. Well, maybe she deserved to eat crow, or swan, as it were.

She dipped lower and lower, finally alighting on the railing of the prow, a good bit away from where he stood. He’d followed her progress since she touched his field of vision, and now he gazed at her with a tenderness that hurt.

“Well aren’t you a bloody marvel.” Killian breathed. There was a stillness that encompassed him even as he recalibrated his posture towards her and made gentle movements in her direction.
He was trying not to spook her, she realized.

She opened her mouth—beak, dammit—hoping she was imparted with Talking Animal Guide ™ powers of communication as well as her complimentary GPS. Nothing that could even be generously described as a syllable came out. She squeaked.

“Hullo to you, too, pretty lass.” He grinned boyishly, eyebrows rising as he drew even closer. “What’s that about your neck, then? Haven’t found yourself caught in a bit of fishing line, have you?”

He took whole strides now, emboldened by her lack of skittishness. His steps drew short when he finally made it close enough to see what really hung around her long neck.

“Emma.” He breathed.

She wanted to sigh in relief.

“I’ve got to—I need to find her.” The shock had drained from his face, replaced by rising panic.

Her heart sank. She had hoped—she had thought that he had recognized her. That their True Love, their shared heart, any of their ties would allow him to see through the black mask and magic to her.

He bent toward her suddenly, and she flinched.

“I’m sorry, love, but I’m going to need that.” He reached for her neck—Liam’s ring on its chain—and as he did, an idea struck her. She leaned into his reach, deliberately nudging the space over his heart with her beak.

He looked down at the slight pressure between them, the gesture that was so familiar to them. He looked at her more thoroughly. There was no way to work her strange avian facial muscles into any kind of expression he would recognize. She merely held his gaze as he raised shaking fingers to her face. She leaned into his touch as he gently swiped his thumb beneath her eye, smoothing his fingertips until they cupped her face.

“Emma?” He sighed her name. There was a skip in their shared heart. It had a way of doing that—offering glimpses into each other. The softness remained buoyed in his tone, the only lightness to him as his expression bled free of Killian Jones and became all Captain Hook.

“What did he do to you?”
“He did do this, didn’t he?” Killian asked, fingers outstretched and trembling, but never quite reaching toward her. Like she’d shatter if he touched her. Like he would shatter anything he touched right now.

She dipped her head.

“That…that honourless blackguard.” He bit out. “Acting guileless as a newborn babe. When I get my hand and hook on him…”

It went on like that for awhile, with him delivering progressively more colourful and inventive threats. Emma remained silent throughout, let him have his way about it. Finally she rested her head on his hand gripping the deck rail.

Immediately he drew up short, running his hand along the back of her neck.

“We’re going to right this, love. I swear it.”

She blinked slowly. It was more catlike than birdlike she imagined, but it was all she could do to let him know she believed him. Believed in him.

Unexpectedly, he laughed.

“I don’t suppose you’d be interested in a bit of Wonderbread would you?”

She pecked him. Hard.

Within the hour, they were at her parents’ loft. Regina was on her way with Henry. David had stammered out a text without ever taking his eyes off of Emma, which was impressive honestly. Then the four of them played the waiting game, which mostly consisted of Emma shuffling her feathers uncomfortably beneath their incredulous gazes. Hook hadn’t given them any heads up, just shown up banging on the door, Emma in the crook of his arm. The trade-off for being spared the indignity of waddling along behind him was being toted around like an accessory dog.

David had merely stared at the picture the two of them made, opened his mouth, shut it, and tried again.

“Say, uh, Hook, buddy, you haven’t been on a bender have you?” He finally uttered.

“We’ve got a problem, mate. Emma.”

“What about her?”

He’d given her the full Simba treatment, then, lifting her in front of him.

“She’s a bit of a bird.”

Now they sat around the small kitchen table. Mary-Margaret kept making little choked noises. David’s brows were likely permanently furrowed. And Emma sat perched on Hook’s lap as he thumbed circles along her side like she was a good luck talisman. She’d been in some spectacularly horrific situations, and this was truly taking rank.

After what seemed like ever after, Regina burst through the door, hands raised and crackling with
violet magic, Henry shielded behind her. When she took in the atmosphere, she lowered her hands and strode into the room.

“The ambulance emoji is only for real emergencies.” She said disparagingly. “And this hardly fits the—what the hell is that?” She stopped short, gazing balefully at Emma nestled in Killian’s lap.

“Hook—why do you have a swan?” Henry asked, moving passed his mother.

“Ah, funny thing, lad…it’s your mom.”

“What?”

“What?” Regina narrowed her eyes.

“Apparently…the prince…Hunter, gave Emma a cursed ring.” Mary-Margaret explained.

“Why would she put on a ring he gave her?”

Emma’s heart lurched at the confusion on Henry’s face. Accident or not it should have never happened. She never should have accepted the ring in the first place.

Regina’s scowl broke into a feral grin. “Oh now this is fun.”

“Regina.” Mary-Margaret snapped. “This isn’t a cute prank.”

“How rude. I think she looks very cute.” Regina replied, unabashed.

David made a cutting motion with his hand. “Can you help her or not?”

“Fine, fine.” She turned her gaze on Emma, drawing nearer to the table, leaning into the woodgrain. “Let this be an object lesson not to take pretty objects from pretty strangers.”

Emma made a mental note to flip Regina the bird at the next opportunity. She tried not to shy away as Regina fanned a palm around her, softly glowing indigo. Regina hummed a bit along with the magic then pushed away from the table.

“This curse is tied intimately to an object that has a fluid relationship with dimensionality. I can’t do anything without the object, and the object is present but on an untouchable plane.”

“Not without that ring there isn’t. Unless.”

“You have tried kissing her, right?” Regina asked, brow raised.

“I—“ He trailed off, looking nonplussed as his gaze drifted down to Emma. She looked as chagrined as a swan could manage. “No, but—“

“Are you trying to waste my time?” Regina brushed the hair out of her face in a huff. “You have True Love’s kiss at your disposal and you haven’t even--? Well, go on then, Captain Crunch.”

Killian and Emma just continued to look at each other. She knew it shouldn’t be such a big deal. They’d kissed thousands of times. They didn’t even have to question the magical nature of their love—they’d proven that when together they quelled the Darkness in her. But this was…

“Don’t be shy.” The slyness returned to Regina’s expression. “No one will judge if it gets a little
bestial in here.”

“For the record, that’s something I never want to hear either of my moms say, ever.” Henry grimaced.


Emma tried not to think of her family watching on as she extended her neck to meet him halfway. She tried not to think about the contact itself because just coexisting together like this felt unnatural and precarious and everything that she and Hook weren’t. But then it was happening and--

Everything went pearl.
She sighed into his lips, flexing her fingers softly against his jaw.

“Curses only take a single kiss to break.” He prodded her weakly, hand gripping her forearm with what little strength he could muster.

“I’ll kiss you as often as I please.” She rested her forehead against his, lingerling until the tears that had been gathering withdrew. She didn’t want him to know how she’d thought she’d been too late, that she’d thought Regina’s singe spell had worked its way to his heart, how she’d thought the smoke gently spilling from his lips was a precursor to his inevitable combustion.

“Well, I confess to hoping it pleases you often.” His chapped lips quirked along with the double entendre before draining into a somber line. “Thank you, Odette. Once again my knight in shining armour.”

She drew a half-moon across his forehead with her thumb.

“Siegfried. You really must stop taking strange things from strangers.”

“Emma?”

Siegfried’s face swam out of her vision, breaking apart as if a mist was being lifted.

She was being lifted.

“Killian?” Her tentative fingers grew frenzied, digging into the lapels of his leather jacket, trying to ground herself in reality, terrified of where she’d just been, who she’d just been. The jarring memory of it delayed the realization of the fact she was able to claw her way deeper into his embrace, able to speak his name. She looked down at herself, her wholly human body, felt the familiar weight of soft leather resting along her shoulders.

“I’m me again.” She uttered.

“Yes, thankfully.” He dipped his head until his forehead brushed hers, and she jolted. There was a pained expression on his face when he withdrew. “What’s wrong now, love?”

Her lips parted, but she couldn’t tell him she felt the echo of warm skin foreign to her, the shared breath of another True Love’s kiss—one he was not on the other end of. Strangely, she felt choked with emotion, like it was water spilling into her lungs. But she swallowed it back, and offered him a quirked half-smile.

“You look taller.”

“Are you alright, Mom?” Henry knelt beside them, and she realized they were on the ground, she was draped in Hook’s arms, her family a half-moon around them.

“Yeah, kid. Just…frazzled.”

“Being a bird will do that to you.” Her mother nodded sagely.

“Speaking from experience?” Regina asked, tone languid and casual.

“You know I am.” Mary-Margaret’s eyes narrowed, but there was no heat to it.
“A lovebird. A wedding gift.” Regina disclosed to the rest of them. “I thought it would be ironic if I could get her hunted in her own wood during her honeymoon.”

“That’s pretty messed up, Mom.”

Regina shrugged. “It was a phase.”

“Emma, how do you feel?” David asked after rolling his eyes at Regina.

Emma looked up at her father. She couldn’t appreciate the hilarity of the angle through the tension coiled in her chest. She wondered if Killian felt it through one of those little glimpses they had into each other now. She sincerely hoped not.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. Help me up?”

He bent down and offered a hand, taking on most of her weight as he gently got her to her feet. Killian rose behind her, but it was her father who caught her as she swayed. She tilted her head into his chest, allowing herself to be steadied.

“Easy.” He murmured, pressing his hand solidly into her back.

“Maybe not so fine.” She confessed. “I feel sick.”

“Curse sickness.” Regina offered. “Varies from curse to curse, but gentler curses like normative transmogrification usually come with something like vertigo. You should lie down.”

Emma nodded into David, then broke away, resolved to stand on her own. Well, almost on her own. She leaned on the table for support. “Thanks for all your help. Honestly I thought this was going to be a bit more of an ordeal.”

“Oh, it’s far from over.” When Emma lifted her eyes to meet Regina’s, she found her instead locked with Killian.

Oh.

“You’re damned right on that count.” He murmured. She marveled, though apprehensive, about the way he could make something so soft so fearsome.

“We need to find Hunter.” David agreed. “He’s crossed several lines now.”

“What are we going to do with him?” Mary-Margaret asked.

“I’ve got a few ideas that are downright poetic.” Killian offered.

“This isn’t the wild west. We’ve got laws to abide.” David said, not unkindly. There was a fire to him that echoed Hook’s. Something that straddled the line between vengeful and protective. It was a restrained, watered down darkness that made Emma’s head spin. Or maybe that was her just coming down from the curse.

“Not today.” Emma said softly.

Their heads snapped in her direction.

“I don’t want to see him today.” She elaborated. “I just want to, I want to sleep.” That feeling—fabric-softened oblivion, the ghost of ashes on her lips—ran through her like a current. She felt heavy with it.
“Swan!” Killian caught her as she fell, and this time she didn’t even try to fight sagging into another’s arms.

“The ring,” Regina said. “Get that off her. It will only make the sickness worse.”

Killian fumbled for her limp hand, securing the silver band between his forefinger and thumb. It didn’t move.

“What the—” He pushed with scouring force, then, and through the haze of exhaustion Emma screwed her lips against the pain. “It won’t bloody budge.”

“Regina, can you magic it off?” Mary-Margaret asked.

The queen shouldered Killian aside gently, and he watched on with a terrible intensity that bled into his supporting grip on Emma. Regina tapped the ring three times with her own ring finger, all the while whispering words laden with magic. Deep violet danced along the band, lit its crevices and something else—a spark of discomfort burned along with the magic until it reached a fever pitch and Emma screamed.

“Stop, stop!” Mary-Margaret said, shrill.

“Mom!”

“Swan.” Killian breathed as she burrowed into him, recoiling from Regina. His voice grew infinitely rougher as he redirected to Regina. “What did you do.”

“The ring is…fighting back.” She sounded taken aback. “That happens, sometimes. This curse is a lot more complex than I thought. It’s—it’s like it’s bitten and its teeth are lodged in bone.” She trailed off into a muted, musing tone.

“What can you do?” Henry asked.

“I can burn the cure out of our resident timeline hopper.” Regina said absently, eyes never leaving the smoking circle around Emma’s finger. It had cooled against her skin, but had left a rawness that she had to bite her tongue against.

“Not if I do first.” Emma said gamely, but her bravado was sapped of much conviction.

“We need to find him sooner than later.” Regina said finally, looking present again. “I have this irksome feeling in my gut that tells me Siegfried had more than moonlighting as a swan intended for Emma.”

“We’ll split up.” Mary-Margaret said. “A couple of us can stay with Emma, while the rest bring Hunter in.”

“No.” Emma shook her head. She didn’t want them anywhere near that man. “He’s too unpredictable. We know that now. You can’t go without me. I’m the best insurance you’ve got.”

“By the time you’re good to go, he could have skipped town.” David said. “Or if Regina’s right, put the rest of his plan into motion.”

“Just trust me.” Her eyes drifted shut, and she turned into the light chill of Killian’s jacket, the warmth of him under it. The exhaustion was creeping through her again, along with a throbbing headache that put everything through a lens of blurred colour and sharp pain. Her vision narrowed, and colours swirled into each other until they were bright, bright white. “Killian.” Her voice sounded far off, alienated from her own throat.
He snapped to attention, grip light despite the maelstrom she felt steeped in his frame.

“Yes, darling?”

“I’m going to faint now.”

And she did.
ashes ashes we all fall

When she came to, Emma found herself tucked into the guest bed on the upper floor of her parent’s loft. The soft lavender twilight told her way too much time had passed. She propped herself up on her elbows, happy to discover she only had the ghost of a headache. Even happier to find she could no longer taste char and kisses knit with magic.

She looked at the ring on her finger, hands tightening in the comforter. Holding it for Hunter was pretty high up there for the prize in rotten judgment. She wanted to test it with her own magic, wanted it off as soon as possible, but the memory of searing flesh rendered her immobile. She sighed, pushing aside the blankets and rising.

Once she was sure of her balance, she made her way downstairs, leaning on the railing just a bit more than usual.

“Emma.” David straightened at the granite island. Killian likewise abandoned his steaming mug, crossing the room in urgent steps. He stopped short a few steps so they were nigh eye-level, reaching out to smooth his thumb across her face, assessing. The relief on his face caused her heart to seize up.

“You fell like a stone at sea.” He murmured, hand lingering.

“I gave you a heads up.” She shrugged, smiling wanly.

“How are you feeling? You probably shouldn’t even be up and about.”

There was a tremble to him. She put a staying hand on his shoulder, and covered his hand with her other. It wasn’t the residual flightiness of the Darkness in him, it was pure concentrated worry.

“I’m okay. Sorry for the scare.” She glanced at David then back to Hook, including them both in her question. “You didn’t go after him, did you?”

“It took a Herculean effort not to, but no.” David said, lips downturned. “Regina took Henry home. Mary-Margaret went to consult Belle. In fact, I need to let her know you’re up.” He picked his cell up from the counter and began typing furiously.

“Thank you.” Emma said, eyes closed in gratitude toward whichever stars aligned so her family didn’t run off half-cocked without her. “Not to drop and bail on you, but I need to go home.”

“You sure you don’t want to crash here for a little bit? It’ll be just like old times, midnight popcorn and hoping the latest Big Bad doesn’t come knocking before the microwave dings.”

“Tempting.” She smiled. “But I won’t be by myself, and I feel just this side of in fighting shape.”

 “…alright.” Her dad said after a few reluctant beats. “Be safe, Emma. Don’t go at this alone. I know you think you’ve got some kind of immunity idol since the king claims to be your True
Love, but his heart is in all kinds of wrong places. Things could get volatile.”

She didn’t reply, just gently tightened her grip on Killian’s shoulder, then moved past him to hug her father.

“He has no idea what’s coming for him.”

Since Henry was with Regina for the night, she and Killian took the opportunity to sleep aboard the Jolly Roger.

“I’m sorry.” She said as soon as they made it to his quarters.

“On what count?” Killian asked, brow raised as he shucked off his jacket and left it strewn over the back of his desk chair.

“I’m so sorry I ever took this damned thing from him.” She swallowed hard. “That I used it to hurt you. That I wanted you to hurt.” Her throat began to close around the words.

Killian was silent, rigid as he leaned against the desk. He prodded a miniature golden globe between his hook and hand to break the stillness as he bode time.

“It’s just so messed up, I’m all messed up—” She began. “But that’s no excuse.”

He sighed. There was that tenderness again, the painful kind, like putting pressure on a bruise.

“When you claimed that ring.” He took a deep breath, bracing himself. “When you claimed it as your own. I never thought—we’ve been fighting for our future so long—whether I want to or not, I think a better man could wander into your life. Someone who doesn’t have to fight tooth and nail to be somewhat decent, someone meant to be a hero.” For once, he was struck inarticulate, stringing together his words in a flurry.

“You are exactly the hero I want.” She said, drawing nearer, but still too far to touch. She closed her eyes a moment to steel herself—for his hurt, for his rejection, she wasn’t sure—before she placed her hand just apart from his on the face of the desk. “I never meant to make you question that. I was scared of what Hunter might mean, and it hurt that you didn’t trust me to figure it out.”

“What a mess we make when we’re afraid.” His lips quirked in an almost-smile, and though like everything else lately, that hurt, too, it also meant things could be alright between them.

“Aye.” She agreed, gently prodding him.

They simply looked at each other a moment, reorienting themselves.

“It’s been quite a day.” Hook said finally. “And the forecast for tomorrow is no brighter. Why don’t we get some rest?”

She nodded, and they began undressing, leaving their clothes in warm piles on the floor of the cabin. She didn’t bother with the night bag she kept over. Emma crawled straight into his bed, keeping the covers lifted so he could follow. It was much narrower than the one in their home, so they ended up spooned close together. With anyone else it would have felt claustrophobic, but with Killian it just felt steady, safe.

“It’ll be alright, you know.” He said just as she had given up on conversation and closed her eyes.

“You really think that?” She wasn’t trying to be disagreeable. It just seemed each new video game boss led to whole new worlds of damage.
In answer, he dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. They drifted off soon after, with the day nestled in the little space between them.

Then Emma was running. Glowing-eyed shadows were reaching for her, laughing silent laughs that echoed in the darkness around her. She heard Pan’s voice in all their wicked mirth. There was a pinprick of light ahead, a tiny burst through the writhing darkness of the landscape around her.

As she ran, blue fire lit her path, low to the ground. It scorched the shadows when they flew too close, so she mistook it for a blessing. It began to crawl into her path, languid and teasing. Each misstep into the flames drove it high along the wall, echoing the screams of her loved ones—she recognized Mary-Margaret, Henry, Regina—tears began to roll down her cheeks, mingling with sweat, and she tasted burning.

Finally she reached the light in the distance, desperate to be consumed by its brightness—

They were by the lake. The sky hung low with twilight, and the water was too still. Her family was too still. She looked behind her, and the darkness of the corridor had converged into three hooded figures. The first stepped forward, dropping his hood with little ceremony. Merlin.

“You didn’t leave the sword alone, Emma.” He said somberly.

She glanced down at the unexpected weight of Excalibur in her hand, blade nicking the ground. The second figure stepped forward, and his robes misted away in flashes of black and silver. Killian.

“You know what you have to do, Emma.” He said. “Run me through. It’s come time to die the man you made me.”

“No.” She wanted to scream, but she could only manage the barest whisper.

“Tick tock.” Merlin began.

“Tick tock.” Her loved ones ceased being silent onlookers, taking up Merlin’s chant.

“Do you ever feel like you’re being haunted by a Crocodile and a clock?” Hook smiled sadly.

Suddenly Emma was charging forward against her will. She tried to stop herself, to dig her heels into the ground, but there was nothing she could do. She drove the blade through his heart, and his screams—they weren’t sound, they were colour and feeling, red and agony piercing her all over, beating inside her head.

Killian crumpled to the ground, and Excalibur stained her hands with ash as Killian bled out.

“She’ll take that.” Rumpelstiltskin materialized beside her, waving a hand, causing the ash to swirl upward into a glass vial.

“And I’ll take that.” The third figure strode forward, his robes and hood bursting into blue flame. Hades leaned forward, crisp as sin, and laid a hand on Killian’s shoulder. Immediately, the cerulean fire consumed him. His mouth dropped open in horror--

She woke to him screaming beside her.

Since they’d returned to Storybrooke, she’d learned not to shake him awake, not to surprise him with rough grips and loud sounds. She bit back her own urgency, muscles tense with the effort it took to remain soft and guiding in the low light punctuated by his cries and trembling. She cursed as she wondered if her own nightmares had caught. Sometimes their shared heart acted out in odd ways, a spark in one and a flame in the other.

“Babe.” She murmured, pushing back his bangs soaked through with sweat, trailing her fingertips over his face. He had rolled away from her, perilously close to the edge of the narrow bed, tangled in the sheets. She guided him gently back, tugging until he was securely in the centre of the disheveled blankets. Everything was sticky and too close, but she kept running her hands along his arms and stroking his face. She allowed the soft glow of her magic to creep into her caresses. “Hook.”

He came back to life in a frenzy of limbs and broken words coming out as if clawed from the back of his throat. He looked around with wild, unseeing eyes, fingers dug into the sheets.

“Please. Hurts.” He managed. She knew he wasn’t speaking to her. Not this time.

“It’s done. You’re safe.”

He turned to her then, frozen, finally present. “Emma?”

She pulled him to her, guiding his head to rest on her chest so he could feel how real they both were. “Which was it?”

The tension that consumed his entire body began to ease up with every forced deep breath. “The Hellbeast. The Hound. Chasing me. Made it to the Jolly, and I thought—I thought I could outrun it like all the rest. But it ran on the water, and everywhere it touched turned into teal fire. The ocean turned into fire.” By the end, he was slumping into her.

She dropped a kiss into the mass of his rumpled hair. “It’s done.” She repeated. “The water’s yours again.”


Emma hated how she couldn’t tell him definitively, yes, everything’s okay, we’re okay, we’ll stay okay. Because he was right. The bad kept coming, the worse kept coming, and even though their track record left them alive or brought back to life—they were never truly at rest.

“For tonight, it is.” She gave him instead, one hand rubbing soothing circles into his unbraced forearm and the other a calming weight on his slick stomach.

“I’m so tired, love.” She knew he didn’t mean for lack of sleep. He wrapped his fingers lightly around her arm. “I’m sorry to have woken you.”

“I’m not.” She flexed her fingers where they rested against his side. “Are you good to try for sleep again?”

“Mm.” He settled into her, not protesting as she drew him more snugly against her, sitting still
propped up. That was the drill. They guarded each other until they could slip back into the night with quieted fear.

Emma drew shapes onto his skin, broad waves and lopsided hearts that turned into gentle constellations. She hummed, sometimes missing the melody by a long shot. She gave him his favourite songs, seafaring ballads and wordless lullabies and that one Florence + the Machine song. She gave him all this until he fell into the stillness of untroubled sleep.

After hours of trying to find that place herself, she gave up the idea of sleep altogether. Thoroughly exhausted and restless at the same time, she couldn’t bear to be awake but she couldn’t bear to stay motionless. She finally moved from under him, taking her time to make sure he didn’t wake. She spelled her imprint into the bed, the feeling of her presence and warmth. He wouldn’t stir from her absence.

She pulled on her clothes in the dark, slipping out of the cabin and into the shock of moonlit air. She had no hopes for soothing. She meant to circle the deck, running her hands along the rail until she could whittle her restless energy to the point where she had no choice but to collapse into sleep, spent. But she found herself wandering away from the ship. She had gotten it right—she needed the water. But not this water.

Emma ended up at the lake where it all happened. The water was peaceful, disinterested in what roiled within her. What was that running its fingertips along the notches of her spine? She stood, a pillar against the wind that played tag with her hair. She shivered through the inadequate fabric of her loose blouse and jeans. She hadn’t thought to rummage along the floor for her jacket. She found herself sinking to the edge of the water, huddling inward. Her eyes narrowed at a flash beneath its night-dyed surface.

*A trick of the moon.* She told herself. But light didn’t bend itself into the shapes of faces.

With stuttering fingers, she reached for the water.

*And it reached back.*

She choked out a scream as she was pulled into the shallows, the chill of the wind nothing compared to what immediately soaked her through to her bones.

“Aralia.” She cried when she sputtered back to the surface.

“Got you.” She laughed bright as the moon above that illuminated her dark skin.

“You are going to regret that.”

“Oh don’t be such a spoil, ‘Dette.” The woman was entirely unrepentant, running her hands through her wet hair.

Emma tackled her into the shallows, and this time they both came up gasping.

When her breath came back to her, Aralia used it for even brighter laughter.

“If you’re going to get back at me, you should try something I actually mind.”

“Well I mind. I’m trying to get some sleep *before* dawn.” A sleep-blurred voice came from beyond the bank.

“Ditto.” Another voice echoed.
“Sorry Meredith, Fawn.” Emma called back in an apologetic whisper. She turned to Aralia with a pointed look. She had the decency to look a little sheepish. “What are you doing in the lake this late, anyways?”

“Trying to swim the dreams away.” She admitted, looking away. Immediately, Emma missed the light of mischief in her eyes.

“Is it the Owl?” She murmured.

“Isn’t it always?” She smiled bitterly. She’d been a famous dancer, before Rothbart had gotten to her. He’d seen her in King Siegfried’s court, at his coronation ball. And he’d taken to her. Like all of the Swans of the Fabled Bevy, she was another thing to collect. She hadn’t danced since then.

Emma offered her hand. “Lay with me. I’ll watch over till morning comes.”

“You’d do that?”

“I was part of—“

“The Royal Guard, Misthaven’s Finest—I know.” Aralia rolled her eyes in good humour. She took Emma’s hand with fingers pruned and icy. They returned to the others, seven sleeping forms. Rothbart had ensured that they could not stray, could not die of thirst, hunger, or exposure. He had ensured they could not live or die without his permission. There was no shortage of nightmares, of course.

Aralia turned into her warmth, snuggling close.

“Thank you.” She whispered into the fabric of her cloak, which had dried as soon as they returned to shore.

Emma recoiled from the water, pulling her hand back as if it were liquid fire. She pushed herself away from the bank on her elbows.

“What the hell.” She whispered. She ran her hand along her face, scrubbing until her skin burned. She stared at the lake for she didn’t know how long, but nothing happened.

Once she got back to the ship, she held Killian tight until first light, closing her eyes to feign waking up with him as if it wasn’t the first time she closed them since the water’s edge.
They wasted no time, barely eating breakfast before they were summoned to her parents’ loft. Regina was already there, Henry delivered to school, though apparently under much duress.

“He said he thought he should have a special laminated card for when things get all ‘series finale’ so he doesn’t have to miss out on the action.” Regina said dryly between sips of coffee as black as a crow’s soul.

“Sounds like someone’s taking their Author abilities a little too seriously.” David said.

“Wait do you think he could actually do that?” Emma asked, brows just this side of knitting. “Write himself a get-out-of-education-free card? That is the last thing I want to deal with right now.”

“I feel like there’s a mite more of a pressing matter at hand, as it were.” Killian said none too gently. His grip on her hand had become progressively stiffer as they converged around the kitchen table. The tension wasn’t directed at her, but it left an unpleasant hum in her nonetheless.

“Hook’s right.” Mary Margaret said, punctuating her words with the clink of her plate in the sink. “We need to get on this, get that ring off of Emma before—“ She stopped short.

“Before what?” Emma asked, facing her mother in suspended apprehension.

“Before whatever curse that swan curse was buying time for sets in.” She said grimly.

Emma averted her eyes. As soon as she’d stepped through the door, Regina had descended upon her, asking her a stream of questions as she magically examined her. She knew it was a mistake—her time as the Dark Swan more than anything drove home how very dangerous it was for her to withhold from her family. But Emma couldn’t bring herself to find the words that would explain the living memories that had enveloped her—how for those timeless moments she felt as if the line between herself and Odette was nonexistent. How she was genuinely concerned about some ragtag fellow swan women, especially Aralia and if she ever managed to sleep.

And she absolutely could Not tell Killian his True Love’s kiss had overlapped and intertwined with Hunter’s, how the warmth of his lips had faded away under the insistent taste of burning. God.

“We need to have this through.” Killian picked up the heavy silence.

“Right.” David straightened up from where he’d been hunched over his own cup of coffee. “Look, you’re not going to like this, bud, but before you got here we were talking and we think it’s best if we don’t go all….Hero Squad about this.”

Killian simply arched an eyebrow, waiting for her father to continue. Emma bit her lip.

“We think it’ll be a lot less—messy—if just Emma and I go, in an official capacity. We’ll take Hunter down to the station and go from there.”

“And what makes you think he’s going to come in any shade of willing?”
“Well, we won’t know till we do. But we can’t keep going the vigilante route, especially since Mary Margaret, Emma and I are officials.”

“You think he cares even the slightest about your legal trappings?” Emma’s nails bit into Killian’s thigh as his tone grew feathersoft. It wasn’t the kind of gentle he used when he whispered sweet nothings to her. It was the kind of gentle he used to mean manslaughter.

David sighed. “He may think he’s outside and above the law here, but we aren’t. Look, I’m not any kind of happy about this either. But we need to get this situation in check and keep it above board.”

Killian opened his mouth to deliver some glowering retort, no doubt, but Emma beat him to the punch.

“They’re right.”

“What.”

“They’re right, Killian. I hate it as much as you do, but this is already all kinds of messy. We don’t need another town-wide scandal to go along with it. Especially not considering recent history.” She’d been able to maintain eye contact with him until the last sentence, when her gaze dropped off into an imagined abyss in the woodgrain of the table.

*Recent history* being her brief reign of terror over the town. She’d had to give up her position at the station for a time—there was no way the people could trust her to protect them when they still double-checked the shadows for her. She’d only just gotten back in the swing of it, and the people were only just beginning to bury their wariness. If another new drama of hers shook everything up, there was no coming back from it.

She was drawn back by the intensity of the gaze she felt on her. They simply looked at each other for a suspended moment before he turned his head, releasing a current of curses that ran into each other.

“Do what needs to be done.” He finished.

“Alright.” David nodded, more to himself than anything. It was obvious he’d been expecting one hell of a fight and was in the process of thanking his stars. “Emma?”

She nodded, rising from her seat. She caught Killian’s hook in her fingers as she did, bending to kiss the chilled metal before moving to cup his face between hands cold with nerves.

“It’s almost done.”

He closed his eyes briefly, leaning into her reassuring touch. When he opened them again, they were blue fire, the only variety of it she could bear.

“Return to me whole.” He said simply.

“If that didn’t just sweeten my coffee and make the sun shine a little brighter.” Regina said, deadpan.

He spared a lazy, glowering look for her before returning his attention to Emma.

She gave him a balm of a kiss, channeling all her care and fury. Through the ferocity of the pressure, she let him know that between her and Hunter, she wasn’t the one who had to worry about emerging whole.
When she was through and they’d reluctantly parted, Mary Margaret came over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. After Emma drew her close in a hug, she turned to Regina expectantly.

“Call me when you’ve apprehended Prince Bootycall. We’ll do shots.” The Queen’s lips quirked.

And on that note, Emma and her father fell into step, prepared to hunt themselves a Hunter.

“He could be holed up in the woods.” Emma offered as they slipped into the Bug. “Apparently that’s his aesthetic, I keep hearing.”

“He spent a lot of time in the woods.” David conceded. “But he always had a castle to cozy back to, remember? Regardless, I already phoned Robin last night. He said there’s been no sign of any encampment beside the Merry Men’s. And Emma--we have to keep in mind that this isn’t the Hunter any of us know. Ours is a lot less of a prick.”

Emma took her eyes off the road for a hot second to glance over at her father.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

They rode in silence for a few minutes, Emma looking at the road with overcast eyes as David stared out the window. Her fingers dug into the steering wheel as she thought about what was coming. The last time she’d faced Hunter, he’d been disarming, soft with mourning and there was nothing wicked in the wistfulness he looked at her with.

But she knew better now. As the Bug ducked into a small pothole, the ring magically soldered to her finger caught in the overbearing sun. The sharp glint didn’t lessen as they levelled out. She began to frown at it when the glimmer turned hot against her skin.

“David.”

“What—wait, what the hell is that?” He’d turned toward her casually, but now his fingers twitched towards the bright metal.

A low swoop went through her stomach, followed by an alarming sense of warmth and wellbeing.

“I think—I think he’s close.” There was a flickering in her vision, and she struggled not to slam on the brakes in panic. She wasn’t going away this time, not to another living memory. But there was a memory, like any of her others. She remembered her cheek pressed to a window, racing raindrops on the other side of the pane with the tiniest nudge of magic. Her stomach had seized then, too, when she felt a looming presence behind her. It had been Hunter, and she had smacked him for sneaking up on her, but then he’d asked what she’d been doing so earnestly, she couldn’t stay mad. What had she said then?

“Nothing.” That wasn’t hers. None of it was hers. She didn’t know him.

“What?”

Emma hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud.

“Never mind.” As they were about to pass Granny’s, the magic warming her skin bordered on blazing. “No.”

“Now what?”

“I think he’s inside. But he can’t possibly be that dumb.”

“Or maybe that arrogant.” David frowned as Emma pulled into the nearest lot.
As soon as they fell back in step, her father put a staying hand on her shoulder.

“Are you alright? Did that hurt you just then?”

There was a choking beat of silence before she shook her head. It hadn’t hurt, exactly. But pain would have been easier. David held on a moment longer, searching her expression. Finally, he sighed and stepped back. She wondered what he saw.

“Alright.” He said brusquely. “Let’s get this over with.”

Emma barely heard the jingle of the bell above the door when they stepped inside the small space. There he was, seated in the midst of it like he belonged there, nursing a steaming mug, making himself at home in her safe place. He looked up as soon as they set foot in, not even giving David the slightest consideration. His eyes were all for her.

“I was wondering when you’d turn up.” His lips kicked up at one edge, but there was no fire in his expression, no challenge. There was that softness, though, that made Emma feel like she’d drank a gallon of hot chocolate in one sitting. Full and sick at the same time.

“Hunter of the Wiled Marsh.” David strode forward when it was clear Emma wasn’t about to take the lead. She was affixed to her place, her simmering battling with some more temperate, unidentifiable emotion. “You’re under arrest for the use of nonconsensual magic on a second party.”

Emma was waiting for something, for Hunter’s serenity to melt into fury, to put up a fight, to meander into a monologue about justifications. She waited for his calm to drop away and reveal the Villain underneath.

“Alright, then.” He fished a ten out of his pocket and left it as he pushed away from the table.

Emma and David exchanged a wary look, their bodies still posed for combat. They tensed up further as Hunter drew near, but he simply put out his hands, casting Emma a mischievous smile as he spoke.

“I don’t suppose I’ll have much luck calling shotgun?”

Chapter End Notes

hey everyone! thanks again for all the reads & support! you make writing this especially fun C:
a trickle then a flood

Chapter Notes

A/N: For those concerned: yes I am 10000% about the angst, but I am also 10000% about resolving it. So while the suffering is nowhere close to over, I promise I’ll temper it with some fluff n lovely before the resolution C: By the way, I’d love your input, be it constructive criticism or just letting me know what your theories are on where this is all going!

Hunter’s cool was intact even as they turned the key to the holding cell, and that unnerved the hell out of Emma. He had refused to talk about anything relevant on the drive over, merely smiling at their unanswered questions.

Cars. What an innovation. He’d said at one point, almost sighing. My mother would have been an absolute terror in one of these. So would I, for that matter.

“Ok, drop it.” Emma finally said, falling into position beside her father as she crossed her arms, forming a united front. “This whole well-meaning tourist act. We’re going to play show and tell.” She flicked her wrist, bringing up the hand heavy with the magical weight of his ring. “See? Yeah. And now you’re gonna tell me how to get this damn thing off.”

“Change your mind so soon? Seems like you wanted it on in the first place.” There was a delicate smugness to the curve of his lips. It took her a moment to figure out why the expression didn’t quite infuriate her.

It was because it was also laced with genuine fondness. Like he was playing a particularly impish prank on her, and couldn’t wait for her to join in on the joke because it would be better together. The realization lit her up with fresh fury. She’d give him a punchline, alright. Or maybe just a couple punches.

“It was an accident.” She bit out.

“How exactly does one mistakenly put a ring upon their finger?”

“Stop sidestepping. How do I get it off?” She was hardly going to explain to him her fumbling in the woods.

“Ask me another question. You won’t like this one’s answer.”

“Do you even realize how much trouble you’re in? How much you’ve caused?” David broke in, the muscles of his jaw twitching. “You violated my daughter’s will in a big way. You put her through hell and back—and trust me, we’d know—to fix the first curse, and now you’re gonna keep mum about whatever else is locked up in that damn thing?”

Hunter grimaced. “I did not wish to cause Emma any distress.”

“You give me a ring burning with enchantment that also happened to turn me into a fucking bird and you didn’t once pause to think, huh, maybe that’s a little distressing?” Emma took a solid step forward, fists clenched and shaking at her sides.
“I said I did not wish, not that I did not know.” His voice was whisper-soft.

“Yeah, well, either way you’re an ass. Now take it off.”

“Come here.”

“Not likely.” David said so quickly their words overlapped.

Hunter spared him an exasperated look. “Only the person who steeped magic into the ring can take it off.”

Emma and David shared an equally disgusted look. She hated that she had to let him touch her to free herself. He’d already mentally and emotionally assaulted her. This was the last line he hadn’t crossed. She took a shallow breath, gathering her fortitude. She strode forward, extending her hand through the gap in the bars.

“Hurry.”

He didn’t break eye contact with her as he supported her hand with part of his own and slowly shimmied the ring off. She sucked in a breath as the warm slide of his fingers against hers reminded her of him sliding on a wedding ring. She snapped her hand away as soon as the ring was off. He held it between his forefinger and thumb, a halo in the light for one last sharp second before he pocketed it.

“It’s not even her ring.” Emma said, voice pitched low.

“Not at all.” Hunter gave her a sheepish grin, tugging at the collar of his shirt and vest so he could get to the chain hanging beneath them. On the end dangled a ring with a wider band. She couldn’t discern the design from as far back as she’d retreated, but it sure wasn’t made up of swans.

“The ring is the Owl’s. One of the Seven.”

“The rings that bound the Fabled Bevy.” The words slipped out of her mouth before she could even think of catching them. In her peripherals, David tensed to attention, casting her a piercing look.

Hunter smiled, something blinding.

“It’s a bit of a jigsaw, innit?” He asked. “Yes, Rothbart’s captives. She kept their rings in the box where she kept his heart, in the end. She freed them, you know. Or you will.”

“What are you talking about?” David closed the distance between them, putting a protective hand on Emma’s shoulder. “You didn’t undo the second curse?”

“I told you you wouldn’t like my answers.” He shook his head. “The only one who’s been lying thus far appears to be you, darling. There is no second curse.”

“Bullshit.” Emma uttered. “You know that’s a lie.”

“The only one who’s been lying thus far appears to be you, darling. There is no second curse.” He repeated, this time with a bite. “The first was a diversion, I admit. And I truly am sorry for inflicting that trauma again upon any version of yourself. The second magic embedded in that ring, however, was one of the lightest of magics.”

“Then how do you reverse it?” She bit out, fingers digging into David’s shoulder, a brutal comfort.
“Oh, you don’t.” He murmured. “You can’t. See I imparted you with something much more powerful than her ring, Emma. I gave you the afterimage of her soul.”

Her face drained pale in an instant. Her vision narrowed to pinpricks that halted her breath, palms frigid. Her breath came back in a collapse of stale office air and the tang of metal.

“You what?” She breathed, because she desperately needed to fact check that last minute there.

“Her memories, the wisps of her feelings—you have a contraption here, that takes portraits? There is a flash of her that isn’t meant to move on, that can’t be taken off as easily as piece of jewelry.”

“You bastard.” David uttered.

There was another of those moments. Where she wasn’t really here, because she wasn’t real. Her hand had long since released its death grip on David’s shoulder, and now her hand slipped limply to her side. She had thought that there were no more lines to cross, that some part of her would remain untouchable.

“I need to go.” She murmured.

“Emma—“ Her father took her hand, practically scrubbing her skin raw as he tried to lend her his warmth.

“I can’t do this right now.”

“Alright.” He cast a caustic look in the king’s direction. “This is far from over.”

“It is.” Hunter agreed, looking like the cat that caught the canary but wasn’t quite sure how he felt about it.

“Take me home.” Emma finally squeezed David’s hand back, a half-hearted pressure to let him know she was present.

As he ushered her out of the station, Hunter called after in a low, soft croon.

“Think on me fondly.”

As soon as they made it to the sidewalk, Emma braced her hands on rough brick of the Department. Her breaths came in laboured puffs, and though it was a mild day, she felt like she was suffocating, the air too heavy and colours too bright.

“Slowly.” David guided. “One breath at a time. Focus on the give in the earth, the scratch of the brick, the hint of gasoline in the breeze.”

She listened, forcing herself to take one sensation at a time until it was all a grounding hum within her. Gradually her breathing evened out, and the colours waned in intensity. She curled her fingers against the wall, light scratches scoring her knuckles as she dragged them along. She pushed away from it altogether, turning to face her father.

“Sorry about that.” She mumbled.

“Sorry you had to go through that.” He returned. For all the gentleness in his eyes, his tone, there was an accompanying urgency, like he wanted to snatch her up in his arms and cradle her close. But he gave her her space. “Can you talk about it?”

“He was right.” Emma swallowed hard. “I lied to you all this morning. By omission. Ever since
Killian cured the first curse, I’ve been pulled into memories, like when I drank Hunter’s potion. But they weren’t his. I relived bits of Odette’s life.” She fiddled with the crinkled fabric of her blouse, needing tactile comfort. “But it’s different now. Now the memories are just there, all tangled up in my own.”

She finally met his eyes again, and had to immediately glance away from the stricken look on his face.

“And I’m scared.” Her voice was small. Lost girl. “Because curses, I could deal with. Memories, maybe. But a whole chunk of her soul? What do you do with that?”

David shook his head. “I don’t know, kiddo. But we’ll figure it out.”

She was inclined to not believe him, but she appreciated the gentle ferocity he spoke with.

“Take the day off. You don’t need to be around him all day today.”

“Thanks, but honestly I need to keep busy.”

“Then work from home. You’ll be on call, but I’ll field all the office work.”

Tears pricked at her eyes. There was too much to handle. Everything felt raw to the point even her father’s easy accommodation of her was overwhelming.

“Yeah.” She managed. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Do you have it in you to drop by the loft? I texted your mother on the way here to let her know how things were going, but I’m sure she’d prefer to see you in one piece herself.”

She nodded. “That’d be good. I could use a cup of cocoa, anyways.”

David pulled her into a tight hug, hands braced on her shoulders as he pulled back.

“I love you.”

“Ditto.” She gave him the strongest smile she could muster, which wasn’t much.

By the time she made it to the loft, she had a better poker face. As soon as she walked in the door, Mary Margaret bolted from where she sat, snatching her up in a bear hug that you wouldn’t think she had in her just looking at her petite figure.

“Thank God.”

“Uh, hi Mom.” Or maybe it was more apt to call it a bear trap, because Mary Margaret didn’t release her for ten more seconds.

“David said you took the prince in without much fuss, but.”

“Yeah it was unnervingly easy.” They drifted away from the threshold, Emma taking a seat while Mary Margaret began fixing her hot chocolate on autopilot. “Until he was kicking back in his cell and telling us that it’s too late to stop his evil plot.”

“You’re not wearing the ring!” Her mother was on tiptoes reaching for Emma’s favourite mug, but she rocked back to standing level in a heartbeat.

“The second thing set in already. Which, um, I kind of already knew.”

“What?”
“But that’s not important.” Emma said quickly. “Actually, Mom, I’m gonna have to skip the cocoa. I’ve got to find Killian. I just wanted you to know I’m okay.” For now, at least. She pulled her phone out of her pocket, unlocking the screen so she could punch in the first number on her speed dial.

“He left in a rush shortly after you left to bring in Siegfried. He apologized, said he couldn’t stand to wait around. He went to the water.”

Emma shot a quick text to him instead. *Headed your way.*

She knew exactly where he’d be, slumped in the bench with a soothing view of shuffling waves.

“Thanks. I promise I’ll fill you in soon, alright? I just—“

“The water can only calm him so much.” Mary Margaret smiled in understanding.

Fear still churned in her chest—fear of telling Killian how deep the magic ran, how Odette’s memories were becoming natural, side by side with her own. Fear of conflicting memories distorting her the truth of him, the truth of her family, and, God, the truth of herself.

Fear made her want to run and run far, but this time she only wanted to run in one direction: crashing straight into her pirate’s arms.
“Hey there.” Emma draped herself across Killian’s shoulders, hands twining around his neck. She felt his heartbeat jump, her own skipping in response. That was something she would never tire of—the way they got glimpses into the effect they have on each other.

“You’ve returned.” He sighed deeply, laying his hand over hers.

She savoured the warm contact, her face nestled in his hair, contrasted by the wind wrapping them in the scent of chill and brine. Then she pulled away, walking round the bench and taking the seat next to him.

“Is it done? This business.” He asked, leaning forward, elbows braced on his knees.

“I wish.” She flopped back until the back of the bench bit into her neck. “At least the ring’s off.”

“Aye, I noticed.” When she didn’t fill the silence he offered her, he continued. “Like a tot of rum to a wound, love. Do it quickly, if you would.”

“It wasn’t buying time for a second curse. It was buying time for some kind of…soul transfusion. Odette’s memories are slowly merging with my own. It’s like reverse amnesia.”

She expected him to surge to his feet, to rant and ramble with fury, or, worse, lapse into a lethal silence. Instead, he scrubbed his hand over his face.

“You’d think after just making bail on the Underworld of all places, we’d have earned some sort of slack on destiny’s part.”

“You’d think.” She agreed, reaching to wrap her fingers around his hook. She closed her eyes against the gently whipping breeze, the hair swirling in and out of her face. “Killian.”

“Swan?”

“Can you do a favour for me?”

“Anything, love.”

“Distract me.”

“Oh, well. I’ve many a shiny thought on how to do that.” His voice dripped with sin, and despite herself, a smile tugged at her lips. He shifted into her, knees knocking like buoys on the water, fingertips tracing her arm. “Let’s go on an adventure, then, love.”

He stood, offering her his hand and tugging her up beside him.
“I’m on call.” She pointed out.

“I believe it’s safe to say, under circumstances, that’s more of a pleasantry. Why don’t you let your father know you’ll be playing hooky?” He wagged his eyebrows, and she punched him solidly in the shoulder. Ever since she’d made the mistake of enlightening him about the phrase, he’d taken the flimsiest of excuses to use it. Often in reference to them. Often in front of her parents.

The call was short, made shorter by the fact she struggled to concentrate as she juggled listening to her father on the other end, and batting away Hook’s wandering hands on this end. He tugged at the ends of her hair, slipped his fingers and hook into her belt loops. David agreed in an instant, obviously relieved. She scowled a bit at the realization he’d been mostly humouring her before, but she couldn’t be bitter long. He was too worried.

“Someone’s taking their distracting duties to an extreme.” Emma commented as soon as she hung up and slipped her phone back in her pocket.

“Someone’s easy to distract.” He singsonged in reply. “And I always take my duties to heart, Swan. Now then, let’s away.”

They ended up picking up onion rings at Granny’s. Emma couldn’t bear to stay in one place for long, especially one recently tarnished by Hunter, so they ate them on the go, wandering away from the town.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Hush, we’re adventuring.”

She filched one of his onion rings in retaliation, snagging it with one finger and biting into it pointedly.

“You blackguard.” He feigned being scandalized. “You’ve more than enough of your own.”

“Tastes better because it’s yours.” She shrugged. “Look it up. It’s science.”

He merely scoffed. As they meandered, they hopped from topic to topic, almost rapid fire. Soon Killian was swept up in explaining the life he’d built in some RPG game Henry had recommended to him weeks ago.

“It’s truly ridiculous, the notions of pirates this realm has. But never mind that, I’m navigating the seas as this flouncy fellow named Sparrow, and I’ve already five of the Pieces of Eight—which are actually nine, figure that—but I’m well on my way to becoming the one true Pirate King.”

“Haven’t you already checked that off in real life?”

“That I have. It’s a lot less painstaking and guilt-ridden this time ‘round, however.”

She mentally kicked herself for bringing up his villainous past, but he strolled on, unbothered. “You know, you might give it a go, love. There’s a lass named Swann you can select, isn’t that a riot?”

“Maybe.” She said noncommittally, not able to bring herself to flat out decline when he was obviously so invested in the thing. She enjoyed a good bout of first person shooting every once in a while, but video games on the whole weren’t her speed.

A couple minutes later she finally picked up on where they were headed.
“You’re taking me into the woods?”

“Aye, I was wondering when you’d catch on.” He reached up to scratch behind his ear. “If it ‘twere at all possible on such short notice, I would have procured a steed.”

“Like back in Camelot.” Emma murmured, smiling as she remembered the bright flashes of the forest roaring by, her hands gripped tight around Killian’s middle.

“Precisely.”

They trudged through the woods seemingly aimlessly, abandoning their current path on what appeared to be Killian’s whims.

“Hook.” Emma stopped eventually, shaking her head. “Are you just trying to tire me out?” She hoped for his sake he wasn’t giving her the toddler treatment.

“If I were simply looking to exhaust you, Swan, I assure you I’ve a much more comfortable means of doing so.” The raised eyebrow left absolutely no room for misinterpretation.

She attempted to bite back her grin as she rolled her eyes.

Eventually the soft churning of running water reached her ears, and Hook picked up the pace, grabbing her hand and leading her forward. They broke through a particularly dense group of trees, revealing the bank to a wide creek.

“Oh.” She said. It was mesmerizing, the slow, steady movement of the clear water, pierced through with sunlight peeking through the trees as it carried along clusters of fallen blossoms.

“Come along, then.” He had stilled so she could take it all in, but now he urged her forward.

“Um, what exactly do you think you’re doing?” She stood her ground.

“Taking you for a dip, of course.”

“Ahahaha, cute. No.” There was no way in all the various levels of Hell she was going in there.

“I’d take your jacket off if I were you, darling.” He released her hand for the moments it took to shuck off his own. She made no move to follow suit.

“I don’t need to take my jacket off because there is no way I’m getting in that water.”

“Last chance.” He warned, reaching back for her hand.

“Okay, okay, okay!” She said as he gave her a quick tug. She wasn’t going down without a fight. But on the off chance this was a losing battle…She tossed her jacket on top of his.

“There’s a girl.” He grinned approvingly before his expression took on a devilish light. The change was instantaneous, within the second, he was hauling her toward the edge.

Emma let out a high-pitched squeal, digging her heels in to slow his progress. But he was determined, and fueled by the fact he had nothing to lose and everything to gain. He didn’t play fair, hooking his hook around her upper arm to give himself leverage as he put the brunt of his weight toward the lip of the bank.

She caught him in the midst of shifting his weight, and she used it against him, becoming dead weight and toppling them both over in a flurry of leaves. She landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. The air left him in one fell swoop. She laughed, not making any move to make things
the ground. The air left him in one fell swoop. She laughed, not making any move to make things easier on him, and not bothering to pick the stray leaves and twigs out of his hair. He merely smirked, eyes alight with joy and mischief, and she knew she was in for trouble.

“Think you’ve won, then?” He asked, flexing his fingers against her side. She squirmed a bit, wary of his self-assured attitude, and entirely too aware of the lines of his body pressed close to hers. She finally realized the source of his confidence: the proximity to the water.

“Don’t you dare.”

He grinned boyishly as his arm went around her back, bracing her against him as he rolled in quick succession, sending them straight into the creek.

Sun-warmed water saturated her clothes instantly. The point they’d entered in was barely deep enough to have the water reach her knees. She waded out, accepting her fate and bent on revenge.

Killian pursued her, unable to contain his satisfaction. “Now that wasn’t so bad was—“

She sent a concentrated splash into him, spraying his face.

“No, not so bad.” She replied cheekily as he spluttered.

“Bad form, that.” His eyes were dark as he stalked towards her.

For the second time, she realized she was in over her head. This time, literally, as he grabbed her and plunged them both below the surface. They were suspended for one bright moment underwater, the sun streaming from above like some holy light. She came up gasping, the sting of wild water in her throat.

“You, prick.” She managed when she finally had her air back.

“Simple matter of tit for tat.” He said. This time the darkness in his eyes wasn’t a show of petty, light-hearted comeuppance. No, they were heavy with a much more preferable promise.

Her retort was lost on her tongue when she realized how close they’d drifted together, hips pressed under layers of drenched fabric. When he bent closer, she subconsciously sucked in a breath that made his lips quirk.

“You’ve got something in your hair.” He explained, feigning purity as he picked a mangled flower out of her soaked hair.

“What a tease—“ She didn’t get the rest of the sentence out as his hand curled up into her hair, lips crashing into hers. The slide of his tongue against hers was dark and deliberate, and he swallowed the sound she made in the back of her throat. She pushed back his drenched bangs, the fingers of one hand knotted in his hair and those of the other shimmying up the wet fabric of his Henley in a slow drag that ended up with her palm resting over his heart.

“I missed you.” She confessed when they finally broke apart.

He raised a brow and she sighed, forehead falling to his shoulder.

“Since all this mess started.”

He hummed, and she burrowed into the feel of it reverberating in the column of his throat, feeling safer than she had in days.

“I don’t know about you, love, but I’m about ready to not be wearing my clothes as a second skin.
Let’s head home.” Killian said finally.

In a remarkable display of self-control, Emma bit back every innuendo that popped in her head. Instead, she interlocked their fingers and together they left the creek, stooping to swing their jackets over their arms before traipsing back through the close bouquets of trees. They went straight to their house, snickering at the odd looks they received as they dripped their way through town.

Emma showered first, emerging new with a mug of cocoa waiting on the counter. She took a grateful sip, eyebrows kicking up at the unexpected burn of rum. Killian muffled a laugh, dropping a quick kiss on her forehead before heading up the stairs to take his turn washing up. When he came back down, she had a blanket fresh out of the dryer that she draped round his shoulders, tugging him toward the couch. He closed his eyes in appreciation before pulling her down beside him, throwing an arm around her shoulder.

“Finally we’ve a moment to—what was the phrase?—Netflix and chill.” He said as the red home screen stretched across the TV.

“This is a little tame to be Netflix and chill.”

Twenty minutes into *Pulp Fiction*, Killian sneaked his hand up her tank top, cupping her breast, eyes never wavering from the screen.

“Netflix and chill?” He whispered solemnly a moment later.

“Netflix and chill.” She confirmed just as seriously, though she felt a surge of affection spiral through her.

By the end of the film, they were tangled up in each other, Killian lightly snoring with his head pillowed on her chest, one hand at an awkward angle as it loosely gripped her hip, and his hook dangling over the side of the couch. She feathered her fingers through his hair before letting her hand rest on his lower back.

“Thanks for the distraction.” She whispered.
The peace didn’t last. It never did, in Storybrooke. Maybe Emma had brought the possibility of happy endings back, but the fact was things were never Over.

She woke to her cell spitting out David’s ringtone. She wearily mashed at the screen with clumsy hands, and as it flashed to life she discovered she’d missed two earlier calls and four texts.

“Dad?” She asked, voice cottoned with sleep.

“Emma! Finally, thank God.”

“What’s up? Why do you sound out of breath?”

There was a huff on the other end, and the sound of crackling, but not static.

“And where are you?” She dragged herself to the edge of the couch, trying not to jostle Killian as she moved.

“In the Forest. Hunter escaped and odds are he’s playing house out here.”

“What.” She sat up straight then, pulled so taut the ghosts of sleep ceased haunting her.

“Yeah, I’m not too big a fan, either.”

“What happened?”

“Good question. I went out to settle a domestic dispute that got out of hand and by the time I got back, there was nothing but a pile of glittering ash in the cell.”

“Magic of some kind?”

“Well it’s certainly not Funfetti.” His voice wavered as his breathing grew laboured, and she wondered if he was hiking up an incline.

“Okay. I just need a few minutes to gear up, and Killian and I’ll take up the search. Where haven’t you looked?”

“No!” Emma was startled by the intensity with which he bit the word out. “The last place you need to be is anywhere near that man. I just called to let you know to be cautious. Are you home right now?”

“Yeah. But David, never mind before, I can handle him.”
“It’s not about you, baby, it’s about him. He’s not playing aboveboard—he never was. If he’s willing to force a chunk of soul into you, I don’t want to find out what else he’s willing to do to get what he wants. Just take Killian and go somewhere you won’t be found. Please.”

Emma chewed at her lip, tense with frustration and building adrenaline. She couldn’t let her family run around exposed while she played a glorified game of Hide-n-Seek. But she also knew her father was right. Hunter clearly had no limits, and she hadn’t lied to David, but it was a close call. She didn’t think the conflicting emotions skittering through her memories would incapacitate her again. But she didn’t know.

Not knowing made her terrified. And being terrified made her unpredictable on the best of days. She recalled the quick gash across Henry’s cheek when her fear of hurting him with her magic became a self-fulfilling prophecy. She recalled the exact weight of Merida’s heart precariously nestled in her palm, the intimate knowledge of the exact pressure she’d need to inflict to turn her fears to dust.

“All right.” She said hoarsely. “We’ll play hideaway. Keep me in the loop. Be safe. I don’t think you being precious to me makes you any more precious to him.”

“Don’t worry about any of us, Princess. He one-upped us with his party favour, but we’ll bring him down.”

“Give him hell.” Emma murmured.

“Cross my heart.” David huffed out a light chuckle. “Love you. Stay out of sight until one of us gives you an all-clear.”

“All right. Love you.” After they hung up, she leaned her head against the back of the couch, resisting the urge to bang it repeatedly, as if she could jar the tainted memories loose from her skull, jar this whole mess loose from reality. She turned to Killian, surprised to find him still asleep, though maybe she shouldn’t have been. There wasn’t much sleep between them between the flashbacks and the nightmares. She leaned over, smoothing her fingertips across the lavender circles crowning the space under his eyes.

“Hook.” She stroked her thumb across the scar on his cheek, bracing her weight on her elbow. “Wake up.”

Nothing.

“Killian.” She said louder, now jostling his shoulder lightly. He didn’t move but his breathing was suspiciously even. Controlled.

“Killian.” This time his name was blunt on her tongue. She patted his face lightly as if he were a withering flower who’d just fainted. There it was—the unmistakable seed of a smirk.

“Get up, you lug.” Emma’s pats became just rough enough to sting. “Before I magically Skype Aurora and inform her you’ve stolen her title of Sleeping Beauty.”

The smirk grew a mile long at that, and his eyes sparkled with mirth through slits.

“I must admit I’m not averse to the idea of lazing away a hundred or more years with your weight on top of me.”

She collapsed into him, hiding her face in his collarbone as she shook with laughter.

“That was quick work even for you.” She mumbled into his warm skin.
“I’m willing to slow it down.” He murmured, hook drifting along her spine. She shivered then, and it certainly wasn’t with humour.

She drew on the urgency of the situation for the willpower necessary to prop herself back up. If the fingers of her right hand played at the waistband of his jeans, well, she was an economic woman and not above multitasking business and pleasure.

“We can’t. Didn’t you hear me on the phone?”

“Nay, I was fast asleep. What did I miss?”

“Hunter wormed his way out of the brig. Using those magical shortcuts he’s so fond of.” She said bitterly.

Instantly, Killian gently guided her back in a swift motion as he sat himself up. “We’ve got to find him.”

“And I’m right there with you. But David says we need to go somewhere he wouldn’t think to look for us.” She added the ‘us’ to assuage the jagged nature of his biding fury, though the truth was she was painfully aware Hunter only had interest in her. “Dad said he’d let us know when the storm blow’s over.”

“I don’t fancy scurrying about town like some prey on the lam.”

“Believe me, I’d like to tag-team and settle this smackdown style as much as the next gal, but I agree with David. I’m not all here, Hook.” Her voice grew soft, unsteady. “Or there’s too much. Whatever. But I’m—I’m starting to not second-guess the memories. They’re just there, side by side with my own. Like they belong.” She wasn’t even going to start on the feelings that came with them.

“They don’t, though. You’re going to have to try and try hard to keep that in sight, love.” He offered a hand, pulling her to her feet, then drawing her close. He bent until their noses brushed, sliding along to place a spark of a kiss on her cheek. “I’ll do my level best to assist you in the endeavor.”

“Gallant. Well said. Admirable, even. But futile. Pitiabale.” They both tensed, turning to face Hunter as he strode into the room. Neither of them had heard so much as the click of the front door.

“Just how daft are you, thinking you can waltz your way here and come out of it unscathed?” Killian bit out.

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather skip the niceties of monologues and pithy banter. I’ve no heart to exchange quips with a scurvy-ridden sea mongrel such as yourself.”

“I hear a left hook is worth a thousand words.” Killian offered, hand splayed. “And I am feeling downright chatty.”

Emma’s stomach felt like it was full of stinging nettle, panic pricking its way through her.

“Hunter, you need to leave, and you need to leave now.” She said solemnly, trying to diffuse the situation.

“I’d like nothing less. I do, of course, require your escort.”

“We both know there is no way in any circle or other shape of Hell that I am coming with you.
Think. You’re outnumbered, you’ve got no chance here. Leave before things have to get nasty.”

“They don’t ever need to, sweet.” Hunter extended his hand. “All I want is to exist in the same space as you, is that so much a sin?”

“You shot every hope of that in the face when you magically raped me.”

Hunter tensed at the words, all of his leisurely swagger stiffening in place. “That’s a bit of a stretch.”

“What do you think it was?” Emma whispered. “Do you want a softer metaphor, Hunter? You forced somebody else’s soul into me.”

The confliction in his expression contorted until it was something sharp and grieved.

“They’re interchangeable. We’re all interchangeable.”

“Look at you and your shiny justifications.” Hook said coarsely.

When Hunter’s gaze swung to him, there was no grief, no unsteadiness, only fury.

“You know, I really did try to like you, despite it all. Despite what you are in my world. Despite you being in the way of my True Love. But you know nothing of pain or sacrifice.”

Emma’s grip tightened on Killian’s arm. He’d once called her his anchor, in spite, the Darkness coursing through his veins, dripping poison into his thoughts and words. Now she hoped she could truly be his anchor, the thing that kept him steady. No one knew pain or sacrifice, not like Killian. She wouldn’t let this stranger dig at his resolve. He was the one who knew nothing.

She took a step closer to the unwelcome king, partly shielding Hook. She raised her hands, and as she did they crackled with sharp light.

“Last chance. Leave.”

“Not without you, I’m afraid.” He didn’t look near wary enough of her and her magic.

She released a warning spark. Her magic was more inclined to heal than hurt, but it also had a protective side. Almost sentient, her magic was strongly tied to her emotions. And right now she was downright furious.

Hunter took a quick step back as the magic skittered toward his feet.

“I’m not afraid of you, darling.” He said, though his brows knit. “You’d never hurt me, not really.”

“Wanna bet?” Emma asked, voice pitched low with promise. She was long past tired of him talking about her like he knew anything about her. How did Odette put up with him for so long?

“No need to wager.” He drew a pattern in the air with his fingers, then pressed his palm in the same spot. A symbol flared to life, a warm glow the colour of everything underfoot in the woods.

“What the bloody hell?” Hook uttered.

Emma had little chance to put in her two cents before she was throwing her arms up, forging a brilliant shield against the oncoming magic, flaring from glow to inferno. She grit her teeth against the exertion it took to maintain the barrier. She could feel the heat of the sigil blossoming through.
“You have magic?” It was a question with an obvious answer, but she needed somewhere to place her bewilderment.

“Does that surprise you? You didn’t think the Owl was the only practitioner in my realm did you?”

The fiery onslaught began to wane, and she took advantage of it to send a paralyzing burst of brilliant light straight to his heart. But it never landed. He dissipated it with one slow movement of the index and middle fingers of his left hand, the other already two signs into another spell. She set to work on her own, but she couldn’t match him for speed. The beige light of his magic radiated through her and she cried out, dropping to her knees.

“Swan!” Killian cried. “What did you do to her?”

“Nothing damaging.” Hunter promised.

Emma’s vision was a blur of soft colours interspersed with fireflies. Her nails scraped against the floor as she pitched forward, trying to support herself. Through the haze, she discerned Killian’s kaleidoscopic form charging forward, hook raised. The series of compounded shapes that must be Hunter sent forth another sigil, and Killian crumpled to the floor. She tried to scream his name, but the barest of slurred syllables made it past her lips before she was on her side, breathing heavily. Suddenly Hunter’s disjointed form loomed over her, crouching to cup her face gingerly.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way, dove.” He said as he dragged his fingertips across her forehead in a lopsided half moon. Instantly, the mess of sound and light dwindled to a pinprick of gauzy consciousness, slipping fast. The last thing she saw was the wavering hazel gaze of the king perched above her.

The last thing she felt was the pressure of his hands supporting her back, slipping under her knees. Everything went obsidian.
Hi hello! Hope this week was a rad one! Please enjoy this long bit of angst because it’s 3 AM & I’m feelin’ it.

Emma’s head felt like stars had gone through whole life cycles within the blackness behind her shut eyelids, burning out in fell swoops that cracked against her skull. When she opened her eyes, she had to steady herself with a steel grip on the cot she lay on. She struggled to her elbows, then to a sitting position, tension snapping its way up her spine as recent memory caught up to her.

Hunter. He’d knocked her out with some kind of magic.

But what had he done to Hook?

The thought pushed her through the fog still slowing her thoughts, her muscles. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, drinking in her surroundings.

“What the bloody hell is this?” She uttered.

The room was roughly hewn, like an amateur had tried their hand at making a home. It was small, a whole living space confined to a single room. There was a basin in one corner, a fireplace in another, and shelves and hooks riddled the little space left over, cluttered with books and clothing. She made her way slowly across the room, limping with the residual effects of whatever Hunter had cast on her. She peeked through the double windows beside the heavy door, only to find an endless line of trees.

She could be anywhere in Storybrooke Forest, then. Splendid.

Emma tried the door with hope already dead in her chest as she reached for the latch. Instantly, soft tan magic skittered across her skin, not even allowing her to make contact with the rusted metal.

“Of course.” She muttered. “Perfect. Love it.”

She sent a flicker of her own magic to test the barrier, and took an instinctual step back as it rose like tinder to a flame, only to settle back, consuming the light of her magic. She turned back round to face the cabin, eyes peeled for plan B.

“So this is where you’ve been holed up, you little rat.”

Emma turned the place down then, looking to uproot anything that could help her escape or get her in contact with her family. The place wasn’t very much lived in, judging by the dust and forest debris lingering along every surface. It wasn’t hard to tell which things were Hunter’s. She thumbed through a couple leather-bound notebooks on the floor at the foot of the bed. They were full of graceful scrawls that reeked of spellcasting. After pages upon pages of foreign symbols, she gave up, deciding the characters were either in Hunter’s native tongue, or ciphered with one of those sigils he was suddenly fond of flinging around.
Frustrated, Emma moved back to the window, scratching her nails against the dirty glass. There was another barrier there, but instead of lying atop it, it was strumming through the panes themselves, a barely visible pigment that blipped in and out as she applied pressure to it. She gritted her teeth against the invasive feeling of someone else’s magic, rising on her tip toes to see if there were any weaknesses in the shield that could be exploited, an opening where she could make an impact and have the laws of physics do the rest of her dirty work.

But of course not, because Hunter was a thorough son of a bitch.

Emma changed tacks then, doing a second run of the shelves musty with disuse. She was just grimacing against the thick dust getting ingrained into the pads of her fingers when a glint caught her eye. She reached over the spines of tattered books and the piles of odds and ends, back into the cove behind the backless shelf. The edge of the shelf dug into her shoulder and she strained against it, in danger of pulling a muscle. When her tentative touch didn’t send magical heebie-jeebies through her, she took a firmer grip, shimmying the fabric until she had it in her palm.

It was a satchel, pulled tight around an oblong object. She tugged at the fabric scrunched closed at the top, digging her fingers into the opening to reveal what rested inside. She held up the unearthed bottle to the light. It was nearly opaque, blue and grainy like sea glass. She tilted it this way and that, and was rewarded with a glimpse of liquid buoying back and forth.

“Oh, Mister Magic, why’s this important enough to hide?” She wondered, eyes narrowed at the mysterious substance. In a decisive second, she slipped the vial into her jacket pocket. If it was so vital to Hunter, it was valuable enough to steal away with.

A crackling came from the door, spurring Emma on. She quickly pawed through the closest pile of miscellaneous objects, stuffing the pouch until it was roughly the same shape as before. She slipped it back in place as carefully as she could manage with her heart trying its damn best to breach her ribs. She scrambled back to the bed as the door creaked open.

“You’re awake.” Hunter said, features open and lit with surprise.

“And you’re here. Are we done stating obvious things we’re not pleased about?”

She expected his expression to shut down, for annoyance to leak into his voice, but he just got… brighter.

“God, I missed your sense of humour. If you weren’t careful, it could swallow you whole.” He took a step forward, smiling fondly, and Emma pressed herself further against the splinterly wall the cot was shoved next to.

Hunter paused a moment, assessing, then tutted, turning on his heel to set down the messenger bag he’d been carrying.

“I’m not going to hurt you, you know.”

“Tell that to the pounding headache I have brewing.”

He merely *hmphed* lightly in response, digging into the bag. He turned back around, extending a hand.

“For you.”

She gave the sandwich peeking out of a wrapper a quick look-over before glancing back to Hunter.
“My mom’s Snow White. You seriously think she didn’t teach me not to take food from strangers?” Given, the actual story about the poisoned apple was a bit more dramatic than Disney’s and she full well knew who Regina was at the time, but fuck it, he didn’t deserve her best banter anyways.

Hunter held up his free hand in surrender, not even bothering to argue, wrapper crinkling against the grain of the night table.

“You’ll have to eat sooner or later, darling. You’ll grow faint.”

“I’m not your darling.” She glowered.

Hunter sighed, scrubbing his palms over his face.

“Look. I understand I’ve gone about this—well, not ideally to say the least. But it’s for the greater good, I swear it.”

“—Said every villain ever.” Emma said, bored. All the monologues she’d had to endure as the Saviour, and the Greater Good spiel was the absolute worst. She didn’t care what he had to say. The Greatest Good would be her, at home, in sweatpants, eating onion rings with her boys.

“I don’t blame you for considering me wicked. I know from your perspective I must seem…cruel. But I’m just trying to save something. Save someone. Heroes and villains don’t matter, not when it comes to that.”

“They do when you’re saving someone at the expense of someone else.” Emma bit out. “Odette is dead and gone. You need to let her go.”

“I wish I could.” Hunter said. “I tried, you know. For a hundred years, almost. But the pain didn’t wane or wither. Only I did.”

Emma wanted to chalk the soft pang of empathy up to Odette’s soul sitting in her like a virus. The truth was, though, she had all too firsthand experience on losing True Love. She’d had to watch Killian die three times now. The type of hurt that caused wasn’t something that could be described, only felt, and deeply. But more than that, Emma knew the selfishness that grew from those particular seeds of despair, the kind that wrenches free will out of other’s hands and raises the dead. She’d gotten Killian back, of course. But the heavy knowledge of the costs were always between them.

“Why me? Why now?” Emma finally asked, reeling herself back in.

“This isn’t my first go at bringing her back. I tried every avenue, every dark deal back in my world. But her body was destroyed and her soul—the real thing, not its fingerprint—had moved on.” His Adam’s apple bobbed with emotion, and she could only guess at how much it burned to have Odette move on without him. “This is my last chance.”

“Say your plan did work, whatever it is. What do you think would happen? We’d just ride off into the sunset together, live out our days in domestic bliss?”

“I don’t know.” Hunter admitted. “I haven’t let myself hope that far. This is all there is.” He waved absently between himself and her rigid against the wall. Silence lapped between them in a steady, unsettled tide.

She knew she should be taking advantage of the lull, fighting her way out of there tooth and nail. But all she felt was…weighty. Weighted. Like even the tick of her heart took an effort. When had the exhaustion crept up on her? She lifted the back of her hand to her forehead, seeking her
temperature. Her hands felt like they’d been submerged in snow. Her shoulder sagged inches down the wall, and she pressed her palm into the scratchy blanket to keep herself upright.

Hunter leaned forward, bracing her with a warm palm against her shoulder. He eased her down to her side, hand resting against her for the briefest second before drawing away.

“What did you do?” She murmured. “What’s happening to me?”

“I’m afraid bodies aren’t meant to cater to two entities, Emma.” The situation must be dire if he was finally using her name. He said it like penance. Like a funeral rite.

“Am I going to…die?” She managed, struggling against the haze settling into her. Why did she need to stay awake again? The thought of dying shouldn’t scare her. Death had been so avoidable thus far. There were loopholes, buffers. But this time, on some level, she knew this wasn’t really a death. It was something even more final. An erasure.

But which of them would be left piloting her body?

“If we don’t free up your mind, I believe so.” It was funny, the regret pulling at his words.

“What do you care?”

“I’m not heartless, Emma.” Hunter’s voice was hesitant, soft as it drifted over her. “Just because I want Odette to live doesn’t mean I want this version of her to cease to exist.”

Something about that jogged her memory.

“Versions of…what about the real you? My…you? How are you still here if…Siegfried…”

Her field of vision flickered in and out, and she closed her eyes against it, against the rising heat in her cheeks, the cold shiver along her limbs.

“I took care of my doppelganger.” There was beat of held breath. “See, Emma? I’ve sacrificed as well.”

Nausea flipped through her stomach.

“You…killed yourself?”

“How else was I to keep my foothold in this world? To let him live would mean…well all sorts of complications none of us need.”

“That’s messed up.” That was all she could muster, losing clarity at the rate she was.

“I’ll fill his space, eventually. This is my world now as well, after all. What was his is mine.” He paused, voice low with thought. “I owe him so much, as it were. A shame to send him to the Underworld so young. But I needed the foothold, as I said, and I needed free passage to Hades.”

That was important, she knew. She couldn’t place her finger on how—her mind was cottoned with heat and drowsiness—but she knew that was important.

“I hate seeing you like this.” He said, snapping back to the present. “And I hate leaving you like this even more. But this is hardly the worst to come, darling. I should have known it would be soon. I don’t have much in the way of healing magic, so I must run out and get what I can to ease the process. I won’t be gone long. Rest, if you can.”

She felt the press of his fingertips against her hair, then he was walking across the floor. As soon
as the door creaked open, a sharp second of coherence shot through her. Now. She needed to move now.

Summoning all her strength, she pulled herself to her feet. Hunter’s hands raised immediately, but he hesitated, and she knew he wouldn’t attack her in her state. She threw a stilling spell on him just in case.

“Emma—“ He began.

“No.” She murmured fiercely, taking a staggering step forward. She sliced her hand through the air, a lily burst of magic bringing him to his knees before he crumpled to the ground. She made for the open door, sure the barriers were down. As she passed him she stooped to card her fingers through his hair without a second thought, muffled panic rising at the possibility of him being hurt.

Emma pushed through the clearing the cabin was settled in, stumbling into the trees, uncertain of which direction to go. She just needed distance. Her mind was narrowing again to a soft point of confusion. She wanted to sink into the thick cover of leaves she was wading through, wanted to rest along the cool ground, ease the burning of her throat, her face. But she barreled onward.

She lost track of time. The sky was at a turning point in the day, becoming harsh with the clash of pink and yellow and purple, all stages of bruises duking it out above. That was all she knew. The trees looked all the same, and her steps were uneven, she could be wandering in circles. Time passed. She slipped in and out of full consciousness, the woods blurring into unfriendly shapes as things grew into the night.

“Help.” She didn’t know who she was appealing to, if they were even on this plane of existence. She just knew her throat was dry and she was scared. She’d never been in these woods before. She missed the crisp brush of the Wiled Marshlands, where no part of the flora could be mistaken for another, where every inch was a landmark unto itself. If only Siegfried were there to guide her back. The woods were practically part of him, he could travel to any land and know his way as if he were home. Part of his magic, he’d explained. Born part man, part Else.

“Help.” She sobbed, hugging herself tight in a useless attempt at consolation. So much for being the fearless daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. She couldn’t even save herself.

Shadows up ahead trembled and condensed, forming three solid figures.

She stopped in her tracks, ready to bolt if need be, but magic thrumming throughout her, volatile and ready to attack just as soon.

“Emma?” A woman’s voice rang out against the twilight. Lavender orbs of light hovered amid the figures, casting an eerie glow across their faces.

“Swan!” A man’s voice this time, surging forward along with him as one of the silhouettes broke from the others.

Before she knew it, she was wrapped up in the man’s arms, and he was speaking frantically into her ear as he pressed her tight against his chest.

“Oh, Emma. Gods, we were so worried. I’m so sorry. It took Regina a damned long time to track your half of our heart, there was some kind of interference—but that doesn’t matter anymore. Are you alright, love?”

She shook her head against his torso, pressing her palms into his chest.

“Love?” He asked as she began to push away from him.
“I’m not—I’m lost—I don’t—it’s too hot.” She shook her head again, running her palms against her cheeks.

The other two figures caught up to them, and she made out the faces of a sharp-looking woman and a soft, petite one.

“There’s something wrong.” The man bit out, harried. His hand clenched and unclenched against his side, and she finally noticed the biting glint of metal where his other hand ought to be.

“What happened?” One of the women asked, the taller one whose dark clothes blended with the night.

“I don’t—I don’t know.”

“I just want to go home.” She whispered.

“Oh, baby.” The shorter woman said. “Of course.” She moved to take her in her arms, but she took a shaking step back.

“This isn’t right. You’re not right.”

“What’s she going on about?” The first woman said impatiently.

“What’s he done to you, Swan?”

There was…there was something about birds, moon-shapes, kisses, no—something else. Like a dream, a beanstalk twisting through her memory, something unreachable at the top.

*We make quite the team.*

The sigh of a ship across the ocean, the clink of pirate’s luck against her own chain around her neck, the flush of light as darkness bled out of her, leaving her raw and grieving—

Her fingers brushed their way across her lips, parting—

She collapsed, the fire too strong to fight.

*Is this what it’s like, to spontaneously combust?*
She was walking through a myriad of pulsing silhouettes, tinged golden with magic that didn’t belong to her. The figures overlapped, a vibrant tangle of scenes, each leaving their brand on her skin, a gentle searing. There were so many voices interwoven until she was certain it was a single, ageless mass whispering phrases like broken glass in her ear.

“Unraveling.”

“--apart.”

“The burden.”

“To keep--together.”

She felt the truth of it—the very fabric of herself unspooling, her body a pyre of magic siphoning away the structure of her mind. She should be more scared, she knew—she should be downright terrified. She was dying after all, a slow burn building up to the Big Bang she sensed on the horizon. But there was too much balm in the light surrounding her to panic.

When she was able to focus, she could see the soft battle of her different lives—the wreckage of an enchanted wardrobe intertwined with the same wood used as a rocking horse, later replaced by her first steed as part of the Royal Guard. Mary-Margaret placing a crown weaved from Spring on her head in Camelot overlapped with the golden tracing of her father teaching her to fence in their special clearing in Misthaven.

Her gaze flickered amidst the cacophony of memories, all losing their edges within each other. She dipped her fingers in as she began to wander the matrix they made, and the gold light licked up her arms. This was the conflicting fire consuming her body, she knew. In the centre of the harsh glow, she found a mirror made of a pearly glass. She peered into it, savoring the chill relief provided by her grip on its edge.

“You.” She murmured. “Of course.”

The figure in the mirror smiled wistfully. She wore her pale blond hair to the floor, crowned by a feathered laurel. The glow of her heart beat golden through her battered armor. She extended a hand, and they interlocked fingers.

“Are you in pain, too?” She asked.

“It never stops. The hurting.” Her other self’s words were as much apology as confession.
“Unholy.” The mass said in its voice that wasn’t a voice, but lightning bursts of colour and sound and sensation all jumbled up in some kind of language. “Unpermitted.”

“One cannot be two.”

“The price is light or death.”

“Do it, then.” They said together. “Take it.”

All was silence. She didn’t realize the mass was also the low buzz of life underneath the muted memories. Out of the quiet formed another mass, burnished white. She couldn’t pin it down—every time it wavered its form changed, a quick progression of features. This way its head looked feral, feline, that way, flowing, elemental. It bent to her and she knew she was its home. Her magic.

She rested her fingers in its ruff, and where she touched the light burned out just a bit. Its answer was a soundless rumble along her skin, resonating in her lungs.

It left her then, burrowing deep, somewhere where it could ease to sleep the fire threatening to eat her alive. The loss of it grieved her, like a part of her soul had been cleaved and hidden. She turned back to Odette, but she was already gliding through her, a brief haunting that made them whole.

She was suspended in air, the golden silhouettes cracking and falling to ash around her. They mixed into each other, a swirling storm of light and char until it all funneled into her, casting its brilliance from within her veins, from within every cell.

“Emma.”

That was one of her names, she remembered. The name of Here.

“Mom. Wake up.”

She gazed up in absent awe as the new voice pierced the grey void. Jagged lines of lavender broke up the space until a star-strewn ocean began pouring in, filling up until her chin was just above water.

“God. Please wake up.”

“It’s safe now.” She told herself even as the water poured into her mouth.

“Come back to us. Come back to me.”

And so she did.

She came back gasping, arms flung out, looking for something to cling onto. It didn’t take her long until she found purchase in a woolen pea coat.

“Emma!” Mary Margaret lurched forward, gathering her daughter in her arms in one second and pulling back in another, holding her at arm’s length so she could really look at her. Henry was on her other side, she only just recognized his grip warm and tight on her hand.
There came the sound of shattering glass from below, followed by footsteps clambering up the stairs.

“Swan!” Killian rounded the staircase in record time, stopping just short of the bed. “You’re awake.” His voice was hoarse, rough from emotion or overuse, she couldn’t tell.

“You burnt up, baby.” Her mother said, reaching down to retrieve the damp cloth that had fallen away when Emma had sat up. “You were writhing and whispering for hours and then suddenly, nothing—we didn’t know—we didn’t know what to do. Belle didn’t have any answers.”

Emma’s gaze drifted between the three of them in a circuit, before leaning her forehead on her knuckles. The fever was gone, leaving her head much more…full and some other part of her stark and barren.

“Mom,” Henry began tentatively, “D’you—d’you know who we are?”

The silence lingered long enough to make their faces crease deeper with concern and fear.

“Yeah, kid.” She said finally, squeezing his hand. “I’m just—I need a minute.”

“You didn’t recognize us in the wood, and we thought maybe…” Killian trailed off.

“Maybe I wasn’t here anymore?” She furrowed her brows, because there was some truth to that. She felt how other she was. “I wasn’t, not for a moment.”

“You remember, then?” Her mom asked, finally taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

“I remember being so afraid, because I was lost. And when you found me, none of you were the you you should have been.” She shook her head, meeting Mary Margaret’s wide eyes. “Is this what it’s like for you?”

“Is what like?”

“Being both Mary Margaret and Snow White? Having both of them in your head?”

“Are you saying…?”

Emma closed her eyes, leaning back against the headboard. “This is harder I think. You were Mary Margaret and Snow White at different times. But we’re parallels. Two conflicting lives shoved into one headspace.”

“We thought..we hoped you were burning her out.” Henry said quietly.

“I was dying.” Emma said. That should chill her more, she knew. But the dream or whatever it had been left her feeling abstract, untouchable. Mary Margaret drew in a sharp breath. “I don’t know how much of where I was…was real. But I know I was dying.”

“Were?” Hook spoke up finally, voice low.

“My magic talked to me. Told me there was a price left unpaid. I gave it up—my magic. I can’t use it while it keeps me alive.”

“You’re sure it wasn’t just a fever dream, love?”
“I can feel it.” She whispered. Her fingers subconsciously rose to her chest, trembling. “I can feel how far away it is.” She realized she’d been looking into the middle distance, her sense of loss heavy on her face. She turned back to Mary Margaret. “Did you find the cabin?”

“It was empty when we got there.” Hook supplied. “Nothing but the remnants of wards and scattered dust.”

“Where are the others?”

“His Majesty is on duty at the station, under duress. And Her Majesty is consorting with Belle. They’re volumes-deep into memory runes last we heard.” Hook said. “Henry, lad, would you mind calling them to let them know your mother’s awake?”

Henry nodded briefly, gently wrapping his arms around Emma before descending down the stairs.

“I’ll give you a moment.” Mary Margaret looked between her and Hook. “I’ll be back with a glass of water. I have a feeling that’s what Killian left in shards all over the floor.”

He managed a sufficiently sheepish and grateful look as she followed in Henry’s footsteps. As soon as she was out of sight, he made his way to the bedside in steps made slightly staggered by restrained emotion.

Emma pushed aside the light blanket and sheets, only to be stayed by Killian’s darting hand.

“You’ve only just made it back among the conscious, love.”

“I’m very done with being rendered magically bedridden.” She said. When all he did was look at her, she patted the exposed bedspace next to her. “Sit with me.”

“How long was I out?” She asked as soon as he obliged, settling into her cautiously, as if she could snap like a flower stem if she was jostled.

“A day.” He swallowed. “There were brief flashes where we thought you might be coherent. You’d call for me, for Henry, for Leroy, at one point even.” He chuckled bleakly on the last bit.

“Yeah, you tell him that and you’re sunken treasure.” She threatened, digging at his side with her elbow.

“You called for him, too.” He said, whisper-soft. She immediately knew who he meant.

Emma wrapped her fingers around his hook, tugging lightly until it rested in her lap. She drew her index finger along the chilled metal in a soft caress, catching on its scratches before traveling up to where his brace met his forearm and lapsing into working a myriad of shapes into his cold skin.

She had no answer for him other than that.

“Are you—“ He took a deep breath that let her know to brace for impact. “Am I still talking to you? To Emma? Or—are you—what about Odette?”

That was a good question. A hard one. It deserved more than an immediate answer, regardless how badly she wanted to absolve the tension that radiated from him.

“Odette isn’t here like that. She was never here. She moved on a long time ago. Siegfried told me that.” Both names felt heavy and angular on her tongue—like she was talking in third person, like
Siegfried was a stranger and a lover. “It’s more like I’m her hard drive.”

“Her what?” His hand stilled on her knee. His confusion made this more painful, somehow.

“Like—” She stopped and started a couple of times. “It feels like her entire life has been saved in me. She doesn’t feel like an invading virus anymore.” He’d get that analogy even if just from its medical context.

“But I’m me. I am.” She turned into him, laying her palm over his chest when he kept being too still. “I’ve just…lived a little more.”

He looked at her with a gaze that chilled her—like he was appraising her ghost. Then he pushed back her fever-soaked hair that had fallen into her face, balancing it behind her ear. She wanted to reach up and smooth the corners of his lips away from the frown settled there. Instead she turned to the staircase as Mary Margaret returned.

She thankfully ignored the obvious tension in the room, brandishing a sloshing glass of water and some pills.

“Aspirin.” She said as she pressed the small white tablets into her hand.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I got in touch with the others. They’ll be here in a bit for dinner. No rush to join us, okay? We’re barely out of the woods—you should rest.”

“I’m up to it.” Emma said, just this side of obstinate. “I just need to clean up first.”

From the look on her face, it was obvious Mary Margaret was picking her battles.

“All right, then. You can borrow whatever you want out of my dresser. Killian, why don’t you come help me finish preparing?”

“Oh course.” He replied, but there was a heatless edge to his tone that made it clear he’d rather be mother hen-ing Emma.

She held her own until the shower water pelleted her skin in cleansing droplets, turned up too hot as if she could steam out her unstable emotions. She leaned into the downpour, scouring her face and pulling apple-scented shampoo through her hair. She took the briefest moment to appreciate the irony of that before melting back into her worries.

The lull of the fever was gone, and now she was left with the all-too-immediate reality of who she’d become. Memories and emotions work in odd ways, she knew. They weren’t always on the mind. She hadn’t lied to Killian—she didn’t feel like two personalities pressed like flowers on the same page of a book. But when her mind wandered, she came up with two seventh birthdays, two first kisses, two of everything, both real.

And it terrified her.

By the time she made it downstairs—hair dripping into the flannel she’d ended up filching from her father’s side of the closet—everyone was seated around the table, including David and Regina. To their credit, they managed not to allow an awkward pause as she joined them, taking the seat between Henry and Hook.
“I was just filling everyone in on what Belle and I came up with.” Regina said as she passed a plate with slabs of roast on it. “Which is nothing useful. She promised to ask Gold what he knows about the matter, which, nice, because I don’t want to.”

“He’s much more likely to feel helpful if it’s Belle asking.” David agreed.

Emma forced another bite despite her utter lack of appetite.

“If all else fails, I can try channeling my mother.” Regina offered. “Back in Underbrooke, she mentioned a penchant for memory enchantments.”

“Thanks for the offer. But I don’t want you to bother her in her afterlife because of me.” Whatever feelings or lack thereof she had about Regina’s recently de-vilified mother, their time in the Underworld had left Emma with a newfound aversion to disturbing the dead. If the scale tipped a bit more to the side of caution than reverence, well, that was her business.

“No sign of the king.” Her father said between bites of mashed potatoes. “I doubt he’s crossed the town line, though. Everything he wants is here.”

Emma felt several pairs of eyes glance in her direction, but she kept her gaze securely on her silverware.

“I’m about ready to take a page out of Robin’s book, track the sucker down and be through with it all.” Regina said, buzzing with impatience. “We’ve all got more important things to do than deal with his sappy antics.”

“I’ve got a history exam on Monday.” Henry agreed, tongue in cheek.

“At least he’s a bit of fresh air.” David said after casting Henry a fond look. “For once we’re dealing with mayhem and madness on a scale other than town or even realm-wide.”

“He wasn’t always like this.” Emma said quietly. The man who held her hand while pulling an arrow out of her side, the man who heated up drinking chocolate for her when the nights were cold, the man who glared at her fondly whenever she made a bad joke—this was not the man in Storybrooke. This man was named Pain.

She realized after the beat of silence and suspended gazes that she’d made an error. She stood abruptly, ducking her head.

“I’m going to head home. Thanks for dinner, Mom.”

“Emma—” Mary Margaret began.

But she took brusque strides toward the door. She felt more than saw Hook on her heels, but even then she didn’t pause, not until the warm weight of his hand was tentatively on her waist.

“Love.” There was so much tenderness and unsteadiness in the word, uttered like a plea. But she needed to get away.

She tried to poof away, but no tendrils of gentle smoke came when she beckoned. She looked at her hand, limp and trembling in the kitchen light. This was the price of living. In a frenzy Emma grabbed at the doorknob, jimmying the door open with far too much force in her panic. The
clamor of her loved ones carried after her as she fled down the stairs.

Emma thought she was going home—to their home—but instead she found herself aboard the Jolly Roger. It felt almost like a sin to be there when she was avoiding Killian, but the truth was, she needed but couldn’t bear him right now, and his ship was as close as she could get. She made it to his quarters, wandering in a daze, not sure what she was looking for. Then she spotted his long coat draped across the back of the chair at his desk. She pulled it over her shoulders, a small weight lifted off her chest as the burden of the heavy fabric settled over her.

She wandered back up to the deck, tilting her face into a wind that seemed determined to steal her hair away in wisps. She began leaning against the rail but found herself sliding down the rigid wood siding just as soon. She did her best to level her breathing, aided by the scent of spice and rum and sea and Killian homed in the leather. She snuggled into it like a comfort blanket, gripping its lapels with blanched fists, tugging until her elbows met her knees.

The expressions on their faces were burned into her memory like ruined film. Confusion, hurt, disbelief. Pity, in Regina’s case. You knew you were in a truly bad way when the former Evil Queen looked on you with that kind of softness. The truth was, of course, that she loved Hunter. Despite it all, despite everything that made her Emma, she remembered that other life in sharp relief, how they fell into companionship and then into love. She dug the crescents of her nails into the give of the leather, trying to stop thinking.

She awoke to the firm pressure of arms trying to scoop beneath her, to get a grip and lift her up.

“Killian?” Emma asked blearily. She had no idea how long she’d been out.

“Aye, love.” Was the reply, pitched low as if he was wary of spooking her.

She pressed her face into his neck, and the instant relief she felt at the contact had her releasing a small sigh.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered, sounding too small.

He let out a sigh, but his was full of exhaustion and frustration. He settled next to her on the splintered wood of the deck.

“I thought we were passed you taking flight when we made it back to the living. When will it stop, Emma? When will you stop running from me?”

“I don’t know.” She answered honestly. “I don’t want to. Run, that is. But it was—there’s too much. And it’s not fair—for you to have to witness how much there is.”

“That’s my decision to make.” He said, firmly, with his anger a bare coloring under his words. He continued more kindly. “And it’s not fair to you, either. Doubly unfair, I’d say, to make yourself have to weather it alone.”

She just looked down at her bare feet flexing on the floorboards.

“Care to tell me why you’re holed up on my ship in the dead of night with my coat around you?” Hook tried instead, knowing his point was made whether she replied or not.

“I wanted to remember you. Only you.”
“I’d wager my charming presence would benefit your endeavor better than a bit of heavy fabric.”

She hummed noncommittally, unable to tell him how she didn’t feel like she deserved that, not when she was multitasking loving another man, one who was trying to destroy everything between her and this version of her family.

“Would you like me to remind you, then?” There was no heat in his voice, no double entendre. Just a bare offer.

She nodded, still not meeting his gaze.

He bore her up, gently pushing his coat from her only to drape it across her lap as he settled her on his. Instantly she burrowed into his warmth. She hadn’t realized how cold she’d become, between her lack of layers and the salt-stained chill of the wind.

“We began on a beanstalk, as all the great love stories do.” He said with quiet humour. “We met before then, of course, but it was different up there.”

“Up there I didn’t have a knife to your throat. My hands weren’t free.”

He nodded, allowing that with a quirk of his lips. “And ever since your knife pinned me against that tree, we’ve left marks on each other.” He took her left hand in his, sweeping his thumb across her palm. “I patched your hand up when we made it to the top.”

Yes, and he’d poured alcohol straight into her wound without warning. She’d flinched, but the harsh kindness of it had shocked the retort she’d had at the ready. Even after he explained the giant’s sensitivity to blood, there was something in the blue of his averted eyes that told her he was lying. Not about the giant, but that he’d only done it to save his own skin.

He laced their fingers together.

“Your nails dug into the back of my hand with your grip, back when you were determined to abscond to New York, back when Zelena’s portal opened its maw.” His voice grew lower, softer. “That was the first time, despite it all, despite when I told you I’d keep my distance—that was the first time I knew I couldn’t let you go.”

Emma shut her eyes. She suspected it would always be a bit hard to bear, how much he loved her. He chucked her lightly under the chin, coaxing her to meet his gaze. He guided her hand to his torso.

“Excalibur.” He said, both an apology and a prayer. “A mark you never should have had to leave.”

Her fingertips dug into the fabric of his vest of their own accord. They tried to not speak about it. In the beginning it was because the subject was too raw, too confusing, too fragile. But now it was laid to as much rest as it could get. She let her fingers wander to the knee closest to her.

“Rollerblading.” She murmured as she thumbed the fabric of his dark jeans, envisioning the light scar from where he fell hard. “You thought there was nothing you could fail at with ‘blade’ in its name.”

“Until we got to the rink.” His face was a cocktail of grudging goodwill. “And you returned from the vendor with wheeled boots.”
“Just wait till we try ice skating.” She smirked up at him.

“A new circle of modern devilry, I’m sure.”

How did he do that? She wondered. Even in the cradle of her despair, her confusion—he found a way to make her smile despite herself. She nestled into his side, moving her palm back up until it rested on his tight stomach.

“My favourite, though,” he began as he nudged her hand higher, resting it against the beat of his heart, “is this mark.” He lapsed into silence, laying back and resting his hand on her hip.

“Thank you.” Emma whispered.

“Aye. Always. I shall always help you find yourself.”

“I love you more, you know.” She said after a minute. “I think, if we’d had our shot, she would have, too.” She quieted the feeling of her betraying Hunter, submerged it under the reality of Hook breathing next to her, his warmth pressed against hers. “I could just drown in you, sometimes.”

“Words like that do mighty works in a man.” He warned her, teasing at the fabric of the undershirt she’d pilfered from David’s side of the dresser. Killian’s fingers were a gentle pressure along her hipbone, across her navel.

“Are you really going to fondle me while I’m wearing my father’s clothes?” She asked when he began tracing imaginary patterns just below her breasts. His hand froze.

“Bad form.” He agreed. He bent closer, breath hot against her ear. “I must say you wear them better, though.”

“You’re gross.” Emma punched him lightly in the arm.

He chuckled unrepentantly. “Aye, well.”

They lay together in silence for a minute longer before Hook shifted beneath her.

“Emma love?”

“Yes?”

“Will you come home with me?”
Emma had startled when she woke up draped across Hook, her leg high on his waist like she was some desperate koala. He’d been patient with her as she processed which life she was in, hand and blunted forearm still against the sheets as she recalibrated. He’d given her space as she got dressed, though when he slipped by her for his turn in their bathroom, what she thought would be a tender peck ended with her back pressed against the doorframe, filling her with exhilaration tinged with guilt. It didn’t get easier from there.

“You’re doing it again.” Henry said with gentle humour.

She blinked slowly, confused. Her hands cupped his face so lightly, as if the slightest weight would cause it to shatter. Her boy. Her son. She couldn’t stop marveling at the fact, in this reality, she’d not only lived long enough to have a kid, she’d lived long enough to see herself reflected in him, to see him whittled into a hero. She shook her head, dropping her hands as if they prickled with static electricity. She’d been asking him for something—to deliver something?

“Sorry, kid.” Emma smiled wanly. “You’re just so cute, y’know? Like one of those internet kittens.” She licked her thumb and fixed his wayward hair, to cover up the fact she’d been staring at him like he was an urban legend. For the third time within the hour.

“Mom.” Henry allowed her her recovery, but the drop in his voice refused to let her act like it hadn’t happened. “I’m yours. You’re Emma.”

That was the game they were playing, all of them—reminding Emma of the reality of her life in Boston, New York, Storybrooke—reminding her she was the one who belonged in the driver’s seat. She appreciated their collective patience throughout the day, the way they graciously fell into the procedure as soon as she had showed up at the loft and explained the other night. She was starting to loosen her armour, to stop hiding it when her timelines got muddled and she needed their help to disentangle them.

“Right. Henry.” She didn’t mean to pause, as if she had to second guess who he was, and she regretted it as soon as his good humour wavered into something starker. “Will you run up and get my jacket? I think I might have something that could help us with Operation Reboot.”

She turned back to her coffee, blessedly spiked. It was the only way she could justify the day drinking she was beginning to think she needed to push through.

“What’s in your jacket?” Mary Margaret asked.

“Not sure.” She replied. “Something that Hunter hid.” She gave her mother a conspiring look—and that was comforting, that regardless of which Princess she was, her mother was a constant.
“Something that must be important.” Mary Margaret smiled.

Henry came down the stairs two at a time, her red leather jacket slung over one shoulder. He passed it across the kitchen table almost reverently. Emma took it, immediately digging through the pockets. She withdrew the blue vial in triumph, raising it as if in a toast before passing it to her mom.

“A potion?” Henry asked.

“Dunno.” She shrugged. “I was hoping your other mother might know. Do you mind running it to her house?” That was where they’d set up camp, Hook and Regina leafing through volume after volume, with Belle popping in every so often to deliver a new book or theory and to pick up the tomes that proved to be dead ends.

“On it.” Henry ducked to place a quick kiss on her temple and wrapped an arm around Mary Margaret before heading out the door.

Emma sighed when she heard the door click shut.

“I would be more use over there.”

“Maybe.” Mary Margaret agreed. “I’m not convinced it’s worth the strain. They’ve already weeded out a bunch of what Belle scrounged up, and it wouldn’t hurt for you to spare your energy.”

“I’m enchanted, not invalid.” She immediately regretted the bite in her words, but her mom just raised a brow, unbothered.

“Yes and we’d like to keep you that way.” She placed a hand over Emma’s where it rested on the rough tabletop. “Today our job is to play keep-away. Tonight we’ll put in our two cents on what the others have found.”

“Fine. Fine, fine, fine.” Emma knew her mom was just as raring to crack the code of the soul transfusion, and it spoke to her self-control that she appeared as composed as she did. She didn’t want to be playing babysitter as much as Emma didn’t want to be babysat. “Can we at least go on a field trip?”

“Emma…”

“Not to meddle! Just for like, lunch or something. Food, you know? Sustenance.”

“We’re in a kitchen.” Mary Margaret said, deadpan. But Emma spotted her tell—the little twist of her lips that meant her mom wanted to be persuaded.

“To Granny’s and back. No pit-stops, no sleuthing, no trouble. Just greasy, greasy fried food and thirty minutes of freedom.”

Emma knew she had her as soon as the little sigh escaped her.

“You’re buying.” Mary Margaret said begrudgingly.

As soon as they walked through the diner door, Mary Margaret pushed Emma behind her, tension shot throughout her petite frame.

“Mom?”
“Are you kidding me?”

Emma peered over her and locked onto the source of her discomfort. Her heart leapt in her chest, the mix of elation and fury leaving her nauseated. Hunter was seated at the far end of the counter, spinning his straw into his drink. Blessedly, he hadn’t looked up as the door chimed.

Fixated, Emma hardly felt Mary Margaret’s iron grip on her upper arm as she dragged her right back out the door. She didn’t let go until they were halfway down the street, in the direction of Regina’s house.

“The nerve…”! Mary Margaret snarled as she led the way down the road. “After everything he’s pulled, he thinks he can just stroll about the town like he owns the place? The…audacity!”

He did seem awfully at home.

“Mom.” Emma said quietly.

“Oh! Right, of course, sorry baby. That must have been awful for you. Do you need a second?”

“No, I’m just—it’s fine. Are we meeting up with the others?”

“If you don’t have any objections. Now that we know the king’s not bothering to lay low, I think it’s best to keep safe in numbers.”

Emma didn’t bother replying, just nodded shortly and fell into step with her mother. She realized her fingers were clenching at her sides, so she shook them out. They became less rigid, but there was no shaking out the fluster within, the phantom feeling of her reaching out and linking arms with Siegfried. *Her Sig.*

Regina scowled as she opened the door, maroon nails clattering against the frame.

“What is the point of agreeing on a plan you don’t intend to follow?”

“Hunter’s not even trying to act like he’s a fugitive. Ran into him at Granny’s.”

Regina rolled her eyes as she allowed them space to go in.

“I’m so glad I’m not Mayor any longer. It’s a real bitch dealing with a town that doesn’t even pretend laws apply to it. Well, come along, Captain Guyliner and I were just taking a break for crepes and booze.”

“Glad to see you’re taking your task seriously.” Snow said dryly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize those tiny men had made you an honorary dwarf, Judgy.” She shot back wryly. “If you were twelve volumes deep in archaic memory runes you’d need a breather, too.”

Mary Margaret merely rolled her eyes as she swept past Regina and made her way toward the kitchen. When Emma moved to follow suit, albeit a little dazedly, Regina stopped her with a warm hand on her upper arm.

“Now that Mother Dearest is out of the way.” She prompted, fingers going slack against the material of Emma’s sweater. “What happened when you saw the prince?”

“I wanted to run to him.” Emma answered easily. The weight of her words hit her on their tail end, jaw popping. “I mean—“
“You mean exactly what you said.” Regina said matter-of-factly, though not unkindly. “Impressive that you didn’t.”

“It wasn’t a matter of self-control.” Regina’s praise slid off her. “I froze. Then Mary Margaret leapt to action.”

“You froze because there was conflict. Because you’re still well and kicking, Emma. Don’t lose sight of that.”

Before she could reply, Mary Margaret’s voice rang from the depths of the home. “Are you coming or not? At this rate I can’t promise there’ll be any pastries left.”

They made eye contact for a brief moment before Regina turned on her heel and led the way back. They found Snow and Hook digging into respective stacks of crepes, Snow’s legs dangling from her perch on the granite island and Hook propped against the counter kitty corner to her. Killian didn’t obviously react to Emma’s entrance, but she noticed the way his eyes perked up and his posture changed, orienting himself in her direction. She swallowed down the guilt choking her like sea water down the wrong pipe and sauntered up to him. He leaned forward in pleasant surprise that only grew when she went up on her tiptoes.

Emma tilted her face up, finding a second of comfort in the familiar scratch of his beard against her skin. She roamed to his lips, soothing away the burnt caramel from the apple crepes. His lips parted under hers in a soft breath, and she kissed him fully before settling back down and swiping a crepe from the top of his stack.

“You had a little something.” She explained with a shallow shrug.

“Get a room.” Regina said in exasperation.

“Offering one of yours?” Killian shot back, eyes never leaving Emma.

“Gross.” Mary Margaret chimed in, though the word was lifted in the middle with underlying mirth.

“So any luck?” Emma asked, unbothered. It was a journey to remember a time when the vulnerability of such a small gesture would have felled her. ‘Gross’ was nothing if not a medal of her progress.

“A lot of dead ends and a couple spells that could have potential.” Regina said as Emma picked apart the crepe with her fingers. “But even those have some nasty side effects.”

“Fatigue? Cramps? Sudden alarming fixation with Sudoku?” She asked between popping bites of crepe into her mouth.

“Paralysis. Brain damage.”

Emma chewed thoughtfully. Maybe she should feel discouraged. Maybe she should be more concerned at the tiny spark of hope skittering around her heart. She couldn’t imagine she felt more whole than she does now. It could be confusing at times, painful even. But she was so, so Full. Of life, of memories, of it all. So much love and loss and adventure—

“You said something about booze?”

Regina narrowed her eyes at how different of a track she was suddenly on. Mary Margaret’s legs skipped a beat in their leisurely swinging, and Killian’s hand felt stiff on her hip. The moment
passed, though.

“Aye, Regina was just saying she was going to fix me a blowjob.”

“Excuse me.”

“What.”

Snow and Emma rounded at the same time, Snow ogling her stepmother in disgust and disbelief while Emma looked on in incredulity.

“At ease soldiers, it’s just a silly drink.” Regina began. “You put Kahlua and Bailey’s—“

“I know what a blowjob is.” Emma said, shaking her head. “I’m just surprised you do.”

“I’m selective, not dead.” She returned dryly as she rummaged through her liquor cabinet. “I don’t do rum for anyone. So we’ve been going through different drinks particular to this world to find some common ground.”

“She told me to be careful about this one, that it comes with ah, connotations.” Killian whispered innocently into her ear, but she imagined the way his lips brushed against her earlobe wasn’t incidental.

“I’ll tell you when you’re old enough.” Emma promised, illuminating despite herself as she felt his smile against her skin. That was one of her favourite running jokes between the two of them, her and her centuries-old pirate. As if time and lifestyle hadn’t schooled him in all things double entendre.

“Truthfully, how are you?” Hook murmured as Regina laid out a line of shot glasses. The light attitude between them was gone in a wisp.

Emma sighed, reaching up to cusp his cheek with her splayed fingers.

“It’s alright.” She replied, the words drawn out reluctantly. That was the problem, wasn’t it? She was too alright with what was happening.

“Emma…”

“It’s alright.” She repeated more firmly. “Let’s just let it be, for a moment, okay?”

His chin dipped to rest on her shoulder, not quite in defeat. It felt more like a ceasefire.

“Ready.” Regina chimed as she finished the swirl of whipped cream on the last shot. They gathered around the island, fingertips finding glasses as they all glanced at each other. When they’d all chosen their shots, Regina spoke again. “For our virgins in the room, the trick is to not take this like any other shot. You’ve got to fit your mouth around the glass so the liquid doesn’t punch through the cream and hit you in the face.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just let them live and learn.” Emma smirked, feeling a degree more like her old self.

“I’m evil. Not that evil.” The corner of Regina’s mouth kicked up in a smirk.

“In bars, the objective is to pull it off with as much grace as possible.” Emma shifted slightly so she could address Killian. “While accepting your fate that you’ll likely end up covered in sickly sweet alcohol.”
He merely huffed in response.

“Here goes.” Snow said serenely. They all knocked back the shots, or as well as they could given the intentionally awkward way you had to take them.

Immediately, the coffee and creams burned down her throat in a saccharine onslaught. It was a little much for her tastes, but she savoured the tiny flame in her stomach. She glanced up to see how the rest of them fared and burst into giggles. Regina’s face was crumpled against the layers of sugar and Mary Margaret sat pristine as a queen, her shot polished off. Killian, meanwhile, was gagging, with a mustache of whipped cream crowning his lips.

“Oh how the mighty have fallen.” She teased as he angrily swiped at his mouth.

“Modern devilry.” He said with feeling. “Bad form, to construct a drink made to undermine its drinker.”

“Yeah, uh huh.” She said indulgently, rolling her eyes.

“Those are sweeter than I remember.” Regina crossed to the fridge and poured herself a purging glass of milk.

“Aye. Alcohol ought not to pretend it’s anything but alcohol.” Hook dove into his pocket and retrieved his flask, taking a healthy swig of rum.

“Now that that’s crossed off the prospective list,” Regina sighed, “back to work.”

Killian nodded brusquely, swiping another crepe on his way out of the room. Mary Margaret and Emma trailed behind them, perusing from a distance the graveyard of tomes splayed across the dining room table.

“Have you looked at the vial yet?” Emma asked, searching for the glint of it in the mess of artifacts and sheaves of paper.

“It was nothing.” Regina said as she settled back into her place at the end of the table. “Just water.”

“That can’t be possible.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, Emma. I did a few cursory spells and then I did them again. It’s just water.”

“We can hide just water.”

“Siegfried wouldn’t hide just water.”

The barest hint of annoyance crept into Regina’s features.

“Well maybe it was a decoy. Put something pretty in a vial and make it take a second to find and maybe whoever finds it will feel like they found something.”

“No.” Emma shook her head. “It’s important. I know it is.” There it was again, this insidious fog that tugged on both sets of her memory. There was something they were missing. Frustration pulsed through her and she tried to ease it away, her fingers locked in her hair.

“Love—“ Hook rose and reached for her, but she backed away.

“Don’t touch me.” She snapped. His hand froze midmotion, and when he pulled it back, it felt as if something had withered between them.
“Emma.” Her mother’s voice was dipped low with both concern and censure.

“I’ll look at it again.” Regina said with finality. “I’ll bring out the big guns this time. And hope it’s worth the effort.”

She nodded brusquely, rouge rising high across her cheeks as she realized how extreme she was being. She channeled all her energy into being able to meet their eyes.

“Thanks.” She managed, the words catching dryly in her throat. “I don’t think I’ll be much use here, so, um, I’m just going to lay down upstairs if that’s alright, Regina.”

“Be my guest.” The Queen replied with a lift to her brow.

She could hear the hush of their conversation as soon as she started up the stairs.

When she got to the guest room, she belly flopped onto the bed, burrowing into the top blanket, cheek pressed into its chill relief. Emma sighed in a slow release, digging her fingers into the comforter. She had barely closed her eyes when she heard the sharp metallic rap of Hook at the door.

“Come in.” She said, voice muffled by the thick mulberry fabric.

“Snow offered to take my place scouring tomes, that we should have a moment to ourselves.”

“You mean to say she got tired of babysitting her fully grown daughter.”

He let out an exasperated huff before she heard the slap of his boots across the floor. “I mean to say she decided to do me the kindness of relieving me of my duty so that I might fulfill another, that of getting us back together on the same page.”

“I’m tired, Killian.” Emma said, the edge smoothed out of her voice. “I have so much memory but not the right one and we’re missing something and I can’t do anything about it and I’m tired.”

The bed dented with Hook’s weight as he crawled across, settling himself next to her. His warm fingers wrapped round her chin slowly, coaxing her face from the mattress. Emma leaned back on her elbows, eyes drifting about the faint floral pattern on the bedspread as she mustered the humility and courage to meet his eyes and speak her words.

“This isn’t your fire, Swan. This isn’t you. You’ve every right and reason to be thoroughly riled over this whole affair. But there’s no need to be on the defense around your family.” He closed the distance between them with a light kiss on her nose. She closed her eyes at the contact. “Do what you need to keep yourself together. In rest,”—he gestured to the bed with his hook—,”or feeling,”—he dragged his thumb down her forearm in a soft caress that kindled a forest fire along her nerves, “or whatever keeps you afloat, but don’t let your fury and fear rebuild walls between us, Emma.”

Emma leaned back on her elbows, eyes drifting about the faint floral pattern on the bedspread as she mustered the humility and courage to meet his eyes and speak her words.

“Right. I’m sorry.”
He dipped his chin in acknowledgment.

“Stay with me?”

“As long as you like.” There was a lilt to the last word, a soft click as he nestled in beside her.

“I don’t want to sleep, really. Not yet.”

“Aye?” Killian raised a mischievous eyebrow. “Fancying a bedtime story, then?”

Emma hummed in response, savouring the look of delighted surprise as she hitched a leg over his waist, rolling him with her until she was a warm weight on top of him.

“I’m thinking something a little less articulate.” She said between a string of kisses that meandered across his jaw and down the column of his throat. His eyelids drifted shut at the feeling, and when they opened there was smoke along the seafront hue of his eyes.

“I admit I heartily favour this method of keeping your demons at bay, love.” The tips of his fingers pushed under the fabric of her sweater, trailing along her spine in a deliberate, slow drag.

“Yeah what is with this theme here, us kissing the darkness out of each other?” She said, voice uneven as his hand wandered down to cusp her ass.

“Make love not war?”

She chuckled into his collarbone, fingers twining in his hair of their own volition.

“You sound like a T-shirt slogan.”

“Here I was thinking I was more than adequately playing the part of paramour.” Hook feigned injury as he turned his head to the side. It was a rookie mistake to leave himself so exposed, though, and he felt the consequence in the bite Emma left there, evoking a noise from low in his throat. She soothed the teeth tracks with her tongue before roaming to the part of his chest exposed by his vest.

“When will I get you in something less…bothersome than this?” She wondered aloud as she fiddled with the brass buttons.

“You can have me any way you like, darling, but there’s something to be said for the suspense this adds.” He rubbed the space between her brows before trailing his thumb down her nose. “The way your face knits and crinkles, for instance.”

“You just like seeing me struggle.” She teased.

“On the contrary, I rather enjoy witnessing you impatient for me.” She paused at the sober delivery of the line, the lack of heat. It had a polar effect on her, driving her to bend down and catch his lower lip with her teeth.

He rewarded her with interest, maneuvering so that he was on top. He kissed her like it was Armageddon, full of tender insistence. She carded her fingers through his hair, a gentle arc that tightened into a solid grip as his hips worked slowly against hers. She stuttered against his mouth, and when he pushed up the hem of her sweater to brush his lips in purposeful lines down her sternum, she bit her lip.

“Killian…”
“Mm?”

She didn’t know how to say it—that in this moment, this was all she wanted—to lose or find herself in him, she didn’t know—didn’t want to know, didn’t want to think—

“Emma.” He stayed her hand on his zipper.

“You don’t want to?” A spark of rejection seethed in the pit of her stomach. It simmered sedately after a moment, but it was lit just the same. She kept thinking she was through feeling like she was always the wrong person at the wrong time, and yet…

“I always want you, love. But I think,” He began gently, rubbing circles into the back of her hand, “given the wayward circumstances, we should keep it, what do you call it--PG-13. At the very least, I’m sure Her Majesty would appreciate it.”

Emma collapsed with a sigh against the pillows fluffed to capacity.

“You’re right.” She scoffed good-naturedly. “You’re right a lot recently and honestly it’s not my favourite look on you.”

“All of my looks are good looks.” Hook teased as he eased down beside her.

She heard the plink and thud of his hook and brace against the nightstand before he turned back to her and drew her snug against his still-bare chest. She wiggled until she was facing him, and pressed her palm against his heartbeat, pressing the rest of her into his close heat. He rested his forehead against her own and sighed into the small space between them.

“You haven’t been sleeping again.” She chided, index finger traversing the lavender rounds beneath his eyes.

“There was no one to sing me back from my worries.” He admitted.

“I’m here now.” She promised. “It’s your turn to rest.”

“You’ll stay with me?” The vulnerability in his words was hard to bear.

“As long as you like.” She echoed what he’d said before, sealing it with a constellation of kisses that started against his temple and trailed along his cheek, eyelids, nose, and finished at the corner of his mouth. He rested his head against her shoulder, the fingers of his right arm curled against her back and his blunted arm wrapped round her waist.

“You’re a rarity, Swan.”

She squeezed her eyes against the tears agonizing to be set free, but there was no stopping their release. They slipped in silent tracks that nestled in his hair, unnoticed. For a handful of moments she’d escaped her double life, and she couldn’t repent that.

But it turned over where it dozed, then, stretching spines within her heart as it settled once more.

What a rare bird.
skinning the line

hi hello long time no post ! I've been under the weather recently but pinkie swear I intend on seeing this fic through , it's v. dear to me . I'm thinking it will reach its finish in a few more chapters , I'm curious to know where you think this'll end up . thanks again for reading ! you da best .

Emma lay with Killian—guarded him, rather—for a solid hour before Snow rapped on the door.

“We could use some fresh sets of eyes.” She said apologetically with a soft expression resting on Killian’s sleeping frame.

“Of course.” Emma splayed her palm across the back of Hook’s shoulder, applying a gentle pressure as she shook him. She wished she could let him rest longer, but she knew he would only panic if he woke up later and she wasn’t there. They were still so skittish of slipping out of each other’s grasp. “Gotta get up, babe.”

“Mmmph.”

“What’s that?”

“How about no.” His voice came out only slightly less muffled as he lost the mouthful of pillow, tilting his head in her direction.

“Don’t be difficult, Snow and Regina need us.” When he gradually sank back into the embrace of the sheets, she sighed and pinched him under the ribs.

He was up at the speed of light, balefully glowering at her as he shook off his slumber.

“Bad form.” He said, voice still thick with dreaming.

Emma pressed a kiss into her thumb then smoothed it into his smarting side. He hmphed, appeased.

“Sorry to disturb you, Killian. I know you’ve done so much already.” Her mother offered. “We’re losing a bit of wind in our sails. Belle dropped by to pick up the tomes we were through with, and she told us those memory stones Ingrid used on Elsa and Emma—you remember, the troll stones? —they’re another dead end. The force of whatever spiritual energy Emma’s stuck with is too strong to be contained.”

“That is a bad run of luck.” He cast a leg over the side of the bed as he refastened his hook. “Well, then. By all means, take as long a reprieve as you need, you and the Queen both. I’ll have another go, and Emma as well, if she’s up to it?” His words lifted into a question as he turned to meet Emma’s eyes.

She didn’t know how much she would be worth, between the memory lapses and the now-irrepressible (traitorous) feelings coursing through her as strong as any magic. But she owed them her hundred percent, especially given all their toils were on her behalf.
“Of course.” It was a weak echo of her earlier words, with a watered-down smile to match. Thankfully, no one seemed to notice her lack of enthusiasm.

“Regina’s headed to the market. She’s gonna try to contact Zelena in the Underworld and needs to pick up a few things. I’m just going to run over to Tink’s to check on baby Neal. You want anything while I’m out?” Her mother called over her shoulder as she led them back down to the dining room.

“No thanks, Mom.”

“We’re all set here, darling, thank you.” Emma couldn’t help the twitch of the corner of her mouth at the endearment. When he first used the soft word to address her mother, Snow had just about kicked him in the shins—that, of course, was back in their Beanstalk days. Once she’d warmed up to Killian (or melted, as he insisted cheekily), the word caused the tips of her ears to crimson. Now she only reacted with a wisp of a smile.

As they took their seats at the table and the door clicked shut behind Mary-Margaret, Emma was still preoccupied with the change. Her reverie was cut brief as Killian slid a heavy book her way. She tugged on its corner until it was more squarely in front of her, her nose wrinkling against the sharp smell of dust and muck and spice.

“What is this? It smells like it’s been left in a forest’s underwear. If a forest wore underwear.” She clarified at her pirate’s bemused look.

“The Grimoire of Bog. He was a wyldsprite, ravaged apart by his own dark dealings. Nasty bloke. He was a great fan of stranding people in the woods using a simple lure of light and a kind of amnesia curse.”

“A lure? Like a will’o’th’wisp?” The edgeless glow Merida and herself had chased still lit up the corners of her mind every once in a while. It certainly was…an experience.

“Aye, if a wisp were out to eat you whole. Good ol’ Bog actually fed the people to the light. It took the—ah, meat—and he harvested their lifeforce to fuel his own magic.”

Emma did her best to swallow down the queasy feeling riling in her stomach. “OK so that would just about make the worst bedtime story Ever. Why do I need to be pawing through this one, again?”

“I thought you’d appreciate it a tad more than the Kindergristle, who—“

Emma cut him off with a sharp gesture. “I know enough about both those words to not want you to say a single one more.”

Killian smiled wanly, but his eyes were cold. A chill went up her spine at the knowledge shared between them. Whatever terrible acts the Gristlething had committed—Killian was protecting her from having to know. Which, given her explicit knowledge of many things horrific and unsettling about the dark side of magic, meant whatever was in his tome was a realm even she hadn’t dallied in.

“Back to book club, then. In yours, you’ll be keeping an eye out for memory alteration. If we can’t extract all the Odette bits bopping around in there, cloaking or burying them might be solid alternatives.” He said lightly, the dead metal look in his eye gone. She nodded in appreciation as she thumbed through the first pages of Bog’s book.

Twenty minutes were punctuated by discouraged sighs, the rustle of pages, and the whir of the
grand clock Regina had installed in the corner of the room. Emma read away, grimacing at the slide of the paper against her skin. Though it couldn’t really be called a slide—more like a textured, vinyl feel. There was also a strange stickiness to the pages that she tried her level best not to question.

She made it through her grimoire before Killian, and she took a moment to pore over him as he pored over the text in front of him. The natural light of the room cast a caress of shadows on his face, accentuating the lines of concentration engraved there. She wanted to smooth everything out, the lines of stress in his face, the ripple of anxiety that had never fully left over the last few days, the one that roved under her skin and set her on edge. She wanted to smooth out their lives like Skippy peanut butter, quashing all the doubt and danger.

Emma settled for fixing them both coffee.

As she was watching the cream dwindle out of the carton, a staccato rap came from the window facing the backyard. She pressed closer to the glass wisped with steam. There was a bird of prey on the nearest rail, some kind of falcon, eyes locked on her. There was a moment of tension, and Emma wondered if birds like that ever gave their prey the dignity of looking them in the eye. She shook the thought away, returning to her task.

As she was placing the cream back in the fridge, another rap came from outside, this time sharper, more deliberate. Emma shut the door, turning slowly as she made her way back to the window. The bird was just flying away, swooping in a lazy half-circle before landing back where it had been perched. As soon as it had settled, it stared straight at Emma, tilting its head meaningfully.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” She huffed. “I am not being summoned by freaking Tweety.”

She glanced around the kitchen then back to the bird, feeling dumb as she pointed to herself. Me?

And the bird nodded, a concise little dip of its beak.

Emma let out a harsh breath, leaning on the counter. Either latent Snow White belle-of-the-forest genes were kicking in or she was Actually out of her mind. Minds? Whatever was going on in her head at this point. She forced her trembling hands to pick up both of the cooling mugs and forced her feet to carry her through to the dining room.

“Oh, everything alright there, love?” Killian caught her wrist with his hook as she placed the coffee on his side of the table. “You’re shaking.”

“Just a little wired, I know it’s the best we’ve got right now, but book club feels a lot more like stalling than taking action.” The lie slipped out of her mouth without pause. She knew she should tell Killian about the strange bird, that she shouldn’t be keeping anything from him right now when everything was out of balance.

He rubbed soothing circles into the back of her hand with his thumb, tutting sympathetically.

“I’d much rather a more, ah, kinetic route myself, Swan. But if there’s an answer to this mess, I have faith it’s buried somewhere within these pages.”

“Yeah. I hope so.” She placed a hand over his, squeezing lightly. “Hey, I’m gonna step outside and check in with David, okay? See how everything’s going at the station.”

“Take your time.” He smiled sweetly before turning back to his book and Emma felt like absolute sludge slinking away from him in her deceit. But then there was the barest seed of curiosity throbbing in her chest. Memory stirred, like ripples on the lake she’d lived in all those years and realms ago. She remembered whispered conversations with ochre eyes.
Emma slipped out the curtained back doors, stepping onto the patio draped in vines and sharp, exquisite fencing. She went to lean against the far side of the fence away from the hunting bird. Immediately, it drew closer, walking unnaturally along the dark cast iron.

“I was beginning to wonder if you wouldn’t miss the hint.”

Emma’s jaw popped as her mouth fell open.


“You’re a bird. And you’re talking. To me.” Emma ran her fingers over her face, accepting her descent into insanity.

“Come now, darling. This is a parlour trick compared to what you’re capable of.”

There was something about it—his—voice. Some familiar lilt to it that pricked chills down her spine all the while making her heartrate pick up in an entirely fearless way.

“Siegfried.” She breathed.

“I knew you’d flex that memory.”

Flashes of amber and star-sewn skies and whispered nights came back stronger this time. It had been Siegfried in bird form who had visited her late when Rothbart wasn’t prowling about, obsessively inspecting his “collection” of swans. She didn’t know how it’d slipped her mind, how she’d missed the telltale signs of the ochre rings round the bird’s irises, the remnants of a sigil that allowed him to possess any predator.

“What are you doing here, are you absolutely mad?” She hissed.

He tsk’d as much as a bird could.

“I merely came to return mine to me. I must admit I’m disappointed in you, dove.”

Emma knit her brows, teeth baring in a silent snarl.

“I’m not yours.”

Siegfried squawked out a laugh. “Now that’s an argument for another day.”

“The vial.” It dawned on her after a moment.

“Exactly the matter, yes. No judgment on you inheriting your mother’s sticky fingers, but I really must insist you return what you’ve stolen.”

“Why’s it matter so much to you? What is it? What’s in the bottle?”

“I’m fond of you as you are, truly, this mash-up of True Loves, but I’d be lying if I said the nosiness couldn’t use some weeding out.”

“Stop playing games, Hunter. What kind of magic are you keeping in there?”

“Are you going to give it back or not?”

Emma raised an eyebrow. “What do you think?”
He sighed, a low whistling noise.

“I had rather hoped you’d let this be cut and dry and things wouldn’t have to get…messy.”

“Just not that kind of gal, I guess.” She deadpanned.

“At least you’ll forgive me when this is all through.” He said, almost as an aside. “Alright, then. We’ll have it your way. Remember this is happening because of your games, darling. It’s unbecoming of you to play keep away.”

“Do you have something important to say or are you just wasting our time?” Her fingers gripped tighter around the railing. “I’d expect more from you, hon.”

The endearment seared her tongue as it came out without a thought. Was that the kind of person she was?

“I’ve missed that.” The bird said softly. “I’m sorry it pains you now. Loving me.”

Emma turned her face so that her field of vision was flooded with apple trees, her jaw clenched.

“That can end soon.” Siegfried promised. “The pain. I’m afraid love is a bit harder to shake.”

“Get out of here.”

“I can’t.” There was no more play in his voice, nothing coy. There wasn’t even any warmth. If Emma wasn’t mistaken, there wasn’t anything but a kind of lament.

“You’ve got wings and an open sky, haven’t you?”

“Emma. See, I know that’s the part of you I’m talking to now. The one that shies away from us. That’s alright. But Emma, you want to stick around for this. Because you’ve taken something important from me.”

“And?”

“So of course I’ve taken something important to you.”

Emma’s gaze snapped back to the bird. He stared back unflinchingly, the weak light from the overcast sky illuminating a patch of feathers.

“What did you do.” The utterance wasn’t even kin to a question, it was low with a dread ready to be kindled into something brighter. More lethal.

“Your son, Emma Swan.” He had no right to sound so somber.

Emma fought every impulse within her screaming to lunge, to rip and tear until Henry was back in her arms, untouched.

“You’ve made a mistake.” She bit out.

“I’ve made many. And this is the purgatory I bear. I’d suggest you not lead me to greaten my sins, then. Meet me in the clearing, at sun down next. Bring the bottle. Let’s not pretend you’ll be alone.”

“You’re going to regret this.”
“Oh, Emma.” He said, shuffling his wings. “I already do.”

He turned from her then, facing the storm slowly bleeding into the sky.

“Don’t kill the messenger, would you?”

When the bird turned back, its eyes were devoid of amber light. The darkness of its pupils swallowed her whole as it quirked its head, startled to find itself so close to a human. It flew off in the next instant, leaving Emma to sink against the stark fence. She dug into her jacket pocket, retrieving her cell phone. She blindly punched in Regina’s number, her heart was going to fast—she was so mad—she was reeling—

“Emma? What’s up? Did you find something useful in the books?”

“He took him.” She said hoarsely, the words barely audible.

“What? Speak up, Emma.”

“Henry.” He’d only been going back to school consistently for a few weeks. She thought it was good now. Safe now.

“Henry? What about Henry? Emma!” Her own name rapped against her ear as Regina grew harried with her silence.

“He’s gone.”
hi fam! it's taken me a hot minute to pace out the rest of the story, but we are well on our way! hope things have been going swimmingly on your ends!

Regina appeared in a rush of violet smoke, teeth bared. Emma took a sharp step back, startled by her proximity.

"Explain. Now."

"Siegfried—Hunter—he took Henry."

"How? When? How do you know this?" She was seething, power crackling invisibly in the air like a storm steeping on the horizon.

"He was here, he told me." Emma gestured weakly at the fence where Hunter had possessed the falcon.

"He was here in my home, and you didn’t get me the millisecond he showed up here? And now he has our son." Her volume picked up with every word until she was nearly spitting the word 'son' like a mad cat.

That was the moment Killian burst out onto the patio, eyes wild.

"I heard shouting." He assessed the situation in a quick blue gaze, then his eyes narrowed. "Why are we angry?"

"Did he know?" Regina spun on him, pinning Killian in place with a sharp look. "Did you know that Hunter was here?"

"What." His surprise was only a quick flicker of emotion before his features settled into a distant expression. "You never even called your father, did you then, Swan." His tone was flat, there was not a fraction of hope or faith that he may be mistaken.

"You wanted to be alone with him. You dumb lovesick princess. And the price you paid for it was Henry." Regina sneered.

Hook raised a hand as if to stave off her caustic words, but Emma didn’t want them to stop. She wanted them to scald her through. Because Regina was right. She’d wanted to see him, to keep in each other’s orbits if only for a stolen moment.

"He’s absconded with the lad." Killian rubbed his face with the heel of his hand. "I imagine it wasn’t out of a burning desire for his company. What does the wretched prince want?"

Emma tugged at the sleeves of her jacket, working the leather between her fingertips like some kind of amulet. Some kind of ward.

"He wants the vial back." She bit her tongue on the glimmer of ‘I told you it was important’ that threatened to spill out. She’d dug them all deep enough as it was. "He told me to bring it to a
clearing at sundown. I imagine he means the clearing where the cabin is.”

“Has he just been watching bad Spaghetti Westerns in his down time?” Regina said bitterly.

“He doesn’t expect I’ll be alone.”

“Oh, after this instance I can swear to it.” Killian said with uncompromising crispness. Emma drew in a soft breath. His thoughts weren’t even touching on her protection, she knew. He was angry at her. Furious, even. “Well. Someone ought to actually call David and let him in on current events.”

Regina glided passed them to wrench open the door.

“I’ll call Snow.”

Regina didn’t even pause. “You’ve done enough. Why don’t you just do whatever for a while and try not to ride off into the sunset with our child’s kidnapper.”

The door settled behind Killian and Regina, leaving Emma with nothing but the cold comforts of the shuffling grass and stinging wind. There was that impulse, as always, to run. Away from the situation, away from her loved ones, away from not being enough. Her muscles throbbed with it, the tension that urged her to keep going until it was all a constellation of specks on the horizon.

But she had messed up and she had to swallow down the typhoon of thoughts and funnel it all into one: she had to get Henry back. She dug her nails into her palms in one grounding instant of pain, then squared her shoulders, turned on her heel, and followed them inside. She kept herself scarce until her parents arrived, following a hunch that had crept up on her in her despair.

As soon as everyone was present, they convened back in the dining room filled with books. Emma kept her distance, pacing within a few feet. Her parents had given her sober, pitying looks as they sat together at the table. She dropped her gaze like burning charcoal.

“He’s got no reason to harm Henry.” Mary Margaret offered in a weak attempt to soothe Regina. Even with her magic sacrificed, Emma could feel the fierce energy coming off her in waves and bolts.

“That would only further alienate Emma.” David agreed.

“I know that.” Regina snapped, unforgiving. “Considering the fact that he killed his self from this realm to further his goal, I’m not exactly reassured.”

There was a beat of heavy silence that no counterarguments could fill. She was right.

“We won’t be able to find him. Henry. Not if Hunter’s putting any effort into hiding him.”

“Something to share with the class?” Regina shot Emma a harsh look as soon as she started talking. Emma let it slide off her like water down a sieve. She had plenty of time to hate herself later.

“When he came as the bird. I remembered something. Hunter isn’t just of noble blood. He’s of magical blood.”

“You think.” Regina said shortly.

“Gina.” Snow said, reaching her hand across the smooth wood. When her fingertips touched Regina’s, the Queen snatched her hand back, but she settled into silence.
“He can’t do what you and I can.” Emma continued. “He’s of a very specific breed of magic. That’s why his family reigns over the Wiled Marsh. They’re connected to only the magic of the woods, of the animals. He’s a Pied Piper.”

“‘A’ Pied Piper?” David asked. “I thought there was only one. I thought there was only Pan.”

“There’s only one Piper of humans. But Siegfried—Hunter—is the Piper of Creatures. The Master of Beasts.”

“That’s a pretty significant trait to forget in a lover.” Hook mused, not bothering to meet her eye. The lack of emotion was more painful than if he’d bitten out the words. It spoke to how one-track Regina was at the moment that she didn’t cleave off his feet for propping them on her table.

“I’ve been trying to not think about her. Me. Him. Only stray memories have crept in. I can’t help something reminding me of something else. But I stopped trying to forget.” She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter, now. He can control whatever animals are within proximity. He can bend the landscape to conceal his presence. That’s how he’s been getting around town without being noticed unless he wants to be noticed. The only reason you could find me in the woods with any accuracy was because we have the bond of True Love.” Now it was her turn to avoid his gaze as she choked slightly on ‘True Love.’

“So that’s it? You don’t even want to try? You just want to wait around and show up when he cordially invites you?” Regina asked, all venom missing from her shocked tone.

“It was just said. He won’t hurt Henry, not without what he considers good cause. I think…I think our time would be best spent figuring out what’s in the vial. If he’s so desperate for it, it must be something that has power over him, or something that could unravel his plan.”

Regina let out a sharp bark of laughter that had everyone else cringing.

“Well, forget little swan Emma. This is your greatest transformation.” She gestured at Emma with a hand curled like talons, then pushed away from the table. “Do what you will with your own ticking clock, Ms. Swan. I’m going to go find my son.”

With that, she disappeared into velvety wisps of smoke.

Emma shut her eyes, not having it in herself to fight the tears pricking for release.

“I do so loathe agreeing with the Queen, but I can’t abide shuffling through pages while the boy’s missing.” Hook met her eyes in one heated moment of disappointment before walking out of the room.

“What’s a Master of Beasts to the best tracker of Misthaven?” Snow offered apologetically, giving Emma a weak smile as she stood up.

“He’s overrun with emotions right now. He might make a mistake.” David offered as an excuse for himself, taking Mary Margaret’s hand. “I’ll put out a BOLO, canvas downtown. I’ll call to check in in a little while. I’m sure you’ll be your best here, kid.”

I’m sure you’ll be your best here, kid.

That was her father’s gentlest way of saying she was useless, that she was a liability. And the part of her that was starting to think she was enough, the part of her that had faced down Nimue and screamed I was never nothing—that part was tired, withered. At least today, all evidence pointed to her being exactly that—useless, a liability.
Emma gave herself exactly three minutes to shake with sobs after they left before she rubbed her sleeve across her eyes in a rough swipe of leather and started following her hunch. She followed suit with the others, abandoning the house as they’d abandoned her. She walked blindly through the growing night, not bothering to shield herself from the downpour as the storm reached its peak. The lake was like a homing beacon, she could feel its familiar ripples in her bones, in the salt of her veins.

When she made it to the water’s edge, she dropped the small drawstring bag she’d stolen from Regina, watched its emerald embroidery wink and wane under the moonlight.

It was time to call Zelena.
The water rippling around the drawstring bag steamed on the surface where the rain hit it. A sickly emerald glow emanated from the heart of the bag, tendrils lacing under the surface of the water until some shimmering symbol hung suspended. It was like a nesting doll of magic, the ripples bigger than the symbol, the symbol bigger than the clear portal that wavered in its center.

“I thought you weren’t coming til next month—“ Zelena stopped short when she caught sight of Emma soaked to the marrow. “Why do you have my sister’s lodestone?”

“I stole it.” Emma replied through chattering teeth.

“Yes, obviously. I asked why, not how.” Zelena rolled her eyes. Good to see her time reigning in the Underworld hadn’t mellowed her out too much.

“I need your help. Someone’s taken Henry, the others are out looking for him.”

“You know I can’t leave at the drop of a hat. Or bag, as it were.”

“I don’t want you to come here. I want to go there. I know what else this bag does. Regina could magically Skype you anytime from anywhere. What she doesn’t have, is the power to go to you at will.”

“Clever girl.” Zelena didn’t seem hostile, but she sure didn’t seem particularly eager to come to her aid.

“Please, Zelena. Mother to mother.”

Zelena bit her glittering crimson lip and looked away.

“Fine. Fine, fine, fine.” She sighed, world-weary. “I imagine you know the drill. Just wade on in.”

“Thank—“ But Zelena and the looking glass portal had already dissipated, leaving the symbol burning brighter than before. Emma took a deep breath. Logically, she knew she’d be okay. That this was a safe way to travel, that portals in general were safe if they were done right and if you went through consensually. Logically, she knew. But she couldn’t help the prickle along her wind-stung skin as she stepped into the confines of the envy green sigil.

She choked back a cry as the ghostly light wrapped its way around her, encompassing her like ivy. It was over almost as soon as it began, though. One moment she was trying not to struggle against the magic, the next she was dripping all over Zelena’s throne room floor. She’d redecorated since assuming the role as Overseer of the Underworld. The place had the same melodramatic taste as Hade’s had, but there was an underlying warmth to it—cold light replaced by soft yellows, sprawling carpets that Emma’s boots sunk practically an inch into, and all sorts of trinkets and curiosities in vibrant roses and greens and golds.
“Ugh. You look like something Cerberus dragged in.” Zelena grimaced from her seat on the throne (which was more of a glorified arm chair, in all honesty).

“….Thanks.” Emma said bitterly, though her natural capacity for salt was at an all time low, given circumstances.

Zelena flicked her wrist, and Emma’s clothes and hair were instantly dry. She flicked her wrist again, and an equally comfortable—though less flashy—chair appeared some feet away, mirroring Zelena’s own.

“Thanks.” Emma said more sincerely.

“So what do I owe the pleasure of your company, my pretty?” Zelena asked with arched brows as Emma took her seat.

“This.” Emma took Siegfried’s vial out of her pocket. She placed it into Zelena’s outstretched hand.

“Hmm.” Zelena shifted it this way and that, clacking her nails against it, holding it up to the light. There was a quality to it Emma hadn’t noticed in the muffled lighting of the cabin. The liquid inside changed colours with the lighting. Zelena tapped the glass and it went transparent. At rest, the liquid seemed to be as common as tap water, but when it was held to the light, it was startlingly a vibrant yellow-gold. “What made you think to bring this to me?”

“Regina mentioned summoning your mother—“ She barreled on through Zelena’s sharp look, choosing her words carefully. “—But after, y’know, everything, I figured that was playing with fire, and your mother deserves her rest. But it got me thinking about our time here, and something Cora and Regina said in passing. Something about making you forget Hades.” She looked downwards at that bit, feeling conflicted about the lengths they were all willing to go to overcome Hades.

“Yes, well.” Zelena started softly. “Talk of mixed bags. It was a lucky hunch of yours, Emma. This is from the River Lethe.”

“The River what?”

“One moment.” Zelena held up a finger. She rang a small silver bell that rested on her side table.

“You rang?”

Emma startled in her seat at the haughty voice, whipping around to verify the impossible.

Sure enough, Cruella drew into their company. She was a pale imitation of what she once was, her garish makeup standing out even more against her simple sheath dress, furs nowhere to be found.

“Oh, joy.” She sneered when she saw Emma.

“Cruella, be a doll and prepare tea for Emma and I, would you? Something bracing, it’s been a day.”

Cruella looked like she had something particularly nasty to reply, but one raised brow from Zelena cut her short.

“Thank you.” Zelena called sweetly after her. She turned back to Emma, clearly about to continue their previous conversation, but paused at whatever expression was on the Savior’s face.
“You’re using Cruella as your maid?”

“Well. I do so admire the high road. But I absolutely live for the petty satisfaction.” Zelena ended on a wicked grin. “Besides, Cruella bullied her way to the top when Hades was aboveground. She made life here quite a, ah, living hell.”

Emma just shook her head.

“Hey, I haven’t pitched her into the Worse place like the One Ring into Mt. Doom, have I? I’ve grown.”

That made her smile. All jokes aside, it was true that Zelena had truly come into her own as Queen of the Underworld. Turns out all she really needed was something and someone to take care of.

“Point.” Emma nodded in good humour.

“Anyways.” Zelena drawled. “Back to the matter at hand. The River Lethe. One of the five rivers that course through this realm and bleed into the others. The River of Forgetfulness.”

Emma was at the edge of her seat.

“So you know of it? You know what it does, how to use it?”

Zelena nodded sagely. “I do. It has fathomless power to erase memories, up to the point where you can essentially destroy a person’s mind. The only thing I haven’t known it to break is survival instinct, a person’s innate will to live. I imagine that’s not the territory you’re looking to dabble in, I hope.”

Emma shook her head. “No. It um, well, this was meant to be used on me, I think.”

“Really? Does this have to do with the person who’s absconded with your and Regina’s boy?”

“I stole it from him. His name’s Siegfried, from the Wiled Marsh. He has…designs on me.”

“Well I’m not acquainted with the courting customs of the Wiled Marsh, but I don’t imagine you win many hearts between magic water and kidnapping.” Zelena said dryly. “Wait a second. You said Siegfried? I have a Siegfried. Fresh meat.”

Emma sighed. “Yeah. I kind of, um, forgot about that. This Siegfried killed that Siegfried so he wouldn’t break the universe or something.”

Zelena let out a cackle. “Oh, this is fun. I mean, this is terrible. Terrible fun. What a mess.”

Normally Emma would be irked at Zelena’s brevity, but it just felt...nice. It was a relief to have someone lessen the weight of it all, to be on the outside and—maybe this was a stretch but dammit she needed it—to make fun because it didn’t seem so dire, because maybe on the outside it looked more manageable than it felt.

Emma barely noticed when Cruella returned with the tea, who practically dropped the cups on the table Zelena summoned, then left amid a distinctly derogatory-sounding bout of muttering. She took a grateful sip, a hopeful warmth spreading through her.

“Fallen out of good graces, have we?” Zelena asked after basking in her own cup for a moment.

“What makes you think that?” She answered defensively.
“The day you run to me is the day all the other bridges are burning. Or at least uncomfortably humid.” Zelena canted her head, the tilt of her smile bordering compassion.


“It’ll be alright, darling. Have a good look at your ‘hang in there’ kitty poster and get back to it. It bothers me to no end, but I’ve yet to see you fail.”

Emma bit her lip. She had never in her life imagined the Wicked Witch of all people would be bringing her almost to the good kind of tears.

“Thanks, Zelena.”

She hummed in acknowledgement. “What does the prince want you to forget, anyways?”

“Myself.” Emma whispered. “He wants me to forget myself, to give the ghost of his one True Love a body to live in. A carbon copy of her.” Emma did her best to recount the whole sordid tale as clearly and succinctly as possible.

“Morbid.” Zelena said. “I’m sure we would have gotten along just fine in my, ah, smite-y phase. As far as the water goes, you’re not helpless in this, Emma. If I understand the mechanics of souls correctly—and I’ve been brushing up—the vial has the power to wash her away as much as you. You’ve the power to redirect it.”

“But how?”

Zelena raised her palms. “I can’t say. What most people don’t know about this kind of memory magic is—what even my mother didn’t know—is that it takes some kind of consent, or some kind of impassiveness, for it to work. Choose what kind of woman you want to be, Emma Swan.”

Emma swallowed hard. That should be easy, shouldn’t it? She wanted to be her, right? Things were just starting to get good, to be normal. Daily life with her loves, True and otherwise. There was no reason to hesitate.

Right?

“Go on, then. Right this thing. Then come back and give me all the fun, gory details.” Zelena wiggled her fingers and a portal appeared to the left of them. “And tell Regina I changed my mind. I want the marmalade cookies, not the honeyed ones.”

“Thanks again, Zelena. And you’ve really worked wonders with this place.” Even though she’d only been in Zelena’s cozy corner of the realm, she could feel it. The air was less oppressive, somehow.

Zelena met her eyes with a genuine, if wistful, smile.

“Turns out it was Hades’ design to have this place so dreary and bleak, not some blue print from above. Turns out that there are a lot of things in life that don’t have to be as miserable as they are.”

Emma was overcome with ivy light dancing along her skin.

It was time to go home.
Chapter Summary

A/N: life has been a Whirlwind, but I'm still committed to seeing this story through! hope you've all been well!

Emma emerged back on the fringe of the lake, quickly becoming soaked once more to the bone. The storm had, if anything, gotten more brutal during her absence. She trudged out of the water with steps soon stumbling from the cold and whipping winds. Time was a tricky thing in the Underworld, and moving between realms so frequently in such a short period left her disoriented.

Emma pressed on through the muddied grass, nearly slipping every other step. The drawstring pouch was clutched between blanched knuckles, a grounding force as she made her way back to town. Her heart thumped, pulling her in the direction of the loft. Their search must be complete, then. Her shared heartbeat with Killian was usually a comfort, but given the circumstances, all it did was make her realize the void between them, and the void where her own magic should be. She felt like a sunflower cut off from light, like there was just enough breath in her lungs to keep her alive.

Go home. Part of her murmured, a soft caress in her mind.

They don’t want you. Another part whispered, equally soft.

What set her course in the end was the promise she had made after recovering from being the Dark Swan—she had promised her family, her boy, that she wouldn’t keep trying to fix the world on her own. By the time she made it to her parent’s home, her hair was a heavy curtain down her back, her face raw from the wind.

She gripped the doorknob tentatively, other hand pressed lightly against the door. She took a steeling breath before letting herself in.

They were centred around the granite island, some gripping still-steaming mugs, all clearly in fresh clothes.

“Hey.” She managed. She’d long hit the point where her teeth had stopped chattering, but as the warmth of the apartment flooded her, they picked it up again.

“Emma.” Mary Margaret exclaimed, setting her mug down and stepping forward.

Killian beat her with his long, rushed strides, though, enveloping Emma in a tight embrace. Emma gasped at the contact, burying herself in the heat and familiarity of him. She sucked in a deep breath, pulling in the scent of brine and mint and something deeper that was a part of him wherever he went. His fingers buried in her hair, tucking her tighter against him. When he finally pulled away, his fingertips were slick with the rainwater from her hair, and the muscles in his jaw were working fiercely.

“I lost you.” He said in a harsh murmur. “At some point—we were in the woods—and then suddenly, I felt…I didn’t feel. I didn’t feel you anymore. I didn’t know what to think.”
Emma didn’t answer for a moment, just took another second of this closeness that she’d missed, that had been too rare in the past days. When she finally stepped away, she turned to Regina, raising the spell bag and tossing it at her. She caught it in a single graceful movement, raising a brow as she did.

“I thought your pilfering days were over, Emma.” Some part of her eased, like she’d been holding a breath too long. If Regina was back to calling her by her first name, they could be okay.

“What’s that?” David asked.

“I went to see Zelena.”

Everyone except for Regina looked shocked.

“You went back to the Underworld?” Hook leaned back into her, pushing her face up by her chin, tilting her this way and that as if looking for some sign of harm, some new imprint of death. She put a placating hand over his, pressed a kiss into the chill of his hook.

“It was the only place I could be useful.” Emma said it with no bite. She didn’t want to use their words against them.

“Emma—“ He began, but she cut him off.

“I was right, about the vial I swiped from Siegfried. It’s got water from the river of memory. That’s how he sealed the phantom of her soul into the ring. And that’s how he intends to bring Odette back to life. For keeps.” She shook her head in dismay. “I won’t…the Emma part of me will just be scrubbed clean.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Her mother said fiercely.

“We won’t let it come to that.” David agreed, a similar fire under his words.

“It will come to that, though.” Emma smiled wanly. “That’s the only way to get Henry back. You couldn’t find him.”

There was a beat of defeated silence. There was a reason Emma hadn’t asked if they’d had any luck—there was no luck to be had. Hunter was a master of the woodlands, the master of Beasts. The forest would swallow up every trace of her son if Hunter but asked. Her fingers moved of their own accord, reaching to twist the damp ends of her hair so they wouldn’t shake with nerves.

“Zelena said it’s my choice, in the end.” She continued, voice less sure. “Apparently you can force memories on someone else, but you can’t permanently change the, the core of them, you can’t wipe away who they were before without some kind of consent.”

There was a collective wave of relief, but that just made tears prick at her weary eyes. They didn’t understand.

“Why aren’t you relieved, Swan?” Killian asked. “You’ve done it—you’ve found the answer we’ve been looking for.”

“Don’t you get it?” She asked, her voice thin and desperate. “I’m not the Emma who could have made this a simple choice.” She laughed, and the harshness of it snapped everyone to attention.

“Love.” Killian’s hand moved to her waist, a gesture of offering stability. She scrubbed her hands over her face.
“You’re not my simple choice, Killian. Emma’s not—I’m not my simple choice, either.”

“What are you saying?” Mary Margaret asked.

“I love you. God, how I love you. But I love him, too. And it—it’s different than a love spell. I’d like to think I could fight that. But it’s not some kind of compulsion. It’s all real, the memories, they’re all real. And it makes me sick—it’s not—it’s not fair that I have to love him. I’m so angry with him.” Her words were starting to run together, so she stopped talking. “I just want it to stop. I want all of it to stop.”

Instead of turning from her, Hook pulled her back into him, hand running soothing laps along her back. “That love story’s through, darling. If anything, he is your past. We’re the future.”

Emma was too exhausted to cry anymore. She was too exhausted to think. She just let herself be held.

“Take care of her.” Regina said, crossing over to them. “I’m headed home. We’ve got a long morning ahead of us.”

As she passed, she placed a hand on the back of Emma’s head. Instantly, the moisture retreated from her hair, her clothes. She was left dry and trembling in Killian’s arms.

A mug of hot chocolate later, her parents were bidding them goodnight with burdened gazes and Killian was leading her up the stairs of the loft to the extra bed.

“If you would.” The request in his voice was muted, guarded as he passed her one of the spare shirts he kept at the loft.

Emma dipped her chin, peeling the day’s clothes off in slow movements labored by exhaustion. Her arms felt heavy, it took all her energy just to pull the thick cotton over herself. She dug through Killian’s drawer—always pristine, in contrast to the domestic tornado that was hers—and selected a pair of seashell print boxers. Killian let out a sharp hum as she pulled them on.

Emma flopped onto the bed, savoring the protest of the mattress. The day was finally, finally done. When the mattress bent under Killian’s weight, she turned and nestled into him.

“I feel like it’s a sin to touch you.” She confided as she trailed her fingers along his back, pushing under the fabric of his shirt to press into his skin.

“Is that so?” He breathed.

“Yeah.” She whispered into his collarbone.

“You are mine, Emma.” He pulled away just enough to guide her face up, to lock gazes. His eyes were like sea glass, brilliant blue dulled with pain and weariness. “You are mine and you are yours. I’ll not forgive that man for making you question that.”

She closed her eyes, needing to shield herself like he was the sun.

“But.” He continued, dipping to press his lips against her forehead. “You will never need my forgiveness for this. I get it now.”

They lapsed into a silence punctuated only by the softening rain on the roof, the lightning splitting the sky, curled into each other like commas at the finish of a sentence.

She was just drifting off, unable to bear being awake any longer, when he spoke again, so low it
was like the ghost of words and not words themselves.

“By this time tomorrow, your body will be your home again.”
The next day passed in a tense blur. They went about their day jobs, trying to stifle the restlessness that fueled the long hours at the school, in the office, in the station. Killian figured out how to group text for the sole purpose of updating them on his search throughout the day. While they did their duties and kept up appearances, he canvased the town for any clues as to where Henry and the prince might be.

Unsurprisingly, there was no sign of either of them. Whatever whispers of their presences existed had been willed away in the forest and dissolved throughout the town.

“I’m sure he’s being taken care of.” Emma said, reassuring herself out loud as she kneaded her knuckles into her forehead.

“Mm.” Killian hummed noncommittally through a mouthful of stolen onion ring. He’d dropped by the station with Granny’s, taking a break from his wild goose chase. He had a lot less faith in Hunter’s basic human decency than Emma did, but he was being more civil about it than Emma could ever have wished for, given the circumstances.

“I’m sure he knows hurting Henry would likely not be just the end of your dealings with him, but the end of him period.” He conceded after swallowing.

“Swan.”

“Yes?” Her gaze flashed up to his where he perched on the edge of her desk, brow raised. She must have missed something.

“You’re not eating.”

She held up the grilled cheese in her hand, showing off the hard proof of her bite marks.

“You haven’t taken a bite in twenty minutes.”

“I just want it to be over with, one way or the other.” She admitted. “I hate this. I hate waiting.” She’d rather be knee-deep in, making the best of the wreckage. There was something particularly excruciating about the clock running out slowly while you’re fully aware you’ve run out of options. So much time and nothing to be done with it.

Her mind kept teasing her with what Henry and Hunter might be up to. It was unlikely her son was tied up like a bank hostage with Hunter pacing the room, filling the air with monologues about his good intentions. More plausibly, her son was probably cutting the prince down to size with that trademark teen orneriness he’d developed over the last couple of months. The idea made the corners of her lips quirk into something almost like a smile.

The reliable thing about time is—it goes on, even when it seems impossible. Eventually the sun...
drifted down and the heat of the daytime sky blended into the lukewarm hues of almost-sunset. The Heroes reconvened at Snow White and Charming’s loft, and they strategized over what was dinner only in name. By this time, everyone was too wired to really eat.

“I’m not sure it has to come to a fight—“ Emma began, but stopped at Regina’s incredulous look. “OK it’s totally gonna come to a fight.”

“So what can we expect out of him?” David asked, addressing the group, though his eyes strayed to Emma in particular.

“We know he’s a fantastic archer.” Snow said. “Which should only be a problem if this becomes a long-range encounter.”

“He must be some degree skilled in swordsmanship.” Hook said. “That’s a staple of a royal upbringing.”

“He won’t use a sword unless he absolutely has to.”

“Right. That was her thing.” Regina nodded. After the all the ruin and hurt that had come from her trying to suppress Odette’s soul, Emma had decided it was best to use it to their advantage. It was their job to help her not lose herself as she bared her soul to Odette’s, picking through her memories and sharing them with her family. Killian was right—Siegfried was well versed in swordsmanship as part of his princely training. But Emma knew there was a certain trauma linked to it, one that only worsened with her death, she who had been the cornerstone of Misthaven’s—and then the Wiled Marsh’s—Royal Guard.

“He’s not much of a brawler, either.” Emma admitted. She felt bad, casting light on her other True Love’s faults and weaknesses. Even if she didn’t ask for this burden of loyalty, she still felt it. “He’s good with a knife, but. He’ll likely resort to magic as a first line of offense and defense.”

“I should take point on this, then.” Regina said.

“No, someone needs to guard you.” Killian mused. Emma could see the gears turning, the naval lieutenant surfacing. “Snow can throw a mean punch, but I think it’s best we have a master archer at our disposal as well. Dave and I should take point.”

Emma coughed lightly. “I’ve been taking down crooks long before I figured out I had magic.”

Killian reached under the table to give her knee a reassuring squeeze. She wasn’t sure how he managed to do it without seeming patronizing, but he did. When she pressed her palm on top of his hand, he flipped his hand so they could intertwine their fingers. “I know, Swan. But I think it’s best if you’re just our last ditch effort at reasoning with him. I don’t think it’ll do you any good to be facing him if it comes to blows.”

“You’re right. Sorry.”

“No worries, love. You’re doing so much just by being there. We know exactly where he’ll be, and he’ll be off balance.”

“So we’re not just playing keep-away with you.” Her father said. “You’re gonna help us get Henry back.”

Emma gave him a shallow nod.

“Right, then. Best we head out now.” Killian said, rising. “I wager we’ll need awhile to find that damned clearing.”
He was wrong on that count. As soon as they made it to the edge of the forest, Emma felt a keen draw in the soles of her feet. The sensation wasn’t anything like what drew her to Killian, the force of their shared heart. It was the prickling of pine needles, the warmth of the sun through the trees. It didn’t show her where to go, but somehow she knew that she would know just where to step. She grabbed Regina’s arm.

“This way. Follow me. I can feel it.”

“Let the record show I don’t like this.” David muttered as they all fell into step, weaving through the woods.

Emma didn’t know how she felt about it. The pulse in her footsteps wasn’t unpleasant. She wondered if this is what birds felt as they flew together in migration—a deep-seated sense of direction, a surety that the path they were on was exactly where they should be.

It wasn’t long before the forest unfolded before them, it wasn’t long enough, in fact. Siegfried must have bent the landscape, asked the woods to rearrange themselves. She was sure the abandoned hunting cabin had been nested much deeper in them, before.

They stepped into the clearing, and at once everything thrummed with magic, strong enough that Emma couldn’t help but feel it even though her own magic was hibernating.

“Whoa.” Regina breathed. “I might have underestimated the little hobgoblin.”

“Rude. Unfortunate. For you. Favorable, for me.” The sound came from several sources, from behind them, from above, scattered through the air so it sounded both near and far. It set everyone on edge, and they tensed into each other like a phalanx, like a bear trap waiting to snap.

“Enough parlor tricks, Siegfried.” When Emma found her voice, it was stronger than she expected. “Give me back my son.”

A silhouette formed in answer, in the center of the clearing.

No, two silhouettes.

Magic bled off them, coalescing in a soft amber mist that dissipated into the dying daylight.

Emma’s heart clenched.

Siegfried.

And a tawny wolf with Henry’s torn scarf hanging from its snarling mouth.
hi hello fam <3 things are getting a lil dicey ! I know seven facts about swords so have mercy on me .

“What did you do to our son? Where’s Henry?” Regina snarled.

Siegfried canted his head to the side, smiling grimly. He held out his hand to the wolf in answer.

“You—you turned him into a mutt.” Her tone promised bloodshed and brimstone.

Siegfried lifted a shoulder. “Your boy is quite talkative. And I figured it didn’t bode well for an Author to have opposable thumbs.”

Emma’s gut clenched. How did he know about Henry’s abilities?

“Fret not. It’s easily reversible. I’m hardly a novice in transmogrification. And my price is simple.”

Emma reached out blindly, taking Killian’s hook in a viselike grip as Hunter’s gaze settled on her.

“I never wanted this. I imagined our reunion a thousand ways, but they were only ever shades of happy.” He shook his head. “But life is no fairy tale. Drink the vial, Emma. Give Odette back her life. And you’ll have your son to ease you into oblivion.”

Outrage and dismay brought tears to her eyes. How did she ever think she could talk him down from this? He wasn’t mad from grief, waiting for a light extended in the dark. She—Emma—meant nothing to him, except as a mirror of his True Love, a vessel to spill her life back into. And he would do anything to get her back.

“Siegfried. Please.” She had to try anyways. She felt the glittering presence of Odette, twisted with grieving. She knew the feeling, seeing your love fall from grace, knowing it was your fault. She saw Hook’s crazed eyes, hyperreal, as he dipped close and told her she would always be an orphan.

“You know she’d never want this. You know how I know that.”

Hunter visibly shook off his confictions, jaw clenched. “She’ll forgive me.”

All sins can be forgiven when someone loves you.

Killian had said that, too, before all things went to hell. She believed it, now. Maybe Odette would forgive him, eventually, even with Emma’s ghost between them.

“You can’t reason with a man like that, Swan.” Killian said under his breath.

She swallowed hard, nodding.

“It’s not gonna happen, Hunter. Not like this, not ever. But I don’t want to hurt you. Just give my son back, give up.”
“Very well.” Siegfried said. “I would have been disappointed if you valued your life so little.”

He raised his hands, and the Heroes tensed as amber light pooled between them.

“Whatever you’re doing. Reconsider.” Snow shouted, bow raised and arrow nocked.

Siegfried released the light, causing it to shoot outwards in web-like trails, invading the air and racing toward the woods. Snow’s arrow was blocked by a sudden upheaval of earth, an obelisk that fell apart, taking the spoiled arrow to the ground with it.

“What was that.” Dave hissed.

“A summons.” Emma whispered.

They came in droves through the trees, through the air. Birds and beasts alike, eyes alight with amber.

“Whatever you do, don’t let them make it through to Emma.” Killian said as the beasts sunk low to the ground, calculating.

Emma shook herself into a fighting stance, hand on the hilt of her sword, not sure how effective she was going to be against a horde of magically influenced wild animals. In theory, they’d planned for this, not investing all their hope into words and the frail chance of Siegfried’s redemption. In practice, this was…a mess. Around her, Killian and her father drew their own swords while Snow reached back into her quiver.

“Oh God.” Dave muttered.

“What?” Snow’s gaze was locked on an unnatural formation of birds of prey.

“Henry.”

Emma’s attention snapped back to her son. He had fallen into the ranks of the real wolves that had answered Hunter’s call. Emma’s gaze cut to Siegfried, stricken. She wasn’t sure what she meant to do, but he was already speaking.

“Descend.”

The clearing erupted into a fray.

Emma couldn’t keep track of it all amid the din of screeches and snarls and the almost inhuman noises coming from her own family as they scrambled to meet the ferocity of the enchanted wild. They were loosely shielding her, Killian and David matched against the circling wolf pack, Regina weaving protective magic, and Snow grimacing at the sky.

“I’m so sorry.” She murmured as she felled a swooping falcon.

Maybe Odette could forgive Siegfried for all of this. Emma never would.

Siegfried himself seemed to have disappeared, which she didn’t trust for a second. While he’d never confirmed nor denied, she was pretty sure his powers extended to manufacturing invisibility, similar to how he asked the woods to hide his tracks. He could be just in the tree line, waiting patiently as they tore through innocent animals, waiting for the animals to tear back.

A wolf took point, springing forward to nip at Killian. He swung his sword low in an effort to discourage it.
“That’s Henry!” Emma shouted.

“Gods.” Killian swore. “We were just starting to get on, too. Bloody low, that prince. A little help, Regina?”

“You don’t think I’ve already tried, pirate?” Regina bit out, looking harried. “I can’t do anything while they’re under thrall. I’m sticking with plan B.”

Plan B was for Regina to make a bubble large and strong enough to encompass them all so they wouldn’t have to fight Siegfried’s beasts directly. The second part of the plan involved spelling their skin to be impenetrable, so any teeth and claws and beaks would glance off harmlessly. The problem was that took a lot of energy to build and sustain. Emma couldn’t feel the magic, but she trusted it was there, brewing. If only it could brew a tick faster.

The animals certainly weren’t waiting.

They all released curses and cries as the birds of prey rained down and the wolves attacked at once. Siegfried must have meant to overwhelm them. Snow dropped her bow, brandishing a hunting knife.

“Forget the shield, Regina!” She shouted as she swung wildly at an attacking raptor.

Emma’s skin prickled as if lightning was about to strike. She wondered if that was due to a collapse in the magic Regina had been shaping. Her attention quickly refocused on the canine baring down on her.

“Wait a second.” She said as she stumbled back. “Ruby?”

The dark wolf was unmistakable. Emma had run into her several times on night patrol, racing through town or hanging around the diner.

“What were you even doing--?”

She must have been nearby when Siegfried worked his sigil. Which was less relevant than the fact she was now trying to carve away Emma’s face.

Emma raised her sword, using the flat side to ward off Ruby as she centred her weight on her chest, pinning her in place. Sweat trickled into her eyes as Emma pressed into the dirt, straining to keep Ruby at bay. Ruby’s jaws snapped around the sword, closer and closer to her face.

Emma’s breathing became labored, teeth gritted against the effort it took to push back.

Dave came at them from the side, raising his sword in a high arc.

“No!” Emma shouted. Saliva dripped thickly from Ruby’s unhinged jaws. “It’s Ruby.”

David did a double take before cursing. The family swear jar was gonna be loaded like a kingdom’s coffers if they survived this. He grabbed Ruby by the scruff of the neck and hauled her off Emma in one swift move fueled by exasperation. Before Ruby could turn on him, he hit her on the back of the head sharply with the hilt of his sword. She exhaled one harsh huff before crumpling into the grass.

Emma blinked in disbelief as he extended his hand to her, dragging her to her feet.

“I owe her a drink.”
“You think?” Emma said.

They pressed their backs together, turning as several wolves drew close.

“What are the odds if we asked nicely, they’d be willing to take up swords?”

Emma huffed out a chuckle at her dad’s gallows humour. Swords were practically useless at this range. Maybe they could stave off the canines’ advances with quick swings, but at the end of the day, it would just be stalling the inevitable. She kind of wished they’d thought to pack their duty weapons. It made a lot more sense to bring a gun to a wolf fight.

_Oh, hey, tranquilizers exist._

Emma mentally face palmed. So there were a couple of holes in their plan.

“They’re not attacking.” David said.

“Yeah I see that. I’m a fan.” Emma replied, distracted.

“But they should be.”

Oh.

She hazarded a glance around, heart sinking.

In the midst of combat, they’d been systematically separated from each other. Killian was yards away, two motionless wolves at his feet as he heaved and dripped blood. Emma couldn’t tell if they were unconsciousness or dead. Snow was even further out, shooting arrows from the cover of trees. And Regina—

“Regina!” Emma screamed, breaking apart from her father.

There was a sharp smell in the air, like burning, though nothing was on fire. Siegfried gripped Regina’s hands in her own, applying calculated pressure.

“You think I can’t work my magic without my hands?” She spat, her face contorted in pain.

“I think you won’t have the chance to try.”

As he spoke, he released one of her hands.

Why wasn’t anyone helping her? Emma took a step forward and the wolves tensed in her direction, threatening to leap. But she had to try.

Someone had to get to her.

Her eyes widened as Siegfried’s hand took on the aspect of the beast, claws extending as the muscles of his hand contorted, the meat of it shifting in a way her eyes couldn’t process.

And then he plunged them deep into Regina’s stomach.
There was collective shouting, distinct words lost as they overlapped each other. There was a ringing in Emma’s ears. She staggered forward a step as Regina crumpled to the ground. Her hands dove to nurse her ravaged stomach. Blood filtered through her fingers, thick and crimson. She huffed out a shocked laugh.

Siegfried knelt beside her. His monstrous hand reverted back to its natural form, coming to rest on her shoulder as he pulled her into a more comfortable position.

“Don’t touch me.” She hissed.

He merely looked down on her with distant sympathy.

Emma was running. She barely registered her sword falling to the dirt, her jeans ripping underneath the dragging of teeth, her father calling out her name. The pain ended almost as soon as it began as Siegfried called his wolves off with a sharp gesture. She would have kept running anyways.

“You understand why her, don’t you, Emma?” Hunter’s voice was low. How dare he speak as if he were mourning? “There is a desperate measure you must take, Emma Swan. And you and yours hold a peculiarly stubborn breed of hope. I see now I can’t take that away from you. You must kill it yourself.”

“Shut up.” Emma said thickly, not looking at him. She came to her knees beside Regina, pulling her out of Hunter’s touch until she was nestled in Emma’s own lap.

“Getting real tired—of this—hero shit.” Regina said gamely in between shallow breaths.

“Shut up.” Tears slipped from Emma’s chin, hitting Regina’s forehead.

“She can’t heal herself.” Siegfried murmured. “I was not gifted with healing. Your friends cannot possibly get her to a medic in time. And your magic is otherwise occupied. Your options are few, and only one guarantees those you love will make it out of here at all, let alone in one piece.”

“Don’t you dare do it, Emma.” Regina said.

“Odette can save you.” Emma was almost begging, and she didn’t know who it was directed at. Siegfried was right, there was nothing left. She’d done alright, in the end, hadn’t she? Her son had found her and showed her magic and showed her things even better than magic that came from within. She’d fought so long, to hell and back, and she had found all the kinds of love she never thought she’d get in this lifetime or any other. She’d be leaving her family a family, light and dark and no magic all intertwined. They would keep each other safe. They would build the happy endings she wasn’t able to fulfill.

Was it really an unhappy ending for her then, if she knew all that?

“Okay.” She whispered.

Their gazes snapped to her.
“Emma, no.” The ferocity had drained out of Regina’s face, along with all colour. A cold sweat had broken out on her brow, and her hands were trembling.

“It’ll be only moments. Like slipping out of one dream into another.” Siegfried said gently.

Emma retrieved the vial, movements slow and exaggerated, scared she would drop it due to the shaking.

“I can’t sit here and stall while my family is cut down because of me, Regina.” She apologized. “I won’t let our stories end together.”

“This isn’t a fairy tale, Emma, this is your life.” Regina’s voice was hoarse.

“I’m sorry to leave you when Henry’s in the middle of his teen angst thing.” Emma smiled wanly.

“You’re really—not.” Regina’s mouth twisted into something like a smile, but it soon collapsed. Her eyes had been shut tight against the pain, but they finally opened, and it twisted Emma’s gut to see the glimmer of tears, and that a blood vessel had broken in one of her eyes.

“I love him so much, Regina.” Emma whispered.

“He knows.”

“I love all of them. All of you.” She swallowed hard. “Help Hook. You know what it’s like. Don’t let him forget he’s a hero in his own right, that maybe I, um, maybe I got him to remember the man he wanted to be. But he’s the one who did all the heavy lifting.”

“Emma—“

She called to her magic.

Her heartbeat picked up when it refused to answer, when she felt more than heard the dead silence.

Please.

She pulled and pulled, searching through the void within her, hoping to find something to grasp. When she did, she sucked in a harsh breath. The thread was so slim, like spider’s silk. But it was there. She tugged at it heedlessly—her goal wasn’t to stop unraveling, anymore. She existed on two planes at once—she could feel Regina’s weight in her arms and the prickle of grass through her jeans, but there was a lightness to her, like she could shake it all off and step away from her body. She closed her eyes and the second world snapped into place.

She was at the edge of a pond. She dipped her toes in, staring into her reflection. There were two of her, or rather, she was superimposed over herself. A crown rested in her lap.

“I need my magic back.” She spoke, but her lips didn’t move.

The price is light or death.

The same warning as before. She shook her head. There was no more use for words. Everything within her was reaching out, waiting to cradle her magic. She leaned forward and held her reflection’s hand in the water. It held back.

The water rose around her as she was pulled in. As she sank further and further, she turned so she could watch the light filtering in through the surface. She hadn’t seen anything so beautiful. She
almost didn’t mind when the fire started inside her lungs.

*The time is now, Emma Swan.*

Emma opened her eyes at the sound of Siegfried’s grave voice.

“Drink the vial and I’ll release your son. I’ll release your family, and you will slip away surrounded by everything you have fought for.”

How could he not see her? How could he not see how she was ablaze?

Emma closed her eyes, one last glimpse of soft darkness to prepare herself. And then she gently moved Regina’s hands despite her strangled protest. Emma laid her hands on her stomach and the fire reached a fever pitch within her. Gold light poured out and out of her until Regina’s stomach knitted itself back together.

“No.” Siegfried murmured, disbelieving.

The light did not stop when it was done. There was no stopping it, now. She felt it dig its teeth in, felt it begin to eradicate the paradox inside of her.

“No.” Siegfried was shouting then.

She was overflowing. She was also very, very parched. She rolled away from Regina, gazing up at the sky. Siegfried grabbed her hand, but she looked past him. He’d made so many mistakes. The biggest of all was not seeing her. She found she couldn’t hate him in this moment. She’d revisit the idea on the other side.

God, she was gonna have to deal with Zelena, wasn’t she?

Faces crowded her wavering vision, and at first she thought she was hallucinating, but it seemed Hunter’s hold on the animals broke in his panic, leaving her family free to meet her.

“Mom.” Henry looked dazed. “What’s happening?”

That was nice, she thought absently. She got to see her wolf son not all…wolfy.

“Regina, do something.” Snow pleaded.

“There’s nothing to be done.” Regina bit out. Her hand was still gripping her stomach. Emma really hoped she hadn’t botched that.

“I’ll have that drink now.” Emma said hoarsely. It felt like an incredible feat just to move her lips.

Understanding dawned on Killian’s face. He snatched the vial off the ground before Siegfried could react. David and Snow moved to restrain Siegfried, then everything devolved into blurs of colour and movement. She felt the cold press of glass against her lips, the soft burn of magical liquid, and then her head lolled to the side.

Her chest was heaving. The fire turned sharp blue inside of her, and she felt like maybe death would have been kinder. Her body was straining under what was left of two souls, a horrible mass of sensation. Someone was cushioning her, she was convulsing from head to toe—

And the fire went out.

She looked up in wonder as the world came back into focus. She didn’t know the sky could be so warm and clear. Her body felt ragged, aches and pains brought into screaming precision. She was
very aware there was a bite mark sunk deep into her calf. That would need some Neosporin.

“Emma.” Killian breathed.

God, his eyes were so blue it should be a crime.

“Hey.” She said dumbly, before turning to retch. It was like she’d drowned and been dragged back to shore. Silvery water spilled from her mouth.

“What’s happening?” Someone asked.

Killian rushed to hold back her hair and steady her. After a few long minutes the vomiting stopped, and she sat back.

“Is it over?” Snow whispered.

Emma closed her eyes.

“She’s not here anymore.”

Siegfried let out a strangled noise.

Emma couldn’t feel a void within her. Odette never really belonged there in the first place. But she felt a dullness in her memories. She remembered Odette speaking to her in her dreams, she remembered hearing about her from Hunter. But the double memories of her life had dissipated. She was just Emma.

She’d never felt gladder to be just Emma.

She leaned back into Killian, raising a hand to his face, needing just a moment to be part of the warmth of him and nothing else. He pressed his lips into her fingers.

“She’s gone.” Siegfried murmured with dull grief. “After all of it, she’s just…gone.”

“Did you really think even the ghost of her would choose to be born into the mess you made?” Emma said, not unkindly, though she felt she had far more than enough reason to be cruel to him. It turned out she hadn’t had such a hard decision to make. Even Odette hadn’t wanted to be Odette, not like this. And thank God that little bit of river water had a better grasp of consent than Siegfried did.

Emma looked around. The animals had dispersed. All except for—

“So, um.” Ruby started, running a hand through her disheveled hair. “Weird day, huh?”

Chapter End Notes

only one chapter left ! got a lil choked up writing this tbh , which happens Never . I was like oh gosh Why is life so Hard for them ?? & then I was like...I'm the Writer so uh , maybe I had something to do with that this time Huh . also frank ocean's "seigfried" came on towards the end of me writing this , I'd suggest looking that up bc frank ocean is ace & Also the lyrics are pretty applicable to this story .
They stood on the edge of the lake. The way Emma’s heart was hammering, it felt like there should be danger. Everything was a crescendo inside of her.

Where was the crash of thunder and lightning, the swell of magic, the last dirty trick that let the villain escape to be vanquished another day?

It was impossible to believe it wasn’t coming, even as Siegfried hunched in on himself, staring at the still waters. He’d been silent since they left the clearing.

Ruby had strut across the brittle grass, retrieved her clothes her wolf form had wriggled out of, shimmied her way back into them, then rejoined the group as they debated on what to do with their broken captive.

When they’d parted, Ruby had taken Henry and Hook to the diner to treat them to hot chocolate (cinnamon topped and rum spiked, respectively), as repayment for “all the snarling and attempted maim-age.”

Only David accompanied her to the lake, magic drawstring bag in tow. Snow had taken Regina back to her house to recover from her wounds, which had went from dire to merely extremely painful.

“You ready?” David’s hand was a solid weight on her shoulder, anchoring her in the moment.

“To send my alternate self’s True Love into the depths of Zelena’s queendom to trade places with this reality’s Prince whom he murdered in cold blood for a shot at reanimating said alternate self?” Emma shook her head. “All part of the daily grind.”

David cracked a wan smile, but there was true warmth in his eyes. “Mondays at the office, am I right?”

Emma stepped up to where the water met the land, took a steadying breath, and dropped Regina’s pocket portal in. Without a storm raging on, the effect was much less dramatic. The water around the bag glowed envy green for a few bubbling moments then arced out to accommodate their passage.

“After you.” Emma prodded Siegfried, awfully gently considering all the various hells he’d put her and her family through.

He complied without a spark of indignation or resistance.

Sighing, she grabbed her father’s hand and they made the leap together.

They appeared in Zelena’s throne room, where she was sitting to tea with the young Prince. He staggered to his feet at the sight of Hunter.

“You!” He exclaimed, face wrought with disbelief and fury.

“I thought you prepped him for this?” Emma said bluntly.
“I told him he has a ticket out of here. I found that sufficient.” Zelena raised a shoulder in an infinitesimal shrug.

“I didn’t know he was involved, that dreadful imposter!” The Prince huffed. He was clearly younger than the Siegfried they’d been dealing with, all puffed up with indignation. “I want no part of this. I’d rather die—remain dead!—than engage in any dealings with this, this! I’m ashamed to share an identity with such a lowly—“

Zelena flicked her wrist and he disappeared in a swirl of emerald smoke.

“Personally, I’d rather deal with a murderous whelp than a whiny one.”

David scrubbed the back of his neck, a bit red in the ears. “He’s an acquired taste.”

“I won’t be pining for seconds.” Zelena arched a brow. “Now that he’s restored to the realm of the living, I’ll take care of this one.”

At that, Siegfried finally showed some sign of life.

“Do whatever you will. I don’t care what happens to me now.”

“Oh, don’t you be melodramatic too. It’s boring. Besides, don’t you still want to reunite with darling Odie or what’s-her-damage?”

“I couldn’t reach her then. I can’t reach her now.”

“Well, duh. That’s because you cheated. Now you’ve got a truly miserable amount of toiling to do, because frankly, you don’t deserve her. But when that’s through. Well, she’s waiting. She always has been.”

Siegfried’s jaw dropped.

Zelena rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s what you get for being so extra. Cruella!”

Cruella shuffled in, balefully glaring at her mistress.

“Escort our king here to his new quarters. And then put him to work on something that’ll inspire…a little soul-searching.” The glint in her eyes was particularly wicked but decidedly not…unkind.

Emma wasn’t looking forward to Zelena micromanaging her own afterlife, to say the least.

“Thank you.” Emma said after the pair retreated into the lowlit caverns.

“Mm.” Zelena acknowledged as she raised her hand to send them on their way. “Don’t hurry back.”

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“Killian, do you mind going to your quarters and fetching me a coat? I’m freezing my Everything off.”

Killian made a fondly exasperated noise as he stood. “I told you you would want to bundle up, it’s a night for clear skies and cold toes.”

She simply blew him a cheeky kiss as he retreated below deck.

When he was out of sight, she took a brisk walk around the deck to brace herself. There was no
“OK, Swan, you’ve got this.” She said to herself. Archie was always going on about positive self-talk and “visualizing, then actualizing” her future. Back when she’d been the Dark One (and, honestly, long before that) she’d purposefully kept herself from seeing much of anything beyond that day, that second, unless it was heartbreak or disappointment.

But tonight she was plunging in.

She had thought of ways to do this ever since she’d asked him to move in (and, in passing thoughts—thoughts she shamed herself the second after she thought them—she’d thought of it since their kiss outside Granny’s…all of their kisses outside Granny’s). When she’d run it by her parents, by Regina and Henry, they’d been so supportive their responses actually became a white noise of suggestions and celebration (or wry approval, in Regina’s case).

“I have a pirate for a stepdad.” Henry mused. “A step-pirate. That’ll be an icebreaker.”

“You’re not going to get married at sea are you?” Regina said, lips downturned in distaste.

“I told you that miniature tuxedo was a good investment!” Crowed Snow, bouncing baby Neal in her arms.

“I can’t handle it if he starts calling me ‘Dad.’” David muttered.

She thought of setting up fairy lights or playing music or doing something else dramatic, but at the end of all her looped and terrified (exhilarating) half-plans, she decided to keep it simple.

(After all, if this went badly, she sure wasn’t sticking around for clean-up, and she’d feel bad sticking him with rosettes and confetti and a thousand shrieking bald eagles or whatever else was supposed to explode in colour and sound for a declaration of love.)

As soon as she heard his returning footsteps padding closer, Emma’s heart beat into overdrive. She willed herself into position, biting her lip against the cacophony of her feelings.

“The jacket you brought, as aesthetic as it is, is entirely unsuitable for this ill weather, so I hope you don’t mind being buried in one of mi—“

His words caught in his throat as he couldn’t find her at eye level and instead found her shivering down on one knee.

“I—“ He started, but for once his seemingly constant stream of Shakespearean speech failed him.

“Um. Hi.” Emma said. Her pulse was so loud in her ears she barely had time to register how lame she sounded. Speaking of time, yeah, that wasn’t even a concept any more. Nope, they were suspended in this ongoing moment, and she was the captain of it, she should really be steering it—and stop thinking in boat metaphors—and oh my god, why wasn’t she speaking?—

“So.” It was such a small word and yet it croaked in her throat. “I know the past…well, our whole lives and this whole relationship, and everything in between has been crazy, but—“

She knew her cheeks were flaming, but she felt frigid.

“—it’s, it’s probably always going to be crazy, and someone once told me, that maybe I should live during all the crazy, or I might miss out on my life. After this whole nightmare with Siegfried…well, he didn’t teach me anything I didn’t know deep down. And what I know deep
down is that I want you. That I will always want you. And I want to keep choosing you for the rest of my life, for forever, if you let me.”

“Shouldn’t there be a question in there somewhere?” Hook hadn’t regained composure, per se, but there was a wonder-filled lopsided grin on his face, and his eyes looked dreamy, and she wanted to punch him in the arm for being so smug and flippant and beautiful while she laid herself bare almost literally at his feet.

“Will you marry me, you dumb pirate?”

“Let the record show that the lady said dashing. Dashing pirate.” He said to no one as he bent and brought her in his arms.

“Okay look, I’m gonna need a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ or a ‘hell yes.’” Emma said, though her mouth had already decided to grin and her heart had already decided to celebrate.

“Yes. Hell yes. Yes and then yes some more.” He murmured in her ear, and really, it had no right to fry her nerves like that. She buried her face in the crook of his neck.

She disentangled herself a moment later, ignoring his grunt of complaint.

“I, um, have something for you.”

Hook watched on in tender amazement as she produced a twisted golden loop from her pocket.

“That’s a beanstalk.” She said somewhat redundantly as she slid it over the tip and around the base of his hook. The ring shone dimly in the warm light of the lanterns on the deck. It had been an adventure for Leroy to size and craft it. “I figured we could work the ring situation out later. But um, this is to say…I intend to finish what we started all that time ago, up in the sky.”

She had to look away from the shimmer of tears in his kohl-lined eyes, because her heart was light and heavy and bursting and he was so much and she was embarrassed and happy, so powerfully happy that she couldn’t take it—

He pressed his lips against her forehead, drew them gently down her nose, and slid his cheek along hers.

“Forever, then.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my gosh . This has been such a journey to write . Thank you so Many for joining me on this lil adventure . I’ve been wanting to write this story for a minute, and it was a personal challenge for me to get it all out of my head and on paper . I love these characters and their stories very much , and I truly hope I did them justice . See you around , I wish you Well !

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